Okhlopkov and the Nascence of the Postmodern

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From 1930 to 1937, Nikolai Pavlovich Okhlopkov was the artistic director of the Realistic Theatre in Moscow. His work there during that time made the theatre's name something of an oxymoron, for in the half-dozen productions for which he was responsible there[1] he discarded the proscenium and many of the conventions of "realistic" staging in favor of a style which was cinematic in its treatment of action (with cuts back and forth between different scenes and with music used as in movies) and what is today often called "environmental" in its use of the theatre space. It was a remarkable and somewhat seminal period of experimentation; it was also, in the sphere of Soviet theatre, a brief and isolated one. Other directors maintained the proscenium style of staging; even Meyerhold did not genuinely discard it. And, after the Realistic Theatre was taken away from Okhlopkov in 1937, he was also forced to retreat to the proscenium, although he did what he could when he could still to extend the stage into the auditorium or to put some of the audience on the stage.[2]

For the purposes of this paper, Okhlopkov's Realistic Theatre work is interesting in that we may discern in it early stirrings of the postmodern. Not of postmodern*ism*; not that he expressed a postmodern philosophical perspective; but that his intentional aesthetics and their realization in the productions in question were nascently postmodern, and that the experience of viewing them was also conducive to

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[1] *The Start,* 1932; *The Mother,* 1932; *The Iron Flood,* 1934; *Aristocrats,* 1935; *Othello,* 1936; and *Colas Breugnon,* 1937.

[2] In the 1940s, '50s and '60s, at the Theatre of Drama, later named the Mayakovsky Theatre, he continued to flout the box-set convention, using minimal or symbolic staging, often revolves, and sometimes a *hanamichi* through the middle of the audience to the back of the house; some productions also had small sections of audience seating onstage. However, he was unable to reconfigure the interior of the theatre or remove the proscenium. His first productions at the Realistic Theatre are generally considered to have been his most innovative, and they are the most exemplary for the purposes of this essay.

the development of a postmodern ethos. This is primarily due to their exposure of the communicative act and their catalyzation of awareness of distance, difference, between sender and receiver and between the world of the audience and the world of the performance. From this comes the undermining of metanarratives, which is the basis of the postmodern. This ethos being inherently inimical to a consolidated ideocracy, it is no wonder that Okhlopkov was forced into more traditional manners of staging after the 1930s. And yet Okhlopkov was an ardent supporter of the socialist ideal. His work is thus also interesting for how we may see, in hindsight, the extent to which his style could actually serve to work against his espoused ideology.

I

In his book *Theatre in Soviet Russia,* André van Gyseghem gives six principles quoted from Okhlopkov as "the basic principles of his theatre." These principles describe well the nature of his Realistic Theatre work; in summary, they are as follows: 1) to discard the box stage and use any part of the auditorium which served the purpose; 2) to allow the stage to surround the audience as well as the audience the stage; 3) to use "montage action" similar to that of cinematic technique ("the action may be transferred from one of our stage sets to another frequently situated some distance from the first, not only at the end of one episode and the beginning of another, according to the author's instructions, but at any time within the episode"); 4) to use music as an aid to setting the mood and pulse of the play; 5) through close actor-audience proximity, to necessitate unusual exactness in the actor's technique; 6) to use a genuine language of the theatre rather than a "naïve photographic naturalism." Okhlopkov concluded: "Thus we assert the realism of the theatre through theatrical means, appealing to the imagination of the spectator and at the same time providing it with a powerful stimulus. Thus the audience co-operates with the actors in every performance, so that the actors applaud the audience as well as the audience the actors" (van Gyseghem 1943, 193-195).

These principles and their realization, taken individually, are neither entirely original nor even entirely new. "Theatricality" has (as the very existence of the term shows) been more the norm than the exception throughout much of theatrical history.

But a return to "theatricality" after the dominance of "naturalistic" staging is not a return to the old manner of seeing the drama any more than egress from a tunnel into the open air means that one is in the same valley as one was in before entering the tunnel. The resurgence of such theatricality is a *post*-Enlightenment moment, not an atavistic irruption of a *pre*-Enlightenment aesthetic.

