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Speaking Truth to Power: Understanding the Role of Political Theater in Russia

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"I make no secret of the truth – I make it irrelevant." This line spoken by Minos has haunted me since I first heard it beneath the starry sky of Gorky Park in Oleg Ernev's *Theseus*, boldly reimagined by a small private troupe in an innovative, controversial 2010 production. It opened with Atrion, king of Crete, voluntarily yielding his crown to Minos's sly persuasion and casting his people into the jaws of a newly minted usurper. I was struck by how unnervingly modern the leering Minos looked, sleazy, puny, inconspicuous, yet a cunning deceiver who, through intrigues, slander, and mud-slinging, clawed his way to power. He showed the audience how cheaply minds and loyalties are bought, how easily associates and partners are manipulated, how cynically crimes are justified in a world governed by cowardice, betrayal, and envy. Another recognizable type in the play was Minos's closest ally, Taurus, who appeared as a bloated, sluggish pawn convinced of his own impunity, boldly practicing corruption, nepotism, and cronyism and declaring that power is always right and can be handed to thieves and opportunists. The production's most memorable innovation centered on the Cretan slave Pantis, introduced as Outis at the start of the performance in a clever play on words referencing Odysseus' trickery of the Cyclops.The witless, deceitful oaf who at every step exhibited his unconcealable incompetence was raised from nothing, granted status by Minos and Taurus and fashioned in a grotesque resemblance to Hoffman's Little Zaches, absorbing the merits of others that were ascribed to him by the usurper's criminal clique. Defying the ancient Greek tradition, the suggestable conformist Theseus was no hero in the play. He trembled before the seemingly limitless authority of the corrupt Minos, betraying friends and forgetting debts in a desperate, fawning attempt to curry fleeting favor with those in power. The end of the play was particularly striking, showing the fate of all characters on stage that was to sink into oblivion: the petty Minos, drunk on his own impunity and gloating over victories he never truly won, was silenced by the audience laughing him down as a clown failing in the role of a tyrant; the bearded, hairy Taurus fell through the cracked floorboards during his lecture on all-licensed power from an overburdened ceremonial chair; the blond, skinny Theseus slipped on a greasy plate and tumbled off the stage while scurrying to prove his usefulness to the clique in power; and the well-padded, bootlicking Pantis burst, like a balloon, from pride and gluttony, leaving a smelly little puddle. The evil labyrinth of moral collapse, where truth, justice, and honesty had been discarded in favor of personal gain, wealth, and self-preservation, crumbled, revealing to the audience an enormous mirror previously hidden behind it. The production did not retell the myth of the Minotaur—it detonated

FIGURE 1 An open-air performance in Gorky Park, Moscow, Russia. Open-air stage in Gorky Park, Moscow. Photograph by Id-a-lgo, March 12, 2016. Wikimedia Commons.

it, replacing heroes with the all-too-familiar antiheroes of our own time, thriving on the cowardice and selfishness of those too afraid to think for themselves. The evening devolved into a postmodern pageant in which the heroes of Classical mythology were shrunk to the proportions of literary grotesques. Minos, straining to radiate satanic grandeur, resembled a caricature of Petr Verkhovensky and Shvonder. Theseus, assuming the airs of a noble courtier, revealed himself as a lackey combining traits of Molchalin and Shvabrin. Pantis, convinced of his own importance and sagacity, trudged from one job to the next as a pitiful chimaera of Sharikov and Smerdyakov. The venerable ruler Atrion bore more likeness to Mr Fairlie, a gentleman chiefly preoccupied with his comforts, wealth, and egoistic indifference to the truth, than to a sovereign like King Lear (FIGURE 1).

