Mayakovski and the Beginnings of the Soviet Theatre

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In 1935, five years after Mayakovski's death and the ensuing suppression of his work, Stalin began to praise his legacy in compelling terms. To everyone's surprise, Stalin proclaimed that "Mayakovski was and remains the finest, most talented poet of our Soviet age. Indifference to his memory and his works is a crime" (Briggs 1979: 121–122).

According to Solomon Volkov in his excellent cultural evaluation of modern Russia reproduced here, *The Magical Chorus*: *A History of Russian Culture from Tolstoi to Solzhenitsyn*, Stalin identified in Mayakovski an early and important shaper of Soviet culture and consciousness. The intensity of Mayakovski's impact on the youth of the Soviet Union as a promoter of ideology could not have been lost on Stalin.

Further, with this brief declaration urging the appreciation of Mayakovski on a national scale, Stalin was aiming to achieve several goals. First, he wanted to offer a cultural counter to Maxim Gorky as the highest Soviet literary figure. Secondly, he was openly challenging Lenin's literary taste, since Lenin never really liked Mayakovski and publicly stated his contempt for the young poet. Finally, Stalin provided cultural prominence for the avant-garde that was being pushed out from the political arena after having launched its utopian projects in the early stages of the Bolshevik games. Stalin was thus also shrewdly catering to the revolutionary urban youth who idolized Mayakovski and considered him to have "the temperament of the prophet Elijah", in Gorky's acid praise (Volkov 2008: 102).

Even Lenin, before Stalin, had to take into account the politically militant youth. When on February 21, 1921, he met with a group of Moscow art students and asked, "What do you read? Do you read Pushkin?" the reply was, "Oh, no, he was bourgeois. We read Mayakovski" (Volkov 2008: 102). Lenin's widow, Nadejda Krupskaya, who left a record of this episode, recalled that after that particular incident Lenin grew kinder to Mayakovski because he saw, as Krupskaya put it, "young people full of life and joy, ready to die for the Soviet regime, not finding

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words in the contemporary language to express themselves and seeking that expression in the hard-to-understand poems of Mayakovski" (Lenin 1971: 226).

As Krupskaya recognizes, Mayakovski embodied for the Soviet youth a unique spirit shaped by the disdain for chauvinism, bribe-taking, dishonesty and false erudition; in short, Mayakovski signified for the youth the sublimation of the new Soviet citizen who could cleanse the nation of class distinction and achieve the revolutionary changes proposed in the early days of the Soviet Union.

The invitation to honor Mayakovski's work and character traits calls for an examination of his plays as an object of consumption, designed and packaged, much like the propaganda posters he created for the Party, to generate and impact the people of the Soviet Union. His theatre is an act that solicits the affection the playwright bestows on his audience through the close observation of public life and inscription of it into his work. Politically engaged in the Bolshevik movement and the success of the new social order, Mayakovski understood the theatre to be a tool for self-culture and social improvement. If Solzhenitsyn, years later, thought the Russians writers to be a second government, Mayakovski saw the stage productions of the young Soviet state as the average citizen's library. In this respect, Mayakovski's investment in the theatre echoes Marinetti's "Manifesto," which announces that "dramatic art, like all other arts, can have no further purpose than that of snatching the soul of the audience and exalting it in an atmosphere of dazzling intellectual intoxication" (Purkey 2011: 111).

Though devoted to his individualism, Mayakovski sought to channel the self-authorizing confidence of readers and theatre goers into avenues of public life that he considered to be conducive to the development of Soviet culture and ideology and of communist solidarity. Delighted to communicate to his public matters of significance in the new social and political order of the Soviet state, Mayakovski felt himself not merely participating in a communion ceremony, but also undergoing transubstantiation himself and subsequently forming a community with those who shared the experience.

This paradoxical embrace of both individual and didactic authority was shaped by the social transformation brought about by the Soviet state's efforts to implement Industrialization and Urbanization, a complex process which Mayakovski was witnessing in the aftermath of the recent, successful completion of Electrification, an achievement largely responsible for channeling Mayakovski's trust not in nature or God, but in man and machines. Having mesmerized him as a young boy (Briggs 1979: 6), total Electrification is the most outstanding feature of the New World toward which his characters, the seven pairs of workers, journey in Mayakovski's *Mystery-Bouffe*, the first-ever Soviet play.