Even in the post-Enlightenment sphere, however, Okhlopkov's style was not without precedent. In fact, it was a logical development in its time and place. Adolphe Appia and Jacques Copeau had ripped out their proscenium arches, although the stage and the audience remained in opposition. The Futurists and Dadaists had played games with language and expression, as well as involving the audience in some of their pieces (some examples are to be found in Aronson 1981, 34-36). Max Reinhardt also aimed at involving the audience more closely, although his staging largely preserved the actor-audience distinction, and Erwin Piscator was trying surrounding the audience by 1926. The "Constructivist" experimentation with staging was in full swing by the early 1930s in the Soviet Union, and in fact was soon to hit a roadblock called "socialist realism". Experiments in non-"realistic" staging, making use of metaphor, synecdoche and other fancies, were also carried out in the early 1930s at the Liberated Theatre of Prague and elsewhere by Jiri Frejka, Jindrich Honzl, Emil Burian, and others;[3] none of the Czechs, however, rearranged the actor-audience relationship as radically as they rearranged the stage space. Likewise, Okhlopkov's mentor, Vsevolod Meyerhold, had introduced many of the "theatrical" means of which Okhlopkov subsequently availed himself, and had experimented with audience contact as early as his 1921 production of *Mystery-Bouffe*. It was for Meyerhold that El Lissitzky produced the often-reproduced (in books) but never realized surround staging design for Tretyakov's *I Want a Child*. Notwithstanding this, however, Meyerhold never truly did away with the proscenium, and Okhlopkov harshly criticized him for it: "Meyerhold actually cut the continually developing line of revolutionary theatre architecture. He threatened to do away with the stage; he even removed the curtains

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[3] Burian continued experimenting throughout the 1930s at his D34 (subsequently D35 through D41) theatre, swinging between antipolitical and politically engaged in his philosophy of theatre but always ostending the theatrical means (see Burian 1976). It may be of interest that Jan Mukarovsky based a structuralist theory on Burian's work, given that post-modern is generally understood as *post*-structuralist, at least in theory.

forever from his stage; but his constructivism not only retained the stage, but the elaboration of the stage as an element that Constructivism required. Meyerhold sanctioned the existence of the stage" (Strasberg and Kingsley 1973, 122). Meanwhile, in Poland, Zygmunt Tonecki summed up Reinhardt, Piscator, Meyerhold, Kiesler, Gropius, *et alia*, in his 1929 article "The Theatre of the Future," which called for annular staging (see Aronson 1981, 239-241).[4] His design was not realized, but Andrzej Pronaszko and Szymon Syrkus produced scattered stagings in the later 1930s under Tonecki's influence. Okhlopkov's particular distinction is as the first director to stage according to *all* of his espoused principles—and to such a degree (Arnold Aronson (1981, 117) calls Okhlopkov's first productions "the first truly environmental theatre productions of the twentieth century")—and as effectively the only one to do so in Soviet Russia. It is my intention to present him not as an entirely unique case but as an exemplary one.

What Okhlopkov's style was in actual practice varied a bit. In all cases the details were shaped by the smallness of the Realistic Theatre, which was the smallest professional space in Moscow, seating only 325 people. This enforced a certain closeness.[5] In the first production, *The Start* (1932), the proscenium arch was still intact. Some of the audience was seated up on what had been the stage, and the performance space was a ramp that rose up on both sides and looped overhead, as well as a small space between the two parts of the audience. Often action took place simultaneously in different places or in rapid alternation. For *The Mother* (1932), listed as directed by Pavel Tsetnerovich but largely guided by Okhlopkov's hand, the entire space was gutted and reconfigured. There was a small round platform in the middle, with four sections of audience surrounding and facing it; the audience were in turn surrounded by a raised platform, with metal grillework in front of it, which was connected by four aisles to the center stage. The staging was rather spare.. In contrast with this was the heavily detailed hillside which was built for *The Iron Flood* (1934); the

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[4] And in France in 1932 Antonin Artaud articulated his "Theatre of Cruelty", arguably the unattainable apotheosis of ideals such as Okhlopkov's.

