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DEPARTMENT OF DRAMATIC ARTS

NIKOLAI ERDMAN

THE SUICIDE

THE RUSSIAN COMEDY

BANNED BY STALIN

БАБАХ!

NOVEMBER **2012**

ABOUT THE PLAY:
A STUDY GUIDE



The Suicide

The Russian Comedy by Nikolai Erdman

Banned by Stalin in 1930

November 8, 9, 10, 2012 at 7:30 p.m.

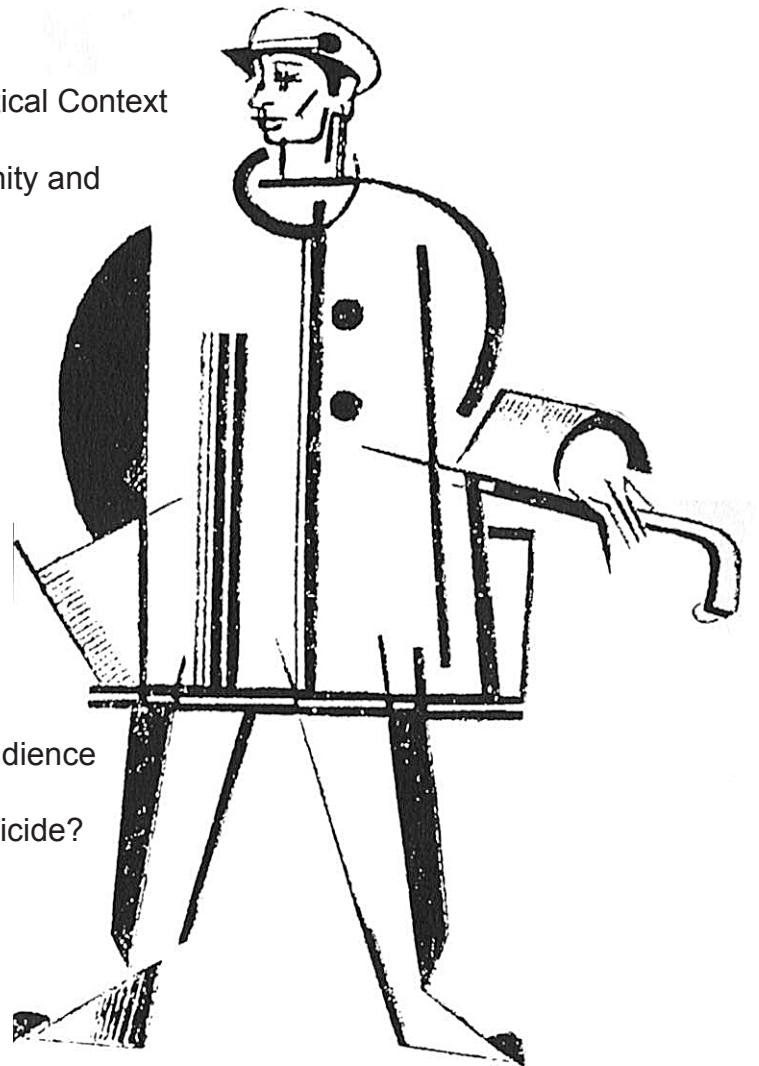
Student Matinee: Friday, November 9, 2012 at 11.30 a.m.

A Study Guide for Students and Interested Audience

Gyllian Raby and Anna MacAlpine collaborated on a new adaptation of Erdman's play for the Department of Dramatic Arts' production. Below, they share their research, the process, and their intentions with the production.

Contents

1. The Play in Overview
2. Nikolai Erdman: Playwright, Exile
 - i. From Russian Empire to Soviet State: the Political Context of Erdman's Life
 - ii. The New Economic Policy World: an Opportunity and Inspiration for Erdman
 - iii. A Time for Artistic Experiment: what the Revolution Meant for Theatre
 - iv. Life After Exile
 - v. The Belated Popularity of The Suicide
3. Is there a Political Message in The Suicide?
 - i. The ideological argument over the characters
Semyon
Alexander
Yegorechka
4. The Suicide: from Moscow, 1928 to St. Catharines, 2012
 - i. Adapting Existing Plays: the Writer-Director-Audience Relationship
 - ii. Why are there so many adaptations of The Suicide?
 - iii. Our Adaptation Process
 - iv. The Commedia dell'Arte
 - v. Music and Rhythm
5. Chart of differences between the original and the adaptation
6. The Production: Acting Approach, Set, Costumes and Lighting
7. Events
8. Glossary
9. Bibliography



Caricature of Nicolai by his brother Boris Erdman, 1922. Freedman Silence's Roar, 2.

The Play in Overview

The Department of Dramatic Arts' 2012/13 season opens with Nikolai Erdman's witty satire of lobbyists seeking political control. Semyon is just an ordinary man who, when arguing with his wife about a sausage, accuses her of wishing he was dead. This sets in motion a disastrous chain of misunderstandings in which Moscow's shadiest characters try to recruit him for various causes. Semyon survives their lottery of death only by means of a tuba, a drinking error, and a love for life so effervescent that he rebels against duty.

This funny, angry, frightened play-with-the-difficult-title was written in difficult times, right before Stalin seized absolute control of Russia. The young Erdman was celebrated for writing

vaudeville comedy that mocked the pretensions of pre- and post-