The tendency to magnify the character of the public individual and the individual's engagement in the public life, and to encourage spectators to balance the characters' experiences with moral judgment informed by a solid, communal standard, can be traced back to an earlier Russian master of the stage, Nikolai Gogol, an acknowledged favorite of Mayakovski. A perfect illustration of this literary lineage is found in Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, a play constructed as a moral exposure of the evils endemic in tsarist Russia. The allegorical characters, who were so true to life as to leave the audience divided at the play's premiere,

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illustrate the personalization of public life to show not only the corruption of the system but also to make every citizen in the audience a critic endowed with a standard of judgment aimed to decry the state dignitaries' abuses of power.

At the time when *The Government Inspector* was being rehearsed, Gogol was preparing an article, published posthumously, on "The Petersburg Stage in 1835–1836", in which he expresses his own views of the drama and the role of dramatists. After examining the nature of the Romantic movement and its influence on the emergence of a new kind of drama on the European stage, Gogol sees the Romantic movement as an attempt to grapple more desperately with the problems of modern society, from which the writers of the neo-classical school had completely cut themselves off by their desire to imitate the ancient writers. But the public, Gogol argues, was dissatisfied with the neo-classical drama, even with a playwright like Molière, who appears "long-winded and boring on the stage", (Magarshack 1957: 135) without regard to the modern age. For Gogol, the Romantic movement's chaotic efforts to implement a change led to the emergence of a great creative type of writer/ dramatist, who can erect a new edifice embracing both the old and the new. Modern drama, according to Gogol, must reflect the problems of modern society and expose "the springs that bring it into motion" (*ibidem*, 135). His advice to the Russian playwright is

> to take a good look at the living man of our far-flung country – see how many good people we have, but also how many weeds which make life unbearable for the good and which no law can control. On stage with them! Let the whole nation see them! Let it have a good laugh at them! …The theatre is a great school and its aim is profound: it teaches a living and useful lesson all at once to a whole crowd of people…and shows up the absurdity of man's habits and vices or the sublimity of his good qualities and lofty feelings (*ibidem*, 136).

Precisely within these dictates which Mayakovski was to follow later, Gogol initiates a personal exchange with his audience, an element that was to become an important characteristic of the Soviet theatre constructed on a close observation of and implication in public life. By adapting to the stage the ills of his society, Gogol inaugurates a public sphere of discursive exchange particularly attractive to men of the theatre, like the politically engaged Mayakovski. Engaged in the communist theatre's expansion to reach and engage the mass audiences, Mayakovski, and figures of this novel type of theatre like the formidable director Vsevolod Meyerhold, used the stage as a space of regenerative culture for the new Soviet society by continuing Gogol's aesthetic version of social theatre that criticized openly the corruption of imperial Russia.

A closer examination of Gogol's *The Government Inspector* vis-à-vis Mayakovski's stage productions illustrates the new role that the theatre plays in the life of the Russian society and also anticipates Mayakovski's discursive and theatrical exchanges with the Soviet public in such plays as *The Mystery-Bouffe* (1918), *The Bedbug* (1928), both staged by Meyerhold, and *The Bathhouse* (1929), which Meyerhold defended against its many detractors (Briggs 1979: 109).

Without aspiring to be a teacher or leader of public life like Tolstoi and later Solzhenitsyn, Gogol draws on the social ills of tsarist Russia to reveal the country's inadequacies and sorrows, its thoughts and common aspirations amalgamated in a

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small provincial town whose officials are subjected to ridicule and grotesque representation. In this respect, *The Government Inspector* also anticipates the Futurists, for whom the theatre was the most propitious genre for scrutinizing real life played on the social scene. To quote once again from Marinetti's exalting praise of the virtues of the genre adapted to its social role, theatre was a "vetrina rimuneratrice" ('a profitable show window') for the daily realities that also incorporated the future possibilities of the social apparatus in effecting change while simultaneously dismantling the tired old structures in art and society (Purkey 2011: 111).