This production sparked my interest in Russian political theater as a space of inquiry, and I decided to study one of its enduring imperatives of "speaking truth to power." I was fascinated to learn that political theater occupies a distinctive position within cultural life, operating at the intersection of aesthetics, ethics, and public discourse. It does not merely represent political realities; it interrogates the conditions under which free speech and dissent are impossible. Russian political theater offers a concentrated lens for such inquiry, as addressing those in authority with unflattering language has always been perilous. We have all observed how fear and complacency compel most to remain silent in the face of power and societal judgment. In this context, theater emerges as one of the few spaces in which suppressed truths can be spoken, witnessed, and disseminated with relative freedom. Political theater rests on a persistent conviction: that even the most entrenched forms of power can be challenged, unsettled, and ultimately overthrown. This belief finds vivid expression in the famous operatic cry in *Tosca*, which speaks of the coming dawn of freedom, causing the wicked to tremble: "L'alba vindice appar che fa gli empi tremar! Libertà sorge, crollan tirannidi!" Embedded in this declaration is the central message of political theater: that on stage (and often only on stage) we can imagine the collapse of oppression, reveal truths that power seeks to conceal, influence public opinion, stimulate changes in the political, social, domestic, and national arenas (FIGURE 2).

An entire gallery of Russian dramatists envisioned the fall of tyranny, and Pavel Katenin was among the earliest voices. My article on Katenin's political theater arose from an early interest in the textual strategies through which Russian dramatists encode political meaning. I was particularly drawn to the implicit articulation of political ideas: through the allusive selection of genres traditionally associated with political reflection, such as tragedy and historical drama; through naturalistic thematic motifs invoking political concerns, including dictatorship and corruption; and through recourse to temporally and geographically distant cultures, above all Classical antiquity. My own academic background proved particularly conducive to this line of inquiry. My BA in Classics and Modern Languages, together with my MSt and DPhil research on the reception of Classical drama in Russian theater,

FIGURE 2 A photo of the recent production of Tosca at The Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Moscow Academic Music Theater. Photograph by Sergei Rodionov from the theater's official website: https://stanmus.ru/shows/toska.

had already foregrounded reception as a critical lens for my understanding of cultural and political discourse in dramaturgy.

Over time, I developed a focused interest in nineteenth-century Russian drama, which emerged against the backdrop of Romanticism and Sentimentalism, and observed the ways in which clashes with Classical culture manifested through two contrasting techniques: masking radical ideological and political subtexts behind formally purist renditions of Classical legends and imposing anachronistic cultural notions transposed from nineteenth-century literature onto ancient plots. Against this background, Katenin's theater emerged as a compelling case study of how classical forms could be adapted to express modern political concerns while maintaining a degree of critical distance. When studying Katenin, I was particularly struck by the divergence from eighteenth-century dramatists, who drew on both Ancient Greek tragedy and contemporary European drama. Nineteenth-century Russian playwrights often based their works directly on Classical tragedies, without mediating sources, so that their treatments of mythological narratives enter directly into a polemical dialogue with Ancient epic and dramatic texts, including Homeric epic, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Seneca.

When I first began planning my article, I intended to focus on two nineteenth-century dramatists, Pavel Katenin and Vasily Narezhny, and to explore the contrast between their commitment to Classical purism and denunciation of dramatists, for whom ancient myths served as a resource of historical parallels, with the actual conception of their plays in which the two dramatists pursued conflicting agendas. I intended to argue that Katenin's *Andromache*, drawing on Euripides's *Trojan Women*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Seneca's *Troades*, preserves veiled allusions to the author's own political and ideological views, despite its adherence to Classical purism. On the other hand, Narezhny's *Bloody Night or the Ultimate Fall of the House of Kadmus*, which goes back to Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes* and Sophocles' *Antigone*, reproduced the characteristics of Ancient tragedy, including the prominent role of the Chorus, an emphasis on ancient customs and an abundance of Greek toponyms and proper names. For Katenin, Classical antiquity functioned as a mask, allowing him to apply ancient models and situational resolutions to contemporary political conflicts. This veiling of political content may explain the brevity of *Andromache*'s stage life at the Bolshoi Theater in St. Petersburg. Narezhny's objective, by contrast, was to expose social injustice and political corruption through references to Classical antiquity. In *Bloody Night*, central characters, especially Eteocles and Polyneices, are transformed to embody moral and political tension. Eteocles, in particular, is depicted as a figure whose sacred and religious sentiments are inseparable from an intense and bitter hostility toward the political adversaries of Thebes. I ultimately chose to focus solely on Katenin because his drama offers a

FIGURE 3 Portrait of Pavel Katenin (1792–1853) by an unknown artist. First quarter of the nineteenth century. The Pushkin Apartment Museum.

