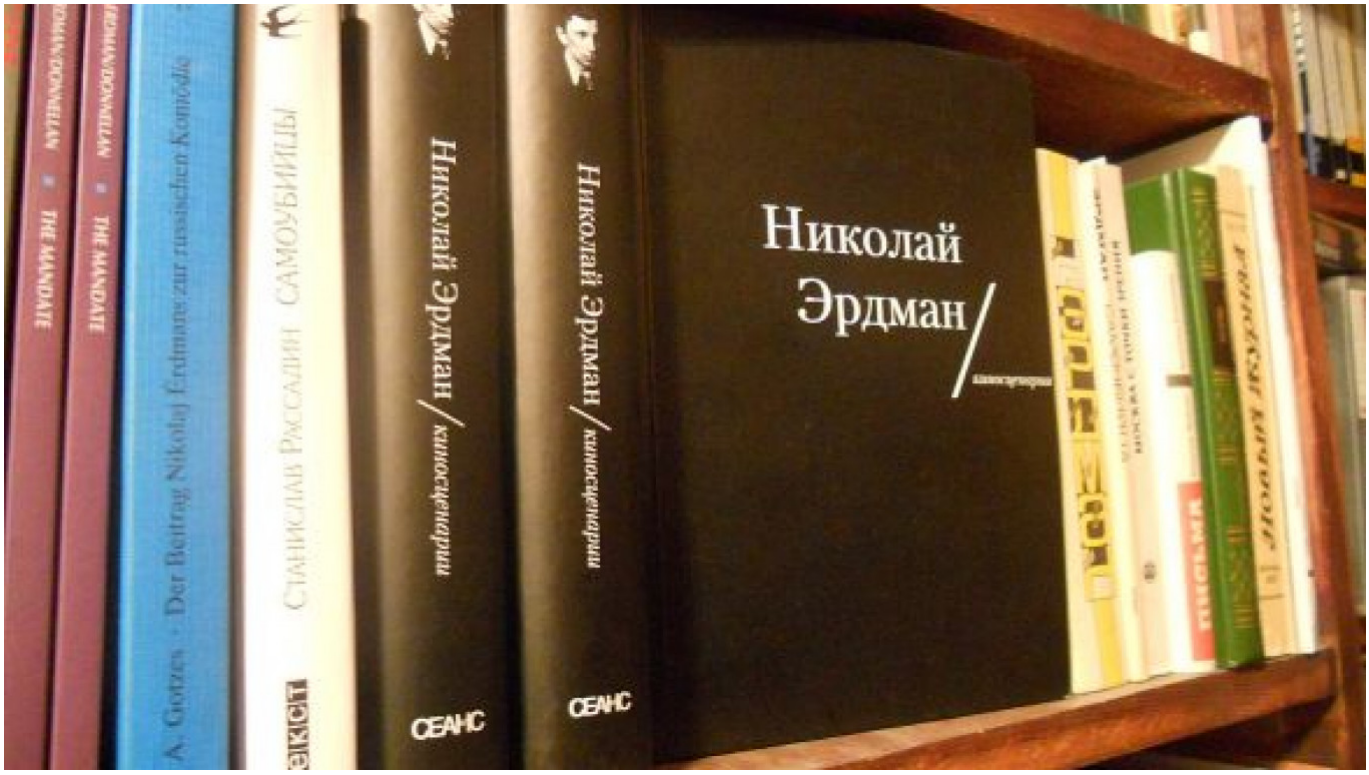
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A Great Russian Playwright Rediscovered as a Great Screenwriter

By John Freedman

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A new book entitled "Nikolai Erdman/Film Scripts" sheds new light on the legacy of a major Russian playwright.

Nikolai Erdman's comedy "The Suicide" tells the story of a forlorn, unemployed man whom a bunch of creeps, thugs and morons convince to try to commit suicide in order to further causes that they support.

The play was written in the late 1920s, was banned by Stalin in the early 1930s, and Erdman never wrote another play for the theater again.

As Mikhail Bulgakov noted so presciently, however, manuscripts do not burn. And "The Suicide," along with Erdman's first play "The Warrant" (also known in English as "The Mandate"), came roaring back to international fame in the 1970s and 1980s.

After something of a cooling off in the 1990s, the current era of economic crisis and blatant

political manipulation of individuals has brought about a renaissance for "The Suicide" around the world. My own translation of the play has been performed at four different theaters in the last year. A reading of Richard Nelson's translation was held at the Red Bull Theater in New York in January. In recent seasons, significant adaptations of the play have been produced in London (Moira Buffini's "Dying for It") and New York (Robert Ross Parker's "Goodbye, Cruel World").

Okay, so Erdman's fame is definitely secure. He is, after all, the author of "The Suicide," a classic text of Russian comedy.

But that's where we have to think again. And a young woman by the name of Anna Kovalova has given us good reason to do so.