Gogol's play showcases a collective portrait of the municipal dignitaries and a striking exposition, through exaggeration and caricature, of their crass dishonesty that unveils the extended corruption of the system. Their transparent metaphoricity arises from the vast distance between the characters' ceremonial dress and their rotten social and moral behavior as the tension between the dignitaries' social office, suggested in their garb, and their immediate actions, predicated on narrow-mindedness and stupidity, communicates their deceit and negative underpinnings. If there is something to be learned from Gogol's characters' attire, it is that the function of the aesthetic is appropriated by the political, and that this is particularly so under authoritarian and corrupt regimes, like that of imperial Russia.

Representing social types more effectively, and more memorably, the generic characters, from the town's Mayor to the Inspector of Schools, the Judge, the Postmaster, the Warden of Charities and district Doctor and the Chief of police to the local landowners, Bobchinski and Dobchinski, resemble the caricatures of posters, anticipating to some degree Mayakovski's later style of presenting his characters in order to convey a message immediately apparent to the audience. Summoned by the Mayor Anton Antonovici, the dignitaries are asked to prepare for the unexpected visit of a putative government inspector, quickly identified in the person of young Khlestakov.

The association of power, authority, and status with Khlestakov, which works exclusively on a psychological level as the dignitaries foolishly ascribe to him this fictional status, is a satirical indictment of the corruption of the individuals who create their own system of subjective prejudices and desires. The power of tsarist Russia which is projected on Khlestakov, however, is more than just the fantasy of these corrupted dignitaries; it signifies, above all, their collective knowledge of the pervasive corruption of the state apparatus and their collective awareness of its projection at the political local level as wide bribery and dishonesty in return for implicit protection.

Gogol's lesson seems to be that the political world stretches out in the communicative relations between individuals who may never know each other but to whom they might yet be responsible. Thus Khlestakov's power is made possible through a circular process that is grounded in an exterior reality, shared by all dignitaries. This power entails a collective fraudulent and dishonest behavior which is reproduced in all the individuals who are themselves subjected to it in their dealings with a corrupt central system. Gogol's satirical way of dealing with the dignitaries' self-interest announces a quality of Russian life still visible in modern times – a squalor of spirit made up of narrow-mindedness, self-satisfaction, lack of vision and servile smugness which the stage director Meyerhold called *obyvatelshchina*

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(Briggs 1979: 83). This quality, which controls the dignitaries' actions in *The Government Inspector*, also dictates the movement and moral lesson of Gogol's play. In the end, the audience is asked to reflect on the characters' words and behavior in relation to the foregoing actions of the impostor and the corrupted officials in a manner that foreshadows Mayakovski's direct address to the audience in *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse*.

Most importantly, the Mayor's tearful lament at the end of Gogol's play provokes a reaction not within the fictional make-up of the fictional character, but among his audience, accessing its powerful collective ethos through the capacity of words to breach the affective barrier of the audience:

> Just take a look at me! Let the whole world, all Christendom, see how your mayor's been duped. Fool! Imbecile! Blockhead! [*Shakes his fists at himself*.] You thick-nosed idiot – taking that little squirt, that bloody pipsqueak for a powerful personage! …I can't get over it. Yes, they say those whom the gods want to punish they first drive insane. Was there anything *like* a government inspector about that whippersnapper? Absolutely damn all. Not by a long chalk! (Gogol 2005: 305).

Viewed as a whole, Gogol's play is a formal exercise in irony, an experimental sort of theatre that keeps the reader politically and intellectually anchored, somewhere between the heart of Russia's absolute imperial power and the spectators' bold and unrestrained immediate space within the theatre hall turned into a forum.

For in Soviet Russia, as in Gogol's play, one of the key issues is Khlestakov's fictitious identity. Initially, when Khlestakov is introduced at the inn, his name recommends him as a subject of a certain essence indicated from the start in the protagonist's name. Vladimir Nabokov, who has brilliantly described the wealth of associations in the young man's name, states that "Khlestakov's very name is a stroke of genius, for it conveys to the Russian reader an effect of lightness and rashness, a prattling tongue, the swish of a slim walking cane, the slapping sound of playing cards, the braggadocio of a nincompoop and the dashing ways of a lady-killer" (Nabokov 1961: 55). However, when young Khlestakov accepts the identity of a state official, which the Mayor arbitrarily bestows on him, he undergoes a radical transformation. Within the scope of the play, the young man is the recipient of a persona that is being assigned to him, as he is made into a government official who then asserts his assumed role in relation to the corrupted townspeople.

