

Stories Lurk Behind a Forgotten Photo of Vsevolod Meyerhold

By [John Freedman](#)

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Group photos are a tradition in the arts and, on occasion, some become iconic. Anton Chekhov sitting with Konstantin Stanislavsky and the troupe of the Moscow Art Theater is one that comes to mind immediately.

There's something intriguing about group portraits. The visages of famous people peer out at us from a sea of unfamiliar faces, reminding us that at one time all of these individuals were mortals who walked the same earth. All were connected as players in a process that led to the making of culture and history.

I own a copy of a unique group photo centered on the theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold that has never been published. Or, if it has, it never received any attention. It is nowhere to be found in any of the 43 books by or about Meyerhold in my library, and I have never seen it anywhere else.

Meyerhold was one of the great innovators of the Russian stage in the first four decades of the 20th century. This was not only an era of great art &mdash it was also a byzantine political age that brought tragedy to many who lived through it. Meyerhold, for example, was arrested in 1939 and murdered in 1940 in the basement of the Lubyanka Square building belonging to the NKVD, the Soviet secret police.

The picture accompanying this column was taken well before that, probably in the mid-to late-1920s, when some of the people in it were rising stars. I was allowed to copy it years ago by Anna Mass, a writer with whom I became friends while I was working on a book about the playwright Nikolai Erdman. Here Erdman stands directly behind Meyerhold, the imposing figure sitting second from left in the front row. Just to the right of Erdman, from our point of view, stands Anna's father, Vladimir Mass.

Erdman wrote his two most famous plays for Meyerhold, "The Warrant" in 1925, and "The Suicide," which was banned in 1932 before it was ever performed. Anna's father worked as an assistant to Meyerhold in 1923 and 1924 and was a well-known playwright and poet in his own right. For approximately a decade from the 1920s to the early 1930s, Mass and Erdman were a famous team. Their jointly written musical plays, comic sketches, film scripts and satiric fables were trend-setting. Suffice it to say that they wrote the script for "Jolly Fellows," to this day one of the most popular musical films in Russian history.

Erdman and Mass were both arrested in October 1933 on the set where "Jolly Fellows" was being filmed in the Black Sea resort town of Gagry. As it is customarily said, they were "fortunate" to have been arrested prior to the horror of the Great Purges in the late 1930s. Each got off with a light scare &mdash they were merely exiled to Siberia for three years, then deprived of the right to live legally in Moscow for nearly a decade. They never again wrote together, although they remained friends until Erdman's death in 1970. Mass died in 1979.

Aside from Erdman and Mass, three of the most prominent playwrights of the 1920s are also identifiable here &mdash Sergei Tretyakov, Vsevolod Vishnevsky and Alexei Faiko.

Tretyakov, the tall, bald man standing in back on the right side of the picture, wrote dialogues for Meyerhold's production of "The Earth Upturned" in 1923, and his play "Roar, China!" was produced at the Meyerhold Theater in 1926. His melodrama, "I Want a Child," was planned for production at the Meyerhold Theater between 1927 and 1930, but that project never came to fruition.

Tretyakov was not as "lucky" as Erdman and Mass. He was arrested in 1937 and murdered in prison. It would appear that he died in 1939.

Faiko, the bespectacled man seated at the far right, had two plays staged by Meyerhold, "Lake Lyul" in 1923 and "The Teacher Bubus" in 1925. Few writers had as many plays produced and argued over in the press of the 1920s as Faiko. But this gentle and somewhat dreamy writer fell out of favor shortly thereafter. His last major play, "Yevgraf, Seeker of Adventures," was staged at the Moscow Art Theater in 1932. When this work was revived at the Stanislavsky Drama Theater in 2006, a half-century had passed since any of his plays had been produced.

Vishnevsky, the slightly bored man in the dark suit next to Faiko, was one of the most honored playwrights of the early Stalin era. He wrote a handful of popular epic dramas on the themes of heroism and revolution that made a big splash in the 1930s but subsequently were rarely revived. His inclusion in this group, incidentally, might indicate a later date for the photo, since it wasn't until 1931 that Meyerhold staged his drama "The Final, Decisive Battle."

It is interesting to see Vishnevsky and Erdman together in a single photo, since the rivalry between the two was intense. Vishnevsky was furious when Meyerhold decided to stage Erdman's "The Suicide," and he actively fanned the flames of opposition, helping to bring about the banning of the play in 1932 and Erdman's arrest in 1933. Always a man of great passions, Vishnevsky was also instrumental in the public condemnation of the playwright and novelist Mikhail Bulgakov at more or less this same time.

Finally, just to the right of Meyerhold, almost sitting in the great man's lap, is Alexander Gladkov. Gladkov was one of the director's right-hand men in the 1920s and 1930s and later went on to become a successful playwright and screenwriter. That was not until after he too spent time in the Siberian camps, however. Arrested in 1948 for "possessing anti-Soviet literature," he was released in 1954, only after Stalin's death. Gladkov's most famous script was "A Hussar's Ballad," which was made into one of the most popular films of the 1960s by director Eldar Ryazanov. Gladkov wrote valuable memoirs about Meyerhold that were published posthumously in 1980.

I would love to hear from anyone who knows anything about others in the photograph.

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