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## Symbolist Ideas in the Scripts of Gubpolitprosvet: The Theory and Practice of Proletarian Performance

Classical plays continued to be performed during the first few years following the revolution. In particular, there were revivals of pre-revolution productions in the style of the “Silver Age”. For instance, Meyerhold revived Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice*, and Fokin’s ballets on mythological themes continued the traditions of the Silver Age, although they had nothing to do with either ancient drama or ancient theatre.

Max Reinhardt had staged Hofmannstahl’s reworking of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* in Berlin circus with a chorus of 500, and that was an attempt to reconstruct archaic performance involving crowds of people. His innovative production was presented in Saint Petersburg in 1911 also in the circus. The Russian theatrical audience, educated by symbolists and the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche, took Reinhardt’s staging as a reincarnation of Dionysian mystical theatre.<sup>1</sup> When in the spring of 1918 Yu. M. Yuryev mounted a production of *Oedipus Rex* in the same Ciniselli Circus using acrobatic techniques, it was a direct reprise of Reinhardt’s production within a new post-revolutionary context.<sup>2</sup>

The opening of the children’s play *Battle of Salamis* by S. E. Radlov and A. Piotrovsky took place on 25 March 1919, with sets designed by Yu. Bondi and music by Yu. Shaporin. This was also a variation on the theme of the *Persians* more than a staging of the play, but it was already an attempt at combining the techniques of ancient theatre with buffooning and grotesque.

The idea of reconstructing ancient theatre attracted S. E. Radlov. He had produced the *Twin Brothers (Menaechmi)* of Plautus in 1918 (Courses in the

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1 Nikolai Evreinov, *Pro scena sua* (Petrograd, 1915), 36–8.

2 Vasilij Rafalovich, ed., *The History of Soviet Theater* (Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1933), vol. 1, 173–4.

art of theatrical production) and Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* in 1924 (Academy Drama Theater = Alexandrinsky Theatre). The *Menaechmi*, translated for the stage by Radlov himself, also began to be performed in places other than Petrograd Russian cities by professional and amateur actors, including a performance in Odessa (1919) on the stairs familiar to many through Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin*. Radlov had actors performing Plautus masked, and as a classical scholar, he wanted to be accurate in recreating ancient theatre. However, Radlov's study of ancient dramatic techniques was not academic. Rather, he saw them as an authoritative source for the renewal of contemporary theatre through the convention. In the Theatre of Folk Comedy, which he created (in 1920–1922), Radlov, experimented with one actor playing multiple characters and wrote loosely scripted plays, which allowed actors the freedom to improvise. It was also in the 1920s that he created a director's explication or reconstruction of the *Acharnians*, written for use in actors' training sessions.<sup>3</sup>

However, what is particularly interesting about this period is not the production of Greek and Roman plays; the most extraordinary events and incredibly artistic and social experiments were the mass quasi-ritual performances, pageants, or shows, which could include up to 8,000 "actors" and hundreds of thousands of spectators. These performances were of varying formats – they might fill the Palace Square and Winter Palace, or they might fit into a large barracks. The Spit of Vasilyevsky Island and the façade, portico, and steps of the Stock Exchange building (Birzha) would turn into a wonderful open-air theatre. Plays were performed here on the steps of the Stock Exchange, as they had been on the steps of churches in mediaeval Europe, and performances would unfold within the city, much as in modern-day India performances of *Ramlila*, the story of Rama and Sita, take place within a whole village or town. These were innovative avant-garde performances, which abandoned the box of the stage and theatre and altered perceptions of the relationship between the actor and the spectator. The initiators, the directors, and the proponents of the philosophy behind such performances were those I have already mentioned: Adrian Piotrovsky, the illegitimate son of a prominent classical scholar and Silver Age figure T. Zieliński, and S. E. Radlov, the son of a well-known historian of philosophy who was also a translator of Aristotle. Both were classicists by education and pupils of T. Zieliński, who left Russia in 1922. Another classicist, L. F. Makaryev, who taught Latin in a grammar school, was also involved in this. He later founded the Young Spectator's Theatre. Other directors also took part in the productions, but I am interested primarily in these individuals. They collaborated and polemicalised with each other. For both of them,