Under his assumed identity, Khlestakov's role is of rhetorical nature and his discourse goes hand in hand with his growing audacity, not only in demanding more and more bribes but also in attempting to seduce both the Mayor's wife and daughter, whom he asks to marry. Although Klestakov's discourse is dominated by the young man's borrowed identity and abusive behavior as a government official, his rhetoric may be seen as a new political aesthetic, animated by social velocity and bold imagination and thus appealing to Mayakovski as a rebellion against inveterate corruption.

To arrive at a better understanding of Khlestakov as a young man whose acquired status of Government Inspector recommends Gogol's play as a social and political satire, it is necessary to analyze the two strands of development that are at play in his character: on the one hand, Khlestakov's self-definition and self-presentation as a social and political subject within the discursive paradigm of the

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play and on the other the development of Khlestakov's individuality in relation to the corrupt behavior and political abuses of the town officials. Although the two thematic strands are not clearly distinct from each other, they form a dynamic relationship which ultimately recommends Gogol's play as an interesting project to Mayakovski's (and Meyerhold's) innovative talent and personal engagement in the development of the new Soviet state. Specifically, the merging of the sprite Khlestakov with a corrupt, tsarist Russia reveals the actuality of Gogol's world for Mayakovski, who embraces the role of a latter-day Khlestakov to pursue a similar dramatic trajectory in *The Bedbug*, a play that re-actualizes the indictment of state corruption without even a trace of staleness in the transfer from Imperial Russia to the Soviet Union.

Possessing an enviable kind of resilience on which he relies in the exchanges with the town officials, Khlestakov insists on a certain social independence, an essential aspect embedded in Gogol's play. Although he becomes more and more skilled into the circular logic of the town's dignitaries, Khlestakov places himself at all times in the position of the outsider who can identify fraud and dishonesty and simultaneously maintain his individual independence and survival skills, which is exactly the sort of role Gogol intended for the character (and which later interested Mayakovski). In a letter to Pushkin on the 25th of May 1836 in which he expresses his overall disappointment with the staging of *The Government Inspector*, Gogol states that

> Khlestakov is not cheating at all; he is not a professional liar; he forgets that he is lying and almost believes what he says. He lets himself go, he is in high spirits, he sees that everything is going well, that he is listened to – and for that reason alone he speaks quite frankly, smoothly, unconstrainedly, and while telling lies he reveals himself in them as he really is (Magarshack 1957: 137).

Juxtaposing his own person with the town's dignitaries who cling desperately to the positions they hold without any clear mandate, like the Judge who declares that he "was elected in 1816 for a three-year term by the gentry and had held the office ever since" (*The Government Inspector* 268), Khlestakov posits himself as an energetic youth, independent and self-confident, filled with contempt toward these crooks. Forced into a confrontation with the town's bureaucracy and pettiness, Khlestakov conveys his own quest for existential gratification, his desire to create a harmonious connection between notions of essential individuality and talent and a larger, objective order that precludes the dignitaries' fraudulent and incompetent positioning summarized in Khlestakov's comment that "This place is crawling with officials. … What a bunch of halfwits! (276)".

In the letter which the young man decides to write to his friend in St. Petersburg and which the Mayor intercepts thanks to the Postmaster accustomed to opening all the letters prior to delivering or mailing them, Khlestakov unravels the fiction of his role and humorously relates his make-believe behavior. As the letter, which is read out loud first by the Mayor and then by his cronies, goes on mocking the foolishness of the town's dignitaries, Khlestakov's comments single out the officials in the most unflattering ways: the Mayor is "as stupid as a mule"; the

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postmaster "probably drinks like a fish"; the Warden of Charities "is a perfect pig in a skull-cap" (302–303), and so on.

