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Today's Theater News is Tomorrow's Theatrical Oblivion

By John Freedman

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Anton Chekhov is the one who put it on paper in its simplest form and, thus, made it something of a cliché: theater needs new forms.

In "The Seagull" the young Treplev utters a phrase to that effect as he prepares to show his family and friends a play he wrote. It's a weird little drama that makes his mother, the famous provincial actress Arkadina, mockingly mutter something about decadence. But the notion that theater cannot survive without change is eternal, and it has been possible to hear Treplev's words about "new forms" uttered in every new age since Chekhov wrote "The Seagull" in 1896.

In the second decade of the 21st century, we are living through an era when the search for new languages, new approaches and a new aesthetic is particularly intense. From the minimalism of many directors working at Teatr.doc to the painterly inventiveness of Dmitry Krymov we find styles of theater that strike us as somehow new or, at least, fresh and unusual.

There is nothing new about being new, however.

This morning I picked up a little booklet published in 1924. It has a beautiful color cover — it's the one on the right above — and it is called "On How the Sexton Got in Trouble, or, On How Peasants Can Get Water for Their Plowed Field." It is a short play written to be performed by peasants in post-revolutionary Russia in the fields or, perhaps, in barns. Chances are there had never been theater in the fields and barns of Russia's farms before this time. If there had been, it certainly was not done like this.

Red Virgin Soil publishers put out a whole series of booklets — this one is numbered 253 — that were intended to help the government bring theater and new ideas to the people. The final page lists other plays available and concludes with the information that these publications may be purchased in "all bookstores and in railway stations." I guess someone assumed, or, perhaps, hoped, that peasants heading out to the fields by train would pick these little books up and start planning theater seasons to go along with their harvest seasons.

Most intriguing of all is a small article at the end of the book, "How to Perform the Play." This essay by Leonid Subbotin, who wrote the play with Vladimir Mass, is — if we hold our tongues in our cheeks for awhile — a treasure trove of methods for seeking "new forms."

"The main thing while working on this play," Subbotin declares flatly, "is not to be embarrassed. That's the main thing. If what needs to be done is clear, then do it boldly. If it's not clear, it's absolutely pointless to shout and wave your hands."

Is this the Stanislavsky method condensed into two phrases?

Subbotin continues: "You must understand the meaning of every word and pronounce each word faithfully. This is called 'finding the proper intonation.'"

Finally, the author concludes, "Besides the characters' clear pronunciation and behavior, their actions must also be clear, expressive and understood by the spectator. You must avoid frequent, small, incomplete actions. Let's take the scene where the angry peasants attack Alexei. This should not be done in a way that chaos reigns on stage. The task on stage is not to attack Alexei, but to show how he was attacked. Spectators love seeing action on stage. When people's thoughts and emotions on stage are transformed into action and movement — that is theater."

Subbotin and Mass wrote at least six such playlets together, many of them anti-church, all addressed to peasants. Mass also wrote some on his own (see the cover at left above, "Who Helped the Peasants, the Agronomist or God?") as did numerous others, whose full names cannot always be ascertained — A.S. Abramov, Kutin, Nikiforov, S. T. Semyonov, Alexander Neverov and N. Goncharova-Viktorova.

I mention them all because only Mass left much of a mark in the history of Russian theater's search for new forms. As pathetic as it may be, the others' last stand in history may well be their inclusion in a list in this semi-jocular, semi-informative blog. I could never be the one to deprive them of that last, sweet taste of glory.

Vladimir Mass, born 1896, was a comic playwright and poet who was highly active

in the 1920s. His collaboration on plays, screenplays and satirical fables with the famous playwright Nikolai Erdman not only made him popular, it gained him arrest and exile in 1933. Their script for the first Soviet musical "Jolly Fellows" in 1932 forever put them in the first ranks of Soviet screenwriters, but their wickedly barbed, politically-tinged verse fables were so daring that both men were arrested and exiled even before the Great Purges began. Mass returned to Moscow at the end of the 1930s, and until his death in 1979 continued a successful career writing light comedies, often in collaboration with Mikhail Chervinsky.

For the record, Mass and Chervinsky's libretto to Dmitry Shostakovich's opera "Moscow, Cheryomushki" has been in repertory at the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Musical Theater since 2006.

For his part, Subbotin (who is no relation to the contemporary director Olga Subbotina) was a fascinating figure who spent his entire life toiling in the sphere of amateur theater. In the 1920s and 1930s he was an editor at the journals "Country Theater" and "Kolkhoz Theater." He was instrumental in creating the first peasant theater in Moscow in 1923 and wrote a book called "The Drama Circle in the Country" in 1925. Born in 1889, Subbotin was killed at the beginning of World War II, probably in 1941.

Nobody now remembers the once-pioneering plays Mass and Subbotin wrote together. It makes you wonder: What will happen to the innovative theater we rush to see today?

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