FIGURE 4 Portrait of Vasily Narezhny. Source: Russian figures in portraits, published by the editorial staff of the historical journal *Russkaia starina*. Third collection. St. Petersburg, 1889. Wikimedia Commons.

particularly rich interplay between Classical form and contemporary political subtext. By examining the veiled allusions within *Andromache*, it becomes possible to trace how mythological plots and the characterization of heroes could function as instruments of ideological commentary, revealing both the potential and the limitations of Classical forms in addressing the political realities of the Russian stage (FIGURE 3 and FIGURE 4).

My article on Katenin represents one of the earliest case studies I have conducted within a larger project on political expression in Russian mythological drama. I hope that, eventually, the results of my research will come together in a monograph. My primary interest has been in conducting a

systematic intertextual study of Russian drama based on Ancient Greek and Latin mythological accounts (Homeric epic, tragedy, lyric poetry, and historiography). I hope to reveal that, from its inception, Russian drama engaged more deeply with Classical sources than previously recognized, significantly shaping later appropriations of Greek and Latin mythological tragedy. I am attempting to demonstrate that during the seventeenth century, Classical mythology was employed in Russian culture with the aim of entertainment, whereas in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russian drama, extant legendary narratives were used predominantly with the functions of edification, didactic instruction, and political-ideological persuasion.

My aim is to show that at the beginning of the twentieth century, which witnessed a renaissance of interest in Classical literature, philosophy, and art, Russian drama experienced a revolution caused by a change of approach to Ancient mythology, which entailed the recreation of lost mythological plots and led to the transformation of the Russian dramatic canon. In their treatment of Ancient mythology, twentieth-century Russian dramatists (Innokenty Annensky, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Valery Bryusov, Fyodor Sologub, Nikolay Gumilev, and Marina Tsvetaeva), whose knowledge of Antiquity went far beyond the canon of Classical texts familiar since the Italian Renaissance, took on the new role of poet-theurgists. This role entailed traversing a chronotopic distance in composing Neo-mythology founded on Greek and Latin mythological accounts and modernizing the cultural paradigms of Russian drama. I intend to prove that in Neo-mythological drama legendary narratives were modernized on all levels, including linguistic (through the use of contemporary colloquialisms and realia) and conceptual (through references to current ideas: evolution/eugenics, religious skepticism, Nietzsche's Übermensch), and became subject to aestheticization (through a focus on aesthetic values and the cult of beauty), psychologization (through an emphasis on the representation of the emotional states of characters), desacralization (through overturning the relationships between gods and mortals), and intellectualization (through reference to Ancient philosophy). My longstanding interest in philosophy has guided my exploration of how these treatments of Ancient mythology were informed by both contemporary thinkers, including Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Solovyov, and Ancient philosophers such as Anaxagoras, Parmenides, Heraclitus, the Hylozoists, and Panpsychists.

In my research on twentieth-century mythological drama, I find myself often returning to both contemporary and modern productions, tracing echoes of past performances through the lens of the present. I have begun, for instance, to immerse myself in the performative world of Annensky's *Thamyris Kitharodos*. I have always been captivated by the costumes and set design by Aleksandra Ekster, where Cubo-Futurist visions took shape in the slanting platforms and pyramids that suggested a wild, untamed landscape. The grand staircase of platforms dominated the center stage, recalling the jagged contours of a mountainous terrain, while slender cones, poised against a pale backdrop on either side, conjured the fleeting illusion of a forest clearing. It is striking to observe how, through these conic figures and cubes, mounted upon tilting planes, Tairov sought to preserve what he called the "rhythmical pattern" of Annensky's Bacchic drama—a rhythm that pulsed through the rocky ground of the set (FIGURE 5 and FIGURE 6).

Currently, I am completing the first part of my research project, from which my Katenin article emerged. Looking back, my central argument grew out of the observation that, at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, an ideological-political agenda, centered on the rebellion of citizens against autocracy, came to shape the interpretation of Ancient myths in Russian drama. In order to bring clarity to my approach, I chose to consider the reception of Ancient mythology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in stages, beginning with a period in which mythological characters, whether Olympian gods or heroes, were assimilated as emblematic types or allegorical masks. I published an article on Vladislav Ozerov's *Polyxena*, in which I traced how Ancient mythology was adapted in Russian drama through a distinctive emotional use of imagery, largely inherited from French tragedies. I discovered that this process of assimilation contributed to the creation of a new subgenre of mythological sentimental drama, exemplified in Ozerov's work, where Polyxena drew on both Classical sources (Euripides's *Hecuba*, Seneca's *Troades*) and French tragedies such as Racine's Iphigénie and Châteaubrun's *Les Troyennes*. Ozerov, a poet of

FIGURE 5 Alexandra Exter. Costume design for the play *Famira Kifared*. 1916. Wikimedia Commons.

FIGURE 6 Alexandra Exter. Costume design for the play *Famira Kifared*. 1916. Wikimedia Commons.

extraordinary talent, contributed most to the development of Russian mythological tragedy as a genre by infusing it with the spirit of Sentimentalism and discovering new tragic forms, imbued with emotional sensitivity and complexity. Ozerov's psychological representation of characters and his introduction of elegiac monologues enabled him to modernize the genre of mythological tragedy, resulting in the creation of a new direction in Russian theater, mythological sentimental drama. He showcased this new genre in his finest and most celebrated play *Polyxena* with its relatively simple plot offset by emotionally complex characters. Ozerov's innovations left a lasting legacy in Russian theater, which endured in Slavic drama in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries and led to the emergence

FIGURE 7 L. S. Miropolskiy. Portrait of Mikhail Vasilyevich Lomonosov. 1787. Wikimedia Commons.

FIGURE 8 Vasily Trediakovsky Birsten. Nineteenth-century lithograph. Wikimedia Commons.

of a new genre of Neo-mythological drama, characterized by the modernization, sentimentalization, and aestheticization of mythology.

At present, my attention is focused on the reception of Ancient myths in Russian drama, often mediated through the traditions of French and Italian Classicism, and frequently carrying an edifying function. I am currently preparing an article on Mikhail Lomonosov's tragedy *Demophon* and Vasilii Trediakovsky's play *Deidamia* in which I argue that these authors employed Ancient myths with a didactic purpose, offering instruction in virtue, loyalty, and self-sacrifice (FIGURE 7 and FIGURE 8).

Next, I hope to study nineteenth-century playwrights including Alexandr Gruzintzev and Apollon Maikov, who, possessing direct knowledge of Ancient Greek, based their dramas directly on Classical tragedies, without reliance on mediating sources. The material I am examining remains little-known even among specialists and is often overlooked in research on Slavic and European drama. I draw

on a wide range of Russian eighteenth- and nineteenth-century plays and librettos, offering detailed analyses from both textual and performative perspectives. I situate Russian theater of this period firmly within its historical and cultural contexts, taking into account the social and political events alluded to in plays with ideological aims and considering the European literary traditions, including French Classicism, that influenced Russian drama.

Ultimately, my research seeks to demonstrate that Russian playwrights worked in a tight nexus with the literary arts of Europe: since they not only drew upon them for creative inspiration (through their engagement with the works of German philosophers Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Rickert and French poets such as Charles Baudelaire, Leconte de Lisle, and Gérard de Nerval), but also translated French symbolist poetry, thus fostering a cultural dialogue between East and West. Through this work, I have increasingly appreciated the subtle interplay between Classical tradition, political engagement, and creative innovation that characterizes Russian theater across centuries. Historically, it has enabled members of the artistic community to articulate opposition, both explicit and oblique, to internal and external state policies. In modern Russia, theater has proven to be one of the most adaptive and responsive tools for engaging with society, capable of accommodating multiple layers of creative input from diverse members of the theatrical community. As I write this piece, I am planning out a new approach to Russian drama based on the tenet that political commentary can be woven into every stage of the artistic process, from writing and directing to acting, allowing playwrights, directors, and performers alike to shape and expand the ideological resonance of a work. This inherent flexibility is a defining feature of political drama, distinguishing it from other literary or performative forms that do not allow for ongoing, collaborative reinterpretation or textual fluidity, in a manner reminiscent of folklore, which is continually composed through performance. Even in the face of entrenched power and the attempts of authority to impose control, political theater endures, evolving with each reinterpretation, discovering new forms and strategies, and ensuring that truth—however suppressed or concealed—will always emerge. Vincit omnia veritas.

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