Gogol's ironic posturing of the young man as a government inspector, which suggests the corrupt practice of the official naming that transfers unquestioningly into the being of the subject, as well as the abuses of the town's dignitaries, could not have failed to capture the interest of Mayakovski and Meyerhold. Meyerhold's staging of *The Government Inspector* in 1924, which for the most part played up to the Bolshevik sentiment to create an aesthetic variant for social theatre that contained a humorous display of unethical behaviors, was very much like the complicated bureaucratic maneuvers which the talented director employed in the 1918 staging of Mayakovski's *Mystery Bouffe*. Such performances, which included a strong brand of Meyerholdism, engaged questions and folded the dramatic movement around an analogous didactic intent, much like the subsequent staging of Mayakovski's next play, *The Bedbug*, which stems from a skillful transposing on stage of the mundane realities of the Soviet Union.

From the beginning of *The Bedbug*, there is not only a great deal of irony surrounding the Nepmen ("bourgeois dogs of the New Economic Policy") peddling alien wares, superior to those of the Soviet State Co-op, but also a socio-political level of contradiction revealed through the experiences of the frustrated Rosalie Pavlovna. Her original dissatisfaction with the market after bartering with one of the Nepmen, "Oh, how right you were to kill the Tsar and drive out Mr. Ryabushinsky! [the bourgeois proprietor]," results in her decision to "buy my herring at the Soviet State Co-op" (Blake 1960: 248).

However, after having seen the paltry herring selection offered at the State Co-op, she conversely complains, "Why, oh, why did we kill the Tsar? Why did we throw out Mr. Ryabushinsky? This Soviet regime … will drive me to my grave" (*The Bedbug*, 250). Embedded within this contradiction is the paradigmatic irony of the Soviets' failed attempt to create the classless state: giving permits to merchants under the NEP, only to label them bourgeois, but still allowing the Nepmen to sell a higher quality of goods than that of the Soviet co-ops. Indicative within Rosalie's despair is the understanding that this new Marxist society ultimately relied on the bourgeoisie, as an enemy, an economic competitor, and a better alternative to the cut-rate goods being hawked within the Soviets' own facilities.

The hero of *The Bedbug* is a loathsome Party man, Ivan Prisypkin who has done well out of the revolution. His proletarian origins give him the necessary background to be installed in his position, which he secures with his smug attitude towards superior officials. As a Soviet composite of Gogol's dignitaries in *The Government Inspector*, Prisypkin is everything a true Soviet citizen should not be, self-satisfied, vulgar, stupid and ignorant, alcoholic and dirty. He plays his guitar, guzzles down vodka regularly, and scratches himself because he is bug-ridden.

Most significantly, Prisypkin's character offers some interesting commentary on the idea of social mobility in what was supposed to be a classless society. The man has become completely bourgeois, changing his name from "Ivan Prisypkin" to Pierre Skripkin, a French sounding first name and a last name suggestive of artistry (*skripka* means "violin" in Russian). The irony comes not only from Prisypkin's proletarian background, but also from the fact that he fought with the Bolsheviks to

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help establish Soviet Russia. Yet he continues to go on and on about how his home should be "a horn of plenty" and how he would like to name his daughters "Dorothy and Lillian", both aristocratic names (*The Bedbug*, 245). At one point, Prisypkin even says to another Soviet citizen, Oleg Bard, "I'm against all this petty bourgeois stuff–lace curtains and cannaries… I'm a man with higher needs. What I'm interested in is a wardrobe with a mirror" (*ibidem*, 248), thus suggesting that he, Prisypkin, has even partitioned himself off from what he considers the "petty bourgeois," and thinks of himself now as being of a higher social order.