[5] Okhlopkov had earlier staged a "mass action" in Irkutsk which involved much more space and people (estimates run up to 20,000), and he would later work in larger theatres; he also envisioned the building of a theatre which would allow flexible staging and an audience of about 3,000. However, in all cases his aim was to bring the audience

audience butted right up against it—it jutted out like a W—and the entire auditorium was overarched by a blue cyclorama, so that the theatre became something of a genuine "environment".. The actors were busying themselves in character with things such as laundry and cooking as the audience came in, and they occasionally addressed patrons directly as the audience was being seated. Spare staging and highly "theatrical" techniques were returned to in *Aristocrats* (1935), which had two bare platforms joined at the corner in the middle of the auditorium, surrounded by the audience; montage action was again used, and scene changes and setting effects were accomplished by rather ostensive variants on the kabuki *kurogo*. The final two productions, *Othello* (1936) and *Colas Breugnon* (1937), had stages at one end and one or two sides of the house as well as pieces in the middle (a gondola, a landscaped island). *Colas Breugnon* "opened with a feast in which actors shared food and drink with the audience who sat on planks and barrels" (McLain 1982, 173), and the entire theatre was made to look like a forest glade.

II

What, exactly, is it about this staging that conduces to a nascent postmodern? Perhaps this would best be broached by laying out what, exactly, I mean by *postmodern.* The classic statement is Jean-François Lyotard's: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives" (1987, 74). This is to say, the idea that there is one overall truth-system which can describe and subsume all narratives, all different perspectives and truth-systems, as was put forth in the evolutionary ethos of modernism (and many times before it), is called into question. This proceeds from an awareness of human existence—expressed in human interaction—as duelling truth-systems, singularities competing through language games. Lyotard espouses "the principle that any consensus on the rules defining a game and the 'moves' playable within it *must* be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation. The orientation then favors a multiplicity of finite meta-arguments, by which I mean argumentation that concerns metaprescriptives and is

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and actors close together and virtually sharing space, whether in large numbers or small.

limited in space and time" (89). The first awareness of this comes through the understanding of the fundamental distance involved in the act of communication, the impossibility of an exact match of meanings between sender and receiver. A result of this awareness is an overt focus on the signs which are used in communication, which leads to a rampant fragmentative quotationalism: this is postmodern*ism.* But that is a product, not an antecedent, of the postmodern condition.

The nascence of the postmodern must be understood in the context of its historical moment, as the next logical step after the Enlightenment apotheosis of the metanarrative of "scientific" empiricism. The same influences—for example, Okhlopkov's aesthetics—in other times would lend to other effects. It is, of course, well understood that the tenure of extreme resemblance to constitutive reality in theatrical signs was rather brief, and that "heightening" has for most of history been the accepted norm. But in a world where metanarratives are stable, a heightening represents greater ideality, or at the very least a plausible imitation or simple degradation, and is accepted as a natural offshoot of the constitutive system. The scientific, empiricist focus of the Enlightenment changed the focus to the immanent, to the physical world as the ultimate truth, to the empirically verifiable and scientifically accurate as the necessary standard for truth-value judgments. In order for the signs to remain transparent, they had to resemble the consitutive with great exactitude; otherwise, they reeked of artifice, of unreality, perhaps even of an outdated transcendental ideology. But the next step on this road is to find that even the understandings which attach to these empirical realities are uncertain, and that nothing is sure but the signs themselves.[6] All that is necessary for this is to render the act of signification opaque and to expose as not inevitable the ideology which drives the ideals. This step is (was) unavoidable, and Okhlopkov was neither the first nor the last to catalyze it.[7] (The thoroughness with

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[6] The step after *that,* of course, is to doubt materiality itself and to return to the metaphysical or retreat to solipsism, but this is beyond the point which we are examining here.

[7] Aside from the theatrical examples cited above, there were, for instance, in the sphere of literature, Viktor Shklovsky's theories (and those of others of the Formalist school). In particular among these is the concept of *ostranenie*, variously translated with such terms as "defamiliarization" and "enstrangement". This is an idea of aesthetic effect (in particular in distinction between poetry and prose) as involving rendering signification opaque and questioning what had been taken for granted (see, for instance, Shklovsky 1990).. With the Formalists, the theory was articulated on the basis of existing works,

which he deviated from the standard transparency of the sign was, of course, more salient.) Post-Enlightenment, "theatricality" can become an underlining of the material sign as the only constant, and thus an index of the disintegration of monadic meaning. Ultimately, in fact, the simple materiality of the sign is all that can be relied on, and it becomes an end in itself; consider Baudrillard (1987, 29): "For us the medium, the image medium, has imposed itself between the real and the imaginary, upsetting the balance between the two, with a kind of fatality which has its own logic."

Okhlopkov's staging first of all conduced to the postmodern in its bringing the audience and performers together in the same space. In doing this, it underlined the crucial distance which is involved in the act of communication, manifest through a difference between the spectator and the action which cannot be reconciled; it catalyzed an awareness of a plurality of realities, of the stage world—a subjunctive one contained within the act of an utterance—and the constitutive world existing in parallel, never reaching perfect communication.

It may seem an odd thing to assert that staging which brings the audience into closer contact with the actors would serve to accentuate their distance from the performance. For one thing, the very phenomenon of closeness will lend to greater emotional impact in the spectator's automatic cognition; for another, the closeness enables greater perception of detail. If any sort of direct contact—verbal or physical—is effected, it should engender in the audience a feeling of direct involvement. And that such staging is emotionally effective and absorbing is well-attested; consider this impression of a moment in *The Mother:*

> Nilovna, a small woman played by the actress Mel'nikova, descended [the] steps into the auditorium and, having descended, immediately turned to one of the spectators with some words (and this address was perceived as something natural, for Mel'nikova said it in a very ordinary voice), just as, for example, they turn to you in a tram with a request for you to pass a coin for them and you do it without thinking. And in that moment the entire auditorium felt in that spectator's position which arose as if there were a super-contact between both sides. (Iu. Iuzovskii, "Teatr Okhlopkova,"

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using examples from such as Sterne and Tolstoy. But even allowing that 19th century fiction used *ostranenie*, the act of identification of it as a process lends a reflexive clarity which has a particularly strong catalytic effect on the development of a post-modern *weltanschauung*. Meyerhold drew some influence from the Formalists, and so they would also have had an at least indirect influence on Okhlopkov.

Zachem liudi khodiat v teatre: stat'i, ocherki, fel'etony raznykh let (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964): 65-66; quoted in Southard 1980, 69.)

But this aesthetic effect does not ultimately equate with greater faith in signification; nor, for that matter, does it necessarily lead to more active involvement on the part of the audience. The question of frame is of paramount importance here. Erving Goffman explains the crucial understanding which pertains to the theatrical frame: "The central understanding is that the audience has neither the right nor the obligation to participate directly in the dramatic action occurring on the stage, although it may express appreciation throughout in a manner that can be treated as not occurring by the beings which the stage performers present onstage" (1974, 125). They may seem for a thrill of a moment to be in the same world, but the awareness quickly follows—and is underlined by being remembered—that they are not.

Consider this reaction to theatrical proximity expressed by Frances Mackenzie (quoted in Marshall 1975, 224):

> Watching a good and lively *Twelfth Night* production, I felt rather as if I were at a party where the hosts were in fancy dress but not the guests. Viola, in an aside, came right up to me and spoke with her face close to mine, but with her eyes looking just over my shoulder at someone in the row behind. I was rather embarrassed and felt I ought to make a polite and sympathetic reply, but was handicapped by my lack of fluency in Shakespearian blank verse. I wanted to recoil in my seat and pretend not to be there, but then, of course, I should have been failing in 'audience participation'.

The problem is clear: the proximity engenders in the cognitive processes automatic reactions developed for things which usually occur at such a range, but these reactions are immediately wrestled down by the awareness that the phenomenon perceived is within a different frame, one that by definition cannot interact with one's own. What if Mackenzie *had* responded in blank verse? Needless to say, it would have constituted an embarrassing disruption, a solecism in the communicational grammar of the moment. And when in *The Mother* the actress playing the Mother had a spectator hold her bread for a moment while she prepared a table, the transgression of the usual boundaries which that represented may have been striking (and perhaps somewhat subversive), but the spectator could not have engaged in any behavior which might have affected the action of the play. There may have been "a feeling that the spectators

could become participants at any moment" (McLain 1982, 117), but the fact is that they didn't and, really, they couldn't.

Likewise, in *The Iron Flood,* the hillside environment was striking, novel, more like being there than a box set would ever be, but no fool would ever have taken it as real presence; indeed, the proximity served again to underline the illusion, as Okhlopkov himself later admitted. "We wanted to turn set pieces into genuine hills—even mountains. But after all—the spectator sat right beside these prop roads, paths, hills and mountains. He had only to reach out his hand and run it along those 'wrinkles' on the road to see that it was not life but only make-believe. Even without putting out his hand it would have been easy to see this at a glance: there was no need to create this illusion, even to try to 'fool' the spectator" (N. P. Okhlopkov, "Ob uslovnosti: II," *Teatr* 12 (1959): 70-71; quoted in McLain 1982, 129). (For that matter, even had the play been performed on a genuine hillside, it would nonetheless have involved the distance of a frame.) Michael McLain analyzes one of the laudatory reactions to the play:

> Although Neznyj avers that the spectator lost his awareness of being in a theater, he contradicts this with his comments about applause and 'the vivid theatrical spectacle.' This would seem to indicate that something approaching a dual reality was created for the audience: they were simultaneously caught up in the 'reality' of onstage events to a remarkable degree, but with the applause and other signs of their appreciation they reacted in a way which still reinforced the awareness of the theater as convention and art. (118)

This "dual reality" was of course the automatic cognitive processing of phenomena followed immediately by the less habituated awareness of frame difference. The awareness of the communicative act enforces a frame separation, a different reality which will show its difference more as the parallax increases with reduced distance. Traditional staging which maintains a separation between actors and audience never brings the action so close that ramifications and frame-appropriateness have immediate importance. They are brought to the fore by bringing the actors closer to the audience. There is perceptual proximity, which has impact, but the longer-term and more subtle, secondary-level effect is distance, an awareness of separate realities.

III

The second aspect of Okhlopkov's Realistic Theatre staging that was incipiently postmodern was its style, its "language": its use of music and montage and, in some of the productions, overtly "theatrical" usages. The audience, having been made aware of the difference, that is to say distance, between communicative parties and between the realities involved, were also made aware of the difference, that is to say lack of similarity, between the two worlds, and their attention was focused onto the signs themselves, the vehicles of signification. This could act against the seeming transparency of the signs, adding a degree of opacity.

Examples are readily forthcoming. The most overtly "theatrical" of the Realistic Theatre productions was *Aristocrats*. The stage platforms were bare, with a few painted screens as decor. "The actual props required in the business," Norris Houghton recalls,

> were brought on in the full light by blue-masked and dominoed attendants who in function suggested the Chinese property man. They would run on in full stage light carrying a telephone, for example, and would hold it while a character made his call; when the business was completed they would run off taking the phone with them. Or when a table was required two of these men would enter with a piece of green baize which, squatting on the floor, they would hold taut between them to suggest the table top. The rest of the play, the dialogue, the costumes, were realistic, and the combination of these conventions with the realism I found disturbing. (1938, 171)

Other productions also confronted the spectator with the form as much as with the contents (which earned them the criticism of "formalism"—which, as McLain puts it, "essentially meant that the production was fresh and entertaining and could so be accused of allowing these qualities to obscure the ideological content" (103); the label had gained, in its use as an epithet, a definition considerably looser than that intended for it by its original users). Jay Leyda wrote of *The Start:* "By means of new demands and shocks, by levels, by light, by sound (speech, music, noise), by the balanced use of every space and object, by terrific control of actors, by playing at all levels of intensity, by being surrounded (literally) by the play—an exciting evening" (quoted in McLain 1982, 101). In *Othello,* elements of Shakespearean, Chinese and Classical Greek staging were combined; for instance, a chorus was added to sing during the strongest moments

of the play (see Southard 1980, 107). In *Colas Breugnon,* "Okhlopkov used soft, delicate plays of light, orchestrated by a musical background, that followed the change of musical rhythm and mood that mirrored the changes within the play" (Southard 1980, 110). Even the realistic detail of *The Iron Flood* was made as an intrusion into the usual audience space, a deliberate attempt to shock (see McLain 1982, 120).

The intellectual stimulation of such theatrical innovations would no doubt be exciting and involving for many audience members. Their role in the performance, as interpreters, was unquestionably foregrounded. This is as Okhlopkov wanted: "Thus we assert the realism of the theatre through theatrical means, appealing to the imagination of the spectator and at the same time providing it with a powerful stimulus. Thus the audience co-operates with the actors in every performance, so that the actors applaud the audience as well as the audience the actors" (van Gyseghem 1943, 195). In a worker's paradise, all will cooperate in harmony. But the very awareness of the cooperation involved in the communication, the understanding that the receiver makes a contribution to the meaning and that it therefore is not indisputable and transparent, is the seed of the postmodern plant.

In transparency of signification Herbert Blau discerns solipsism, hegemony, a view through a lens which does not reveal that it is a lens. "This is the space without boundaries in which ideology seems to merge with the structure of the unconscious, from whose (unimagineable) coign of vantage there is no frontier to cross because there is no geography, nor existence but its own" (1992, 431). Ideology—which is really to say metanarrative, or a brand thereof—is key here. Consider what Fredric Jameson (1993) cites as "the great Althusserian (and Lacanian) redefinition of ideology as 'the representation of the subject's *Imaginary* relationship to his or her *Real* conditions of existence'" (89). "The Althusserian formula, in other words, designates a gap, a rift, between existential experience and scientific knowledge: ideology has then the function of somehow inventing a way of articulating these two distinct dimensions with each other" (91). It allows the illusion of transparency in communication. "What we call ideology," Paul de Man explains, "is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism" (1986, 11). That which turns the focus to the linguistic function, to the necessary assumptions underlying meaning, will not rid us of ideology—which could hardly be possible unless it were to turn us into

vegetables—but it will force an acknowledgement of it and a consequent understanding that metanarratives are not rock solid and indisputable.

In an ideocracy such as Soviet Russia, this could naturally be a problem. The postmodern is, from the beginning and by definition, inimical to ideocracy of any type. We will recall that incredulity towards metanarratives leads to "the principle that any consensus on the rules defining a game and the 'moves' playable within it *must* be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation. The orientation then favors a multiplicity of finite meta-arguments, by which I mean argumentation that concerns metaprescriptives and is limited in space and time" (Lyotard 1987, 89). What this means is that, with Lyotard and Deleuze, one will "seem to favour the supervention of a micropolitics which will attend to the local and the specific without recourse to some grand programme or macropolitical theory such as Marxism, or psychoanalysis, or evolutionary progress" (Docherty 1993, 4). Ideology and metanarratives can only be applied pragmatically, not dogmatically and universally, for their universality has been denied.

Ideocracy is thus especially vulnerable to the deconstructions of postmodernism because it relies on the stability of a single meaning-system, a single metanarrative.[8] Ernesto Laclau analyzes one of the aspects of Marxism which are vulnerable in this respect.

> Consider, for example, the category of 'class' within Marxism. Central to the series of recent exchanges are the following questions: Is it classes or social movements that constitute the fundamental agents of change in advanced industrial societies? Or, is the working class in the process of disappearing? But these questions are quite secondary because, whatever answers they elicit, they *presuppose* what is fundamental: the obviousness and transparency of the category 'class'. . . . It is precisely the limitation of responses that keeps alive the sense of a question. (1993, 331)

And the postmodern, for its part, dissolves the limitation of responses and renders categories opaque.

But the effects also come in ways even more directly pertinent to the case of Stalinist Russia. The Soviet Union of the 1930s was only questionably Marxist, but it

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[8] Other systems, such as late capitalism (see Jameson), are based on fluid media of symbolic exchange and are thus well-suited to the postmodern.

was very much subject to a view of humanity striving for a single apotheosis, one grand ultimate state of being, and it was stridently apparent to all and sundry even in that time and place that anything which might question the values driving this quest could weaken it. A single quest seemed to call for a single artistic style, one that would directly aid that quest, one which would keep people's minds focused on the one thing. This was "Socialist Realism." Party spokesman Andrei Zhdanov formulated it as follows:

> Socialist realism, being the basic method of Soviet literature and criticism, requires from the artists truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, truth and historical completeness of artistic representation must be combined with the task of ideological transformation and education of the working man in the spirit of socialism. (Southard 1980, 83)

The very details of its prescriptions in themselves tend to prohibit much of Okhlopkov's innovation. But the Realistic Theatre's work also represented more: first, the simple fact of its presence as an exception was an enforcement of pluralism, an infraction. Beyond that, its ostension of forms was viewed as a distraction from the importance of the message. This is noteworthy: the forms, whether or not in the grand scheme of things they were actually new, were obtrusive in that time and place for being different. More than this, even, and perhaps only inchoately sensed by most of Okhlopkov's critics (or, for that matter, his supporters), was the crisis of faith in metanarrative which the Realistic Theatre staging served to catalyze. Even if one could remain true to one ideology, one would always be aware of others as viable options; ideocracy, especially of the Soviet sort, requires an unswerving belief in only one. The very concept of ideology, in fact, was a weapon, a club with which to beat down the fractious. Within the sphere of a metanarrative which claims exclusive patent on the truth, other ideologies are falsehoods, obscurers of transparent meaning. The necessary response to those who make signification opaque is to say that it is because they have gone over to falsehood, and that were they to return to truth all would be clear. The "formalism" of the Realistic Theatre was, not surprisingly, seen as a sort of falsehood.

From *The Start,* Okhlopkov's staging drew fire. His first production at the Realistic Theatre was condemned for formalism, for distracting from the message with its obtrusive stylistic innovations. Not that it was universally condemned: there were, as

always, those who took more liberal stances, but they were not the voices of the powers-that-were. And again with *The Mother,*

> [t]he progressive critics recognized [it] for the socially viable, ideologically sound and artistically effective production that it was. But the conservative view was still stridently negative. The critic E. Beskin wrote that with the production Oxlopkov had proved himself 'a formalist, a rationalist, an anarchist building a bridge in the air with no foundation in lives, psycho-social content.' . . . Within each new production the seeds which had been sown for the dissolution of the Realistic Theater were being nurtured by reviews like Beskin's. It was not a time to be charged with such sins. (McLain 1982, 119)

After *The Iron Flood,* one of the major critics, Boris Al'pers, wrote, "The innovation of this theater is confined to stunts and technological 'bright ideas' which are very poor and limited in scope. This theater wants to amaze the audience with its unusual stage carried into the auditorium and the loud gaudiness of its productions. At the root of this theater's recent work lies a coarse naturalism coupled with a weakening of the ideological content" (Boris Al'pers, "*Zeleznyj potok* u Oxlopkova: 11 Marta 1934 g.," in *Teatral'nye ocerki: 2 :Teatral'nye prem'ery I diskussii* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1977): 246-248; quoted in McLain 1982, 128). *Aristocrats* was likewise criticized, but the play's contents—a glorification of the Baltic-White Sea Canal project—gave sufficient license for endorsement and success.

In 1936, however, a series of three articles under Stalin's signature appeared in *Pravda* condemning formalism.[9] In response to these, five self-criticism meetings were organized for the theatre artists of Moscow. Okhlopkov, who was more interested in surviving than in making a strident point, responded to official criticisms of his work with appropriate abjection. "[N]ot having overcome the petty-bourgeois ideology in myself, the philistine ideology of the futurists . . . I could not communicate to the spectator the true sense of these productions" (N. P. Okhlopkov, "Protiv formalizma i naturalizma: Diskussiia u teatralnykh rabotnikov: Vyustuplenie oshibki moei raboty," *Teatr I dramaturgiia* 4 (1936): 196-7; quoted in Southard 1980, 102). One would do well, however, to consider that he also at the same time apologized in advance for the errors in his production of *Othello* which was to open soon after. But Okhlopkov, we

should be sure to remember, was himself an ardent supporter of socialism. He had no wish to deconstruct the metanarrative to which he subscribed; the plays which he produced, at the Realistic Theatre as later, were in text very solid Soviet stuff (or—as with *Othello*—at least not anti-Soviet). His aim was to bring the audience and the actors closer together, as we note, "so that the actors applaud the audience as well as the audience the actors." Indeed, Norris Houghton noted that "in the Realistic Theatre spectators and actors look much the same . . . : there will be Red Army uniforms on the stage and in the house; there will be shawl-shrouded women and rough-bloused men in both places" (Houghton 1938, 170). But, inevitably, in the joy in the use of the theatrical means, in the bringing into proximity of audience and actors, and in the very innovation which this style represented, Okhlopkov's own ideology—along with any and all—was subtly being undermined. His karma, one might say, was running over his dogma. The positivist ethos was already well-formed, and the next step after questioning metaphysics would naturally be an uncertainty regarding the ultimately unverifiable act of understanding; given the right nudge, the result could not but be a weakening of the absolute faith in transparency of signification, and thus in metanarratives.

The result also could not but be a weakening of the faith of the Soviet government in Okhlopkov's viability as an artistic director. *Othello* and *Colas Breugnon* did not fare well, and in 1937 the Realistic Theatre company was merged with Tairov's Kamerny Theatre and moved into their space, one which did not allow for much manipulation. In the long run, Okhlopkov was able to save himself through his work in film, becoming something of an icon of the Soviet worker through his performances in *Lenin in October, Lenin in 1918* and *Alexander Nevsky.* He was ultimately given another theatre, but one which, having historical significance, could not be gutted and reconfigured. He continued to innovate as he could, but the potentially postmodern effects of his work had been somewhat weakened.

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[9] These were "Confusion Instead of Music," on 28 January, "Falseness in the Ballet," on 6 February, and "On Slovenly Artists," on 6 March.

IV

The question may arise as to whether Okhlopkov's work was in fact modernist: it was labelled "formalist", after all, which could tend to imply a modernist slant,[10] and its focus on finding the most effective means of theatrical communication may seem to smack of the modernist emphasis on materials. It is the question of difference (as in Derrida) which makes it clear that it was not. Whether strict modernism in theatre is possible at any rate is subject to question; Nick Kaye (1994) asserts that it is not, and quotes one of the priests of modernism in art, Michael Fried: "*Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre*" (28; emphasis in original). The basis of modernism is the idea of the self-sufficient apotheosis of the materiality of a given artistic form, the cleansing of the media of any scintilla of signification, signification being a thing which automatically brings in and relies on things external to the material of the work. "In striving toward 'essence' the modernist work seeks to realize qualities and values which are legitimate *in their own terms,* and so to transcend the play of difference Derrida reveals in an appeal to the 'transcendental signified' and so the *presence* of meaning" (17; emphasis in original). The idealization of a closure of reference, a self-sufficiency of meaning, trades on the assumption that what it idealizes is even possible. A postmodern sensibility finds that it is not, that there can be no closure of meaning, for there is always a difference between what refers and what is referred to—in fact, anything which relates to nothing external to itself is incapable of conveying meaning (for example, "A is not B and B is not A" means nothing without further explanation)—and a difference between understander and understood. That the medium has interposed itself between the real and the imaginary does not mean that the sign becomes self-sufficient; it must always at least *seem* to refer to something beyond itself. In terms of Okhlopkov's work, it should by now be clear that the very idea of closure was undermined, and the act of signification was underlined.

Okhlopkov's significance in theatrical history is not, and most likely will never be, remembered primarily for the contribution of his style to the emergence of the postmodern. This is perhaps at least in part because the postmodern itself has acquired

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[10] This is not to say that the Formalists were modernists, but simply that much that was modernist was tarred with the brush of "formalism".

a certain invisibility—it is, after all, and in spite of itself, a metanarrative too. Even if the standard staging style remains non-"environmental", the plurality of possible theatrical forms and arrangements is largely taken for granted nowadays (at least in the circles of those who are likely ever to hear of Okhlopkov), which means that the postmodern project has been quite successful. Nevertheless—or perhaps even because of these facts—it bears reminding that the qualities for which Okhlopkov is remembered were in fact both products and causes of the nascence of the postmodern, whatever else they may also have been, and their relation to the dominant politico-cultural sphere of their time and place is a valuable illustration of the inseparability of the political and the aesthetic.

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