3 Sergej Radlov, "On the Technical Skills of Greek Player," in *Collection of Papers about Theater: 1918–1922* (Petrograd: Mysl, 1923), 65–93; Dmitri Troubotchkine, "Ancient Drama in Russia in the 1910s and 1920s," in *Greek and Roman Drama: Translation and Performance*, ed. by John Barsby (Stuttgart, 2002), 216–232.

the theatre of ancient Greece served as a theoretical model for new forms in which professional actors would collaborate with amateurs, actors would collaborate with spectators, and the theatrical space would be fundamentally different from a house with a missing wall. As Piotrovsky, an eminent translator of Aeschylus and Aristophanes, wrote, the ancient techniques of staging Greek tragedy are useful in staging the chorus scenes of mass pageants and mass performances.<sup>4</sup> Those working in the theatre at this time viewed the immediate past (the realistic theatre of the 19th century) as an interruption in the genuine theatrical tradition of which ancient classical drama, the *Commedia dell'Arte*, and Shakespeare were all a part.<sup>5</sup> That was also the general trend during the early 20th century in Western Europe.

These innovative, avant-garde tendencies were allowed to flourish on an unexpectedly grand scale in Russia immediately after the revolution and, most importantly, with an influx of unexpected performers: army men, soldiers, and sailors. We know that soldiers' theatres staged, among other things, *Oedipus Rex* and *Prometheus Bound*, but I do not know the details. However, Euripides' *Hippolytus* was staged by N. N. Arbatov on 1 May – International Worker's Day – in 1920, using the military commissariat's political education department as part of a huge theatrical event in which 200 theatre "brigades" were sent into the city. They travelled on open tram platforms, stopped to play scenes for the public, and travelled on.<sup>6</sup> However, a classical play performed as part of a mass pageant tends to be the exception. It was simply that this celebration drew in all available theatrical and non-theatrical resources.

My thesis is that classical scholars, who had been taught by T. Zieliński and Vyacheslav Ivanov, began to make the symbolist utopia a reality, ironically within the very social and cultural conditions that had forced their teachers to flee abroad.

Radical proponents of revolutionary disruption in art emerged from the milieu of classical scholars, usually a conservative group. They inspired artistic experiments that were most extreme and close to outrageous. But then even Isadora Duncan, with her revival of ancient dance, performed the *International*, the revolutionary anthem, in Petrograd through the medium of dance.

Those born in the last decade of the 19th century were too young for the wreck of tsarist Russia to become the wreck of their entire life, after which they could only live out the rest of it as best they could. With varying degrees

4 Adrian Piotrovsky, "The Festivities of 1920," in *Pro Soviet Theater* (Leningrad: Academia, 1925), 9–17.

5 E.g., Radlov wrote: "Fearfully and carefully avoids our theater the cherished door on which there is the inscription: ancient drama. And if it approached it, it was always with rusty keys in hand and a yawning mouth. And productions were in white robes, white columns, forced gestures and pompous words." Cf. *The Love for Three Oranges 2* (1914), 56.

6 Rafalovich, *History*, 268.

of enthusiasm (and Adrian Piotrovsky with a huge degree of enthusiasm) they began to build a new, proletarian, and socialist culture. During the years 1918–1919, both Radlov and Piotrovsky worked in the theatre department of the People's Commissariat for Education ('Narkompros')<sup>7</sup> and worked in the mass-cultural organisations of soldiers and sailors. In 1924 Piotrovsky became the head of the art department of the Leningrad Governorate Department for Political Education and was thus responsible for supervising amateur artistic projects in all of Leningrad. He held posts in educational establishments and theatres and worked as a dramatist, librettist, lecturer, and manager: all while translating and writing prefaces and commentaries to his translations of Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Theognis, and Catullus.

The period of the mature Soviet officialdom had not yet come. Both our heroes, therefore, worked with various avant-garde and experimental studios and institutions. In the years to come, they would both be damned as formalist and bourgeois. The greater revolutionary Piotrovsky would be executed in 1937. Radlov would at the end of World War II find himself in a prison camp, together with his wife (a poet) who died there.

Most vast mass pageants took place in Petrograd in 1920. Although almost no visual material survives, descriptions can be found in Volume 1 of the *History of Soviet Theatre*, published in 1933.

My aim, however, is not to give a historical description of these performances or build up a fuller picture of what they were like. That is something that can be done using archive materials. What I want to do is make sense of how symbolist theory metamorphosed into avant-garde and socialist theory. I want to understand how meanings changed during this process, and how those changes enriched art and culture.

The titles of some of the Petrograd mass performances were: *The Sword of Peace*, 1920 (February); *The Mystery of Liberated Labour*, 1920 (May); *Blockade of Russia* on the alleged Entente policy of surrounding Russia? 1920 (June); *Toward a World Commune*, written for the 3rd Congress of the Communist International, the spectators being its delegates, 1920 (July); *The Storming of the Winter Palace*, 1920 (November); *Victory of the Revolution*, 1922; *Festival to honour the 10-year anniversary of the October Revolution*, 1927.<sup>8</sup>

All mass pageants were propagandist in nature and were based on the events and ideas of the socialist revolution or the world revolution. Their foundation was the so-called "Red calendar" of memorable dates of the proletarian revolution. At the same time, that calendar and its colour looked back

7 In analyzing the work of the Theatre Department of the People's Commissariat one cannot lose sight of the identity of its employees. The Deputy Head of the Petrograd branch was V. Meyerhold (from autumn 1918 to spring 1919), the chairman of the repertoire section was Alexander Blok, etc. Members of the intellectual and artistic elite, the future emigrants or victims of regime, were part of its staff.

8 Adrian Piotrovsky, "The Chronical of the Festivities in Leningrad 1919 – 1922," in: *Mass Festivities* (Leningrad: Academia, 1926), 53–84.

to calendric folk rituals and the feasts associated with them.<sup>9</sup> The creation of a “Red” calendar also served to displace the traditional religious feast days.

One of the earliest of such festival performances were the semi-improvised “games” on the theme of the February revolution entitled *Overthrow of Autocracy*. They were held between March 1919 and the end of that year. Soldiers just called out of their barracks performed eight scenes: 1) 9 March 1905 (prologue), 2) Arrest of the Student Underground, 3) Mutiny in the Military Prison, 4) Capture of the Arsenal by Insurgent Workers, 5) Demolition of Police Stations, 6) Street Battle on the Barricades, 7) Revolution at the Front Line and 8) Abdication of the Tsar at headquarters.<sup>10</sup>

The main action was made up of the demonstrations and marches that had taken place in the February Revolution in 1917. The “games” were played on two wooden platforms at either end of the square, the barracks, or the hall, as the case might be. The two platforms were linked by a passageway, the “march route”. The structure of the action was episodic, but there might have been two different episodes taking place simultaneously on the two platforms: one might show the events in the Winter Palace, at a police station and General Headquarters; the other events at the factory, the front-line army committee and revolutionary headquarters, etc. As in a medieval mystery play, there was separate locus both for Heaven and Hell.

The main turning points were represented by a movement along the passageway: marches, charges and movements of groups of participants from one platform to the other. The march “to the Palace” singing “Lord, save Thy people” and the final bayonet charge on the Palace were the key highlights of the entire “games”. There were no sets, and costumes and make-up were used only for the negative characters, such as the “Tsar”, “policemen” and “generals”; whereas the “workers” and “soldiers” wore their own clothes. The dialogue was interspersed with singing. There was also inarticulate shouting, noise, and bickering in the crowd. The performance took place in barracks, in prison camps, and on the steps of buildings on the Palace Square in St Petersburg.<sup>11</sup>

By the anniversary of the revolution in October (November) 1919 a kind of satyr play, so to speak, had attached itself to the beginning: an intermezzo with farcical grotesques of “Capital”, the “Minister” and the “General”, as well as an exodus on the October coup at the end. The performance took its final and regular form by Oct. 1919 and was called then “The Red Calendar”. The

9 Anniversaries consisted of “Bloody Sunday” (Jan. 9), memorial day of K. Liebknecht and R. Luxemburg (Jan. 17), Red Army Day (Feb. 23), Day of working women (March 8), Day of the Paris Commune (March 18), Day of the Lenin’s arrival to Petrograd (Apr. 16), the 1st of May, “July Days” (3–16 July), October revolution anniversary (Nov. 7), Memorial day of the Moscow armed uprising (Dec. 22).

10 Adrian Piotrovsky, “The Chronicals (1926),” in *Theater, Cinema, Life*, ed. A.A. Akimova (Leningrad, 1969), 74.

11 Performing people were not a casual group of soldiers; it was a military guild named the ‘Red Army theatrical and dramatic workshop’, founded by N. G. Vinogradov. Its lifetime was rather short, from May 1919 to May 1920.

performance of the storming of the palace would usually draw in the spectators as well. They stood on either side of the passageway along which the workers ran to meet the rifles that were levelled at them, and the spectators would join in the assault. However, the end-piece was made up of speeches and public meetings.<sup>12</sup> Up to 100 people were involved, and the total number of performances is astonishing – there were 250!

These performances already saw a break away from the idea of a single illusory stage in favour of the dynamic festival space of folk theatre.<sup>13</sup> At the centre of the pageant is the “mass”, the crowd of workers and revolutionaries, the “chorus” that acts, sings, and speaks in concert. The “chorus”, with no make-up or costume, indistinguishable from the spectators, creates the impression that said spectators are participating in the play. The chorus and spectators exist in counterpoint to the purely theatrical “masks” – symbolic grotesques of the “Tsar”, “Gapon” and “policemen”. These masks, inspired by recent events in the same way as the Cleons or Brasides of Aristophanes, were born out of recent events in Athens, migrated from one mass performance to another. What we may observe here, therefore, is nothing other than the process of birth of a new masque theatre. Naturally, there was neither curtain nor intermission.

The central role of the chorus, the mass, was founded in ideology: as the revolution was perceived to have been carried out by the masses, so they ought to be represented on the stage.<sup>14</sup> Radlov however considered mass performances only one form of folk theatre and argued that plays with three actors, such as those performed in ancient Athens, should be able to attract 20–30 thousand spectators just as they had done there.<sup>15</sup> Radlov protested against compulsory drafting of soldiers as participants in the plays, and argued for amateur drama clubs, which would supply both the chorus and the protagonists, so that an agon, a competition, the most important driving force of any drama,<sup>16</sup> could take place between them, as between the choruses and dramatists in ancient Greece. One can, therefore, see that Piotrovsky and Radlov, practising directors but also theoreticians of theatre, systematically drew on the experience of ancient Greek theatre.

One of the grandest and most spectacular mass shows was put on after only ten days’ preparation in July 1920 in Petrograd under the guidance of K.A. Mardzhanov, with N.V. Petrov, S.E. Radlov and A. Piotrovsky as directors, and N.I. Altman as scene-painter. This was *Toward a World Commune*, in which 4,000 workers from drama clubs and the Red Army and up to 45,000

12 ‘The Bloody Sunday’ performance (in memory of the revolution of 1905) had a different ending: after shooting people down there was a funeral train and singing wake, as well as trial of the riots and departure of the condemned to penal colony with appropriate songs.

13 Piotrovsky, “Festivities,” 9–17.

14 Sergej Radlov, “On Mass Performances and more important Things,” in *Collection of Papers about Theater: 1918–1922* (Petrograd: Mysl, 1923), 37 f.

15 Radlov, “Mass Performances,” *ibid.*, 41 ff.

16 *Ibid.*, 44.

spectators took part. These were scenes that represented the history of the revolutionary movement from the days of the Paris Commune through the creation of the Communist International to the October Revolution and the World Commune. The play comprised around 170 independent scenes, which were performed not only in front of the portico of the Stock Exchange and on its steps. However, they also spread onto its parapets and rostral columns, from which signal lights would flare, as well as onto the square and the circular walkways leading down to the Neva. They continued onto both bridges over which real soldiers and cavalry passed on their way to war and returned victoriously, and even onto the River Neva itself, where torpedo-boats were anchored, and the Petropavlovsk fortress, from which guns were fired. Military searchlights lighted the performance from torpedo-boats on the Neva, the Petropavlovsk fortress, the rostral columns and both bridges. Instead of a curtain, a real military smokescreen would occasionally appear. Guns and supply wagons moved over the square, as well as lorries filled with soldiers armed with rifles. The semantics of the space constantly changed. For instance, when the performance showed the siege of Russia by the Entente, the river behind the spectators became a hostile element. A gun boomed out from it, and sirens howled from the boats. Although in summer the daylight in Petrograd lasts far into the evening, the performance lasted until 4 am, so that the siege took place in complete darkness and the victory and rejoicing came at sunrise. In the end, there were supposed to be aeroplanes flying around and airships taking off, but this did not take place for technical reasons. Radlov and the other directors directed the movements of performers (organised in groups of ten) militarily by telephone and electric bells. Managing the show, which took place in the fortress and the river with its boats, was like trying to coordinate troop movements during a battle.

“The Storming of the Winter Palace”, staged at the third anniversary of the revolution on the 7th of November 1920, was no less grandiose. Its main creator was Nikolai Evereinov (1878 Moscow – 1953 Paris), a prolific and famous dramatist, actor, theorist, and stage director, the central figure of symbolism in the theatre and the last, but not the least a pioneer of the reconstructing the Medieval performances. The Winter Palace was represented by itself, and the red and white stage-platforms on the opposite side of the square represented the insurgent people and the exploitative classes, including the Provisional Government. There were 8,000 participants and around 100,000 spectators. The newspapers advertised for those who had in fact taken part in the capture of the palace and in the overthrow of the Provisional Government to participate. The four hundred windows of the palace blazed suddenly, and shadow silhouettes demonstrated a pantomime of the clash of the old world with the new.

Piotrovsky considered soldiers and sailors to be the natural chorus of avant-garde performance. These were young men who, on the one hand, had

been men taken out of their traditional way of life, and on the other were subject to military organisation and discipline, which was necessary to make them into a thousand-headed character. For Piotrovsky, they were the ideal amateur chorus of citizens. However, one could equally say that they were not amateur actors but forced labour. Radlov accordingly objected to the forced conscription of soldiers for performances. However, without such conscription, it would not have been possible to prepare the pageant in only ten days. I should say that all kinds of property were also requisitioned for these pageants – not only the stage property of the Imperial theatres, but also any other necessary tools and paraphernalia. The performers got pickled herring and sweets as payment for their participation. But Piotrovsky wanted to see this and did see this as the birth of theatre out of folk “games”, similar to the birth of Greek drama according to classical scholarship.

The years of amateur theatre came to an end in 1927, when at the Party meeting on campaigning, propaganda, and culture the higher ranks found that mass pageants had become a “point of application of philosophical and aesthetic theories foreign to the working class”. Indeed, it has to be said that this was close to the truth.<sup>17</sup> All the avant-garde ideas of “proletarian art” broke down when faced with the fact that ordinary people’s taste was for the conservative cultural rear-guard. Piotrovsky noted that the plays produced by Radlov’s Theatre of People’s Comedy were favourites with children since for children the conventions of play are natural and habitual. However, mature socialist art modelled itself on the previous age, the age of theatrical realism.

Both the innovative experimental reconstructions of the original staging of ancient drama and the embodiment of ancient theatrical principles thus reconstructed in mass pageants were an attempt to put into practice the idea of the Slav Renaissance or Third Classical Renaissance. T. Zieliński first formulated them in 1899<sup>18</sup> and developed them further in his 1911 article “In memoriam I. F. Annensky, with whom he had discussed the idea. Vyacheslav Ivanov had then taken it up.<sup>19</sup> This idea had its roots in pan-Slavism since it posited that the Slavs were a real community just like the Germanic and Romance peoples. The idea of the Third Renaissance at once put the Slavs in the position of the future leading European nation and required that, as a *sine qua non* for taking up that leadership, the Slavs should absorb the classical heritage of Western Europe.

The First Renaissance was, according to this theory, the Romance renaissance that began in Italy in the 14th century and spread across Europe, lasting right until neo-classical France. The Second Renaissance was the neo-humanist Germanic renaissance of the 18th century (Goethe, Winckelmann,

17 Rafalovich, *History*, 88–90.

18 Tadeusz Zieliński, “Ancient World in the A. N. Maukov’s Poetry,” *Russian Bulletin* 7 (1899): 140.

19 Vyacheslav Ivanov, *Native and Universal*, ed. by Vasilij Tolmachev (Moscow: Respublica, 1994), 60 f., especially 67–72.



Wolf). One could not fit all of history into this pattern of course – to place Shakespeare within the Romance Renaissance Zieliński was forced to make Elizabethan England part of the Romance world. The next thing would be the Slav Renaissance in the 20th century: “Since the Slavs are undoubtedly the third great European people, it is to be expected that they will also become one of the world powers, once they have impregnated their soul with the seed of antiquity. That soul will, as a result, be able to make fruitful the souls of other peoples. We are talking, of course, not of hegemony, not even a hegemony of ideas of culture, but only of a kind of duty: since the Slavic peoples have long been indebted to the Romance and Germanic nations, it is now time for the Slavs to repay the debt into the common pot, after adding to the original loan their own values, created by uniting classical antiquity with the national spirit ... And now I will speak as a prophet and foretell that in the future European culture will exist under the aegis of the Slav renaissance, unless something like the end of the world (which, if Spengler is to be believed, is quite possible) intervenes.”<sup>20</sup>

This sermon and this prophecy were addressed to an audience of the Russian Silver Age, permeated as it was with reminiscences and images of classical culture. In fact, by the beginning of the 20th century, the schooling of young men in Russia had been based on the study of classical languages for 30 years, and the educated strata of the Russian public could learn about classical civilisation directly, rather than having to have it mediated by the French or the Germans. However, Zieliński nevertheless refrained from expressing his ideas on the Slav Renaissance in his publications in Western European languages (until 1933).<sup>21</sup> What basis, other than wishful thinking, could he have to persuade the West of the truth of this prophecy?

Although this historiosophic prediction of a Slav Renaissance did not come true, it had considerable influence not only on the culture of the Silver Age but also on Soviet culture when instead of the Third Renaissance Russia saw the Russian revolution. Several of Zieliński’s pupils did not want to abandon the Slav Renaissance and interpreted the Russian revolution accordingly. Nikolay Bakhtin thought of it as the invasion of Achaean Greece by the Dorians, after which the next stage would be a classical flowering. Other saw it as the sack of emasculated, degenerate Rome by the barbarians, after which the rebirth of a Christian Europe would follow. Others still saw in current events a triumph of democracy similar to the Athenian democratic model, and so on. “Now or never,” Piotrovsky wrote, “we must continue the tradition of Athenian political comedy,” in the satirical amateur theatre of the masses.<sup>22</sup>

20 Tadeusz Zieliński, “Introduction to the Works by Vyacheslav Ivanov,” in *Vyacheslav Ivanov: Creation and Fate* (Moscow: Nauka, 2002) [first publ. 1933 in Italian], 255–256; “A Poet of the Slav Renaissance Vyacheslav Ivanov,” *ibid.* [first publ. in 1934 in Polish], 249–250.

21 Cf. note above.

22 Adrian Piotrovsky, “Theater of Folk Comedy (1920),” in *Theater*, 52.

I should say that the “teachers’ generation” was also very interested in Greek drama, not only as text but also as spectacle. Vyacheslav Ivanov, Zieliński and Annensky agreed, so the legend goes, to translate, respectively, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and carried out their plan. They intended the translations to be used for dramatic productions. Ivanov and Annensky also wrote plays using plots of tragedies, which have not survived.<sup>23</sup> Zieliński annotated his text with notes for actors and mise-en-scenes and welcomed the performance of *Iphigenia in Aulis* by Isadora Duncan. He was close also to the group of her Russian followers and his students as well (Heptachoros-school). Annensky read lectures on classical theatre as part of N.P. Raev’s Historical and Literary Courses for women. Zieliński wrote much about the theatre, including Attic comedy, and Ivanov created a real theatrical utopia, based on his conception of a theatrical show in ancient Greece as a communal ritual performance that not only plays a role in forming the human community but also brings it into communion with the Divine. In his “Dreams of the people as an artist”, he talks about self-organisation in art (*samodejatel’nost’ hudozhestvennaja*). He says that “the country will be covered in the *orchestrai* and *thymelai* of ancient Greece where dancers will dance the round-dance.”<sup>24</sup> “The acting and mobile community”, the “chorus” was for Ivanov the “bearer of the supra-artistic reality of communal ritual performance’. In putting on mass pageants, their creators attempted to transcend art, to create a new life in forms that were both supra-conventional and supra-real.<sup>25</sup>

Ivanov’s term was not “artistic self-organisation” (*hudozhestvennaja samodejatel’nost’*), but “self-organisation in art” (*samodejatel’nost’ hudozhestvennaja*). Because the words in this phrase have changed places, they no longer mean the same. Whereas “artistic self-organisation” is an amateur activity, which is controlled by the government and which is in the service of propaganda, “self-organisation in art” is, by contrast, an art in and of itself: theurgist, life-transforming, liturgical, etc. Ten years before 1917 Ivanov had dreamed about a “supplier of the creative needs of the community”, who would serve as the “hand and mouth of the crowd, the crowd which is conscious of its own beauty’. The followers of the symbolists embodied their teachers’ values in a radically different world. Fulfilling Ivanov’s utopia, they took upon themselves the role of the “mediators of the artist people’. In mature Soviet society, these ideas were transmuted into the slogan “Art belongs to the People’.

It was not only Piotrovsky and Radlov who were involved in the self-organised creativity of the masses, which they saw as reviving classical antiquity;

23 Catriona Kelly, “Classical Tragedy, and the ‘Slavonic Renaissance’: The Plays of Viacheslav Ivanov and Innokentii Annenskii Compared,” *Soviet and East European Journal* 33 (1989): 236–240.

24 Ivanov, *Native*, 72.

25 During the pre-revolutionary period the future Commissar of Culture in the Soviet government Lunacharsky also dreamt of theater as a free religious cult, making theaters from temples and temples from theaters; Rafalovich, *History*, 249.

for instance, certain members of M. M. Bakhtin's circle also did so when in 1919 they put on an open-air production in Nevel of *Oedipus at Colonus*, using 500 students of working schools and representing this production as the intelligentsia's contribution to the construction of a new world.<sup>26</sup>

From the previous generation, the students also inherited Theodore Lipps' idea of *Einfühlung*. They could not, therefore, be satisfied with seeing classical antiquity from an antiquarian standpoint, and drama as a book to be read. That is the foundation of the drive to reconstruct authentic classical productions of ancient drama. Radlov and Piotrovsky found themselves joining the ranks of G. Craig, M. Reinhardt, Vs. Meyerhold and N.N. Evreinov, since they saw ancient theatre as highly conventional. That was typical of those who worked in the theatre, whereas classical scholars who had no contact with the theatre avant-garde could not rid themselves of the conception of realistic theatre when reconstructing the ancient production in their minds. "We have to understand," Radlov wrote, "that ancient theatre could show an actor flying away from the earth on the back of a beetle just because no-one cared that it was physically impossible to represent this realistically."<sup>27</sup> Radlov turned out to be a pioneer of the method of theatrical reconstruction that is so popular today and to which the scholars of the English-speaking world came in the 1970s based on Shakespearian studies and the Royal Shakespeare Company.

The theatre of Aristophanes was a state institution regarding its organisation, a socially revolutionary institution in spirit, a choral institution in form and a highly professional institution regarding the skill of its actors. This was the ideal of theatre in the new Russia; this was what "revolutionary classicists' dreamt of when they produced revolutionary street pageants in Petrograd."<sup>28</sup> They started to revive, with varying degrees of success, ancient self-organised theatre as a people's proletarian theatre, a theatre of political satire.<sup>29</sup> In his preface to the *Acharnians* Piotrovsky wrote: "After the ethical insights of the Renaissance and the aesthetic fantasies of Winckelmann, it was given to our generation to be able to see beneath the sentimental-humanities rubbish of 19th-century classical studies the simple, grand socio-religious basis of Athenian art, founded on blood and kin: our own classical antiquity."<sup>30</sup> One can notice the familiar signposts: Renaissance, Winckelmann, Russia, and of course "our own classical antiquity'. This is how the Slav Renaissance took place and how proletarian Slavs absorbed classical antiquity under the guidance of an "artist-mediator'.

26 L. Maximovskaya, ed., "Newspaper 'Hammer' (1918–1920)," in *Nevel Collection: Papers and Memoirs* 1 (Saint Petersburg, 1996), 150.

27 Radlov, "On the Skills," 72.

28 Sergej Radlov, "The Theater of Folk Comedy," *Life of Arts* 410/412 (1920, 27/29 March): 2.

29 Piotrovsky, "Ancient Plays to the Soviet Stage (1936)," *Theater*, 135–138; "Theater of Folk Comedy," *Theater* (1920): 50–53.

30 Aristophanes, "'The Acharnians' with Director's Stage Explanations by S. Radlov (Petropolis, 1923), 10.

In the 1930s criticism was heaped on the pupils of symbolist magicians. In response, they disowned the mystic element of the communal ritual performance, “empathic feeling” (*Einfühlung*), the revival of classical antiquity, mass pageants,<sup>31</sup> and “antiquarian” reconstruction (as it is now called):<sup>32</sup> “after all, no-one would think of antiquarian or conservation principles when producing *Romeo and Juliet* or *Othello*.”<sup>33</sup> One would do so, in fact, and very soon after those words were spoken, but no longer in Russia.

The ideas of Adrian Piotrovsky and Sergej Radlov demonstrate that the soil of ancient Greece lay beneath both the Silver Age utopia and the early Soviet utopia. The revolution brought Russia countless disasters and calamities. However, like a nuclear explosion, the destruction of the social and cultural paradigm freed an amazing amount of energy – not only destructive but also constructive energy, which was artistic, scientific, and creative. During the times of chaos, hunger, and civil war, ideas were born, works were created, and events of huge spiritual significance took place. Nearly all those beginnings were soon stifled, and the innovators brought to ruin. However, the ideas and works created or conceived in the first quarter of the 20th century, though sometimes realised only long afterwards, remain the most important achievements of Russian culture and, despite their utopian nature, continue to feed it to this day.

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<sup>31</sup> Rafalovich, *History*, 245.

<sup>32</sup> Piotrovsky, “Ancient Plays to the Soviet Stage (1936),” *Theater*, 135.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, 136.

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## SUMMARY

Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow:  
*Symbolist Ideas in the Scripts of Gubpolitprosvet: The  
 Theory and Practice of Proletarian Performance*

During the period of the so-called Silver age of Russian culture, three outstanding translators of the Greek tragedy, Tadeusz Zieliński, Innokentiy Annensky and Vyacheslav Ivanov, put forward the idea of the third, Slavonic Renaissance – the new rebirth of Antiquity, with the leading role of the Slavic peoples, particularly the Russians. They claimed that while the first Renaissance was Romanesque and the second German (in the era of Winckelmann, Goethe and German classical philology), the third one was supposed to be Slavonic. In the early Soviet period, the idea of Slavonic Renaissance brought about some unexpected results, first of all precisely in the sphere of theater. The paper focuses on how symbolist ideas got to be expressed in the performances of classical tragedies. Ivanov authored the expression “creative self-performance” that later, in the Soviet era, acquired the meaning of “non-professional performance,” such as comedies staged by “sailors and the Red Army soldiers,” Adrian Piotrovsky’s “amateur theatre,” and the pioneer reconstruction of the scenic performance of Aristophanes’ comedies done by Sergey Radlov, Adrian Piotrovsky, and others.

## POVZETEK

Ruska državna humanistična univerza v Moskvi:  
*Simbolistične ideje v scenarijih Gubpolitprosveta: Teorija  
 in praksa proletarske predstave*

V takoimenovanem srebrnem obdobju ruske kulture so trije nadarjeni prevajalci grške tragedije, Tadeusz Zieliński, Inokentij Anenski in Vjačeslav Ivanov, zastopali zamisel o tretji slovanski renesansi, o novem preporodu antike, kjer naj bi imela vodilno vlogo slovanska ljudstva, zlasti Rusi. Menili so, da je bila prva renesansa romanska, druga germanska (v času Winckelmanna, Goetheja in nemške klasične filologije), tretja pa slovanska. V zgodnjem sovjetskem obdobju je ideja slovanske renesanse prinesla nekaj nepričakovanih rezultatov, predvsem na področju gledališča. Prispevek se osredotoča na to, kako so prišle v uprizoritvah klasičnih tragedij do izraza simbolistične ideje. Ivanov je uporabil izraz »ustvarjalna samopredstava«, ki je v sovjetskem obdobju dobil pomen »amaterske predstave«. Sem so sodile komedije, ki so jih postavili »mornarji in vojaki Rdeče armade«, »amatersko gledališče« Adriana Piotrovskega ter pionirska rekonstrukcija uprizoritvenega uspeha pri Aristofanovih komedijah Sergeja Radlova, Adriana Piotrovskega in drugih.