The character of Oleg Bard offers, perhaps, the most ironic insight into the confusion of social mobility in Soviet Russia. "I can already see," he tells Prisypkin, "the triumph of your class as symbolized by your sublime, ravishing, elegant, and class-conscious wedding!" (*ibidem*, 249). The wedding comes after Prisypkin spurns his working class girlfriend, who shoots herself out of grief, and then prepares to marry a more sophisticated woman who works in a beauty parlor as a manicurist (a highly glamorous profession in Soviet Russia). With a bridegroom being part of the proletariat, Prisypkin's wedding should, of course, be described as anything *but* "ravishing" and "elegant." However, such an elaborate wedding is meant to indicate that Prisypkin has moved up in the world, as he himself says to his former comrades in the workers' dormitories where he once worked and lived: "I shall present myself in a get-up more appropriate to my new social status" (*ibidem*, 252). Further confusing the notion of social mobility in a classless society is the idea that, with the wedding, Prisypkin is becoming bourgeois (by marrying the daughter of a Nepmen), while the "classier" family becomes somewhat proletarian (by getting their union card).

Even though the character of Prisypkin seems somewhat of a buffoon, the idea that everyone would take this opportunity, were it given to them, is evident in the remarks of the mechanic: "I'm no deserter. You think I like wearing these lousy rags? Like hell I do! There are lots of us, you know, and there just aren't enough Nepmen's daughters to go around" (*ibidem*, 256). This statement, in its implications, only echoes the mechanic's earlier statement, "It's better to work with other people, but it's much more fun to eat your sirloin by itself. Right?" (Ibidem, 255), in suggesting that anyone would take Prisypkin's opportunity, if only there were enough "Nepmen's daughters to go around (*ibidem*, 255)".

Within the proletariat itself too, it appears, there exists a level of class-conscious animosity. Thus the Cleaner makes a crass remark to the Inventor about the possibility of capitalist prospects: "Why don't you take out a patent before somebody steals the idea?" (253), and there is also the hope within the proletariat of what Sheila Fitzpatrick has termed "proletarian promotion" (Fitzpatrick, *The Journal of Modern History* 1993 65:4), a notion expressed by the Barefooted Youth who vouches: "When I get to be a foreman and earn enough money to buy myself a pair of boots, I'll start looking around for a cozy little apartment" (*ibidem*, 255). Knowing that the same opportunity is permitted them–albeit not readily available–instead of praising Prisypkin's "moving up in the world," his fellow comrades insult him, and look down on him as a "deserter," to which he replies,

> Mind your own goddamn business! respected comrades. What did I fight for? I fought for the good life, and now I've got it right here in my hands–a wife, a home, and real

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> etiquette. I'll do my duty, if need be, but it's only we who held the bridgehead who have a right to rest by the river! […] Maybe I can raise the standards of the whole proletariat by looking after my own comforts. So there! (*ibidem*, 259).

Prisypkin, it is implied, did not fight for the ideal that originally carried the Bolsheviks into power, i.e., the hope for a completely egalitarian society; rather, those who fought, according to Prisypkin, are the only ones who have earned the privilege to move up in the world. How exactly he plans to improve everyone else's conditions, as they look upon him with jealous reverie, is a ridiculous concept to consider in this context. Succinctly, his former comrades' disposition towards him can be summed up in the Cleaner's final statement to him, "You're walking out on your class with a hell of a bang!" (*ibidem*, 261), a comment which is not only punning on the gunshot that was just heard as Zoya Beryozkina, Prisypkin's jilted girlfriend shot herself, but also denoting the fact that Prisypkin must have a lot of audacity to abandon his comrades.

Perhaps one of the most profound ironies in the whole play comes in Oleg Bard's wedding speech. "It's true that along that road [Prisypkin] lost his Party card, but, on the other hand, he did acquire many state lottery tickets," Bard tells the crowd (263). He goes on to say that "We have succeeded in reconciling, in coordinating the couple's class and other contradictions," and then to add that "We who are armed with the Marxist vision cannot fail to see […] the future happiness of humanity–or as it is called in popular parlance: socialism" (*ibidem*,263–264). For a veteran of Prisypkin's reputation, losing his Party card *should* be a big deal, but as long as he finds himself moving up in the world, it does not seem to matter, a fact suggesting that what he *really* fought for was the opportunity to live a bourgeois life – an objective which is in no way aligned with either "the Marxist vision" or the tenets of socialism.

The fire that erupts at Prisypkin's wedding appears to put an end to his social ambitions; as the firemen are unable to put it out, the fire leaves all dead (everyone was too drunk to attempt an escape), except for one body left mysteriously unaccounted for.