Kovalova just published an eye-popping collection of the film scripts that Erdman wrote between 1927 and 1970. Printed by SEANS in St. Petersburg, it bears the simple title of "Nikolai Erdman/Film Scripts."

As Kovalova notes in her introduction, Erdman, as one of the quintessential authors for theater in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, did not "come to cinema" – he merely "stopped by" once when passing. And yet, because of the banning of "The Suicide," and because Erdman was exiled to Siberia for three years while former friends and colleagues were arrested and shot during the Great Purges and after, it just so happens that cinema became this writer's refuge for the remainder of his life.

By the time he died in 1970, Erdman had written over 50 screenplays of all kinds. He wrote the scripts for two of the Soviet Union's most popular and famous musical comedies – "Jolly Fellows" (1933) and "Volga-Volga" (1938). He wrote melodramas – "The Actress" (1943) is still shown regularly on television today. He wrote fairy tales – "Cain the 18th" (1963), based on a play by Yevgeny Shvarts, and "Morozko" (1964) are just two films that still can be seen on television every month or two.

Some of the animated films made to Erdman's scripts are among the most loved cartoons of Russian children even today. The gently lyrical and tartly satirical tales of "Golden Throat" (1954) and "Island of Errors" (1955) have entertained numerous generations of both young and old.

In old encyclopedias (and new ones on the internet) you can still find phrases like, "Nikolai Erdman, broken by Stalin and the Soviet machine, quit writing for the theater in the 1930s and whiled away the rest of his life writing hackwork for films."

Declarations of this kind are unconscionable and just plain wrong. Anyone who has seen the films made to Erdman's scripts knows that very well.

Now, the publication of "Nikolai Erdman/Film Scripts" makes that abundantly clear for all to see.

This collection of 12 scripts provides some astonishing reading. Not only do we see Erdman's extraordinary ability to create action and living images with words, but we also see that this writer repeatedly spoke out in his work about the state of the world in which he lived.

In both feature films and cartoons, Erdman was attracted to stories that pitted tyrants against defenseless individuals.

In "The Free City of Artisans" (1966), based loosely on a story by Tamara Gabbe, we encounter evil soldiers and secret policemen laying siege to a medieval city of artists and artisans.

"According to my intelligence," the head of the secret police declares, "the last crust of bread has been eaten and the last drop of water has been drunk."

But the inhabitants of the city refuse to surrender, and soldiers in the attacking army shout: "Death to the artisans!"

"Golden Throat," written as The Thaw was getting underway after the death of Joseph Stalin, commences with unmistakable references to that historic movement that took place in the mid-1950s in the Soviet Union.

The camera, Erdman indicates, shows "a field covered in snow, but already black and green spots can be seen everywhere."

As the wintery scene continues to thaw, a chubby partridge awakens, spreads her wings and calls out to the other birds who are still fast asleep: "It is time! It is time! It is time!"

"Immediately," Erdman writes, "the entire Flock comes to life."

"Flock," I must add, is capitalized in Erdman's script, surely emphasizing that he intended to provide a metaphorical reference to the notion of a society or nation of individuals waking up as if from a long slumber.

I should also point out that "Golden Throat" develops into the story of how this mother partridge becomes a heroine for taking in the children of other birds who died or were killed in the course of the winter.

For those whose knowledge of Soviet history is fuzzy, I provide this reminder: The problem of children orphaned by the death of parents in the Siberian labor camps was an acute social issue at this time.

No less impressive in this collection of scripts is the sheer quality of the writing.

Erdman was a master-builder of character and situation.

In the script for "Mitya" (1927), Erdman describes the scene as the hero slowly approaches a snowman, made by some street kids, which now teeters precariously on the cover of a telephone distributor box.

"On the street corner stands a boy of 14," Erdman writes. "The boy's face is apprehensive, a frown is on his brow. He looks toward Mitya. Mitya stands near the distributor box. He digs into his pocket. Pulls out a key. (Close-up). The boy's face. Two fingers in his mouth. The boy whistles. From the right and left sides of the street, from behind gates, the dirty mugs of eight boys appear."

Erdman was also a master of paradox, who could find philosophy in simple descriptive contrasts.

Consider the first sentences of his script for "On the Boards" (1956), a cinematic version of the famous 19th-century Russian vaudeville "Lev Gurych Sinichkin."

"An expansive Russian landscape. The top angle of a long narrow triangle of train rails runs up against the foggy line of the horizon."

What an image! The great Russian expanses, in which a narrow road rams up against the foggy wall of the horizon.

Erdman, who was arrested and exiled to Siberia but spared an early death, knew everything there was to know about Russia's expanses and the foggy horizons that hung over them.

Thanks to "Nikolai Erdman/Film Scripts," we now see with clarity how Erdman continued to write about that with talent and vision throughout his life.

Anna Kovalova has published a major book that makes it possible to reevaluate one of the most important and enigmatic writers of the Soviet era.

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