After fifty years, during which time the Communist utopia is achieved, workers discover a great block of ice in a cellar, which turns out to be Prisypkin. Brought back to life, he resumes his former dissolute life contaminating those around him with excessive beer-drinking and sentimental songs. In the ensuing spreading of corruption, scientists are happy to isolate a bug which has survived with Prisypkin. Together, one from the bed and the other from under the bed, the drunken Prisypkin and the bloated bug fill up on other bodies: the bug on Prisypkin's, and Prisypkin's on humanity. Put into a cage at the zoo where he can do no harm, Prisypkin suddenly and disturbingly recognizes his own kind in the audience, and begins shouting from his cage on the stage into the auditorium, in a tone that resonates with Anton Antonivich's cries in Gogol's play. "Citizens! Brothers! Friends and relations!" cries out Prisypkin before the zoo attendants remove the cage from the stage and the zoo director attempts to restore calm among the agitated spectators.

The need for a change, which Prisypkin's cries project, stems from the protagonist's total disregard for the norms and regulations of the Soviet ethical

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social system and reflects the profound degradation of his moral behavior – a depravity which becomes the object of Mayakovski's parody and satire and engages serious problems of cultural identity associated with political corruption in an incisive and theatrical manner.

Similar cries are articulated with added intensity in *The Bathhouse*, Mayakovski's next dramatic project. In the play, the bureaucrat Pobedonosikov, who sits in his office all day dreaming up excuses for not seeing petitioners (a big notice outside his door reads No Admittance Unannounced), ends up rejected and cast out of a time machine. In the final scene, he is left to wonder publicly if such rejection means "that I and my like are not needed for communism".

Apart from engaging the spectators in the explicit humiliation of the protagonist within the lines of Gogol's views regarding the role of theatre, Mayakovski's *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse* also offer an exemplary model for the theatre, a dramatic form that suits the Soviet sensibility and promotes the advancement of Soviet ideology. Specifically, such public displays of the shamed protagonists as those in Mayakovski's plays lead to a special type of mass psychology addressing all Russians, a psychology that produced the mass culture heralded by the avant-garde and formally launched in Meyerhold's project October for the Theatre. The revolutionary slogan, in tandem with the October Bolshevik Revolution, proclaiming that there be "No pauses, psychology, or 'emotions' on stage…The public should be involved in stage action and create the play collectively – that is our theatrical program" (Rudnitsky 1969: 237).

In the spirit of this proclamation, Mayakovski opened up the stage, allowing the audience to view the behind-the-scenes workings, and Meyerhold staged Mayakovsky's plays with the lights left on for the performance. The actors, without makeup or wigs, spoke directly to the audience, which engaged in discussions with the actors. Meyerhold also got rid of curtains, used constructions instead of traditional sets, and introduced a system of training actors that he called biomechanics – a complex mixture of gymnastics and acrobatics that helped the actor control his body movements naturally and precisely, in what may be viewed as an anti-Stanislavsky method of sorts.

The disappearance of the distance between the audience and the actors, which Gogol initiated almost a century before such theatrical innovation and which culminated in Meyerhold's spectacle-meeting concept in the staging of Mayakovski's plays, further bridged the space between the two dramatists. In spite of the vast distinctions between their respective worlds, as Purkey notes, the satirical direction of Gogol's theatre speaks directly to Mayakovski's times and cultural milieu, opening a tradition of and setting the tone for the satirical absurd and the political engagement of the theatre of East Central Europe (Purkey 2011 : 119).

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Abstract

Admitting the cultural amalgam of theater, politics, and history, my examination of the early Soviet theatre focuses on a detailed consideration of Vladimir Mayakovski's theatre and its close relationship to politics. Determining Mayakovski's theatrical engagement, the 1910−1920 decade merged art and politics in dramatic forms, which drew their inspiration from Gogol's classical plays while struggling against the "bourgeois" art with revolutionary fervor. As they secured the social and political prominence of theatrical productions in the new Soviet Union, the flamboyant Vladimir Mayakovski and the formidable director Vsevolod Meyerhod equated the country's socio-political revolution with revolution in art and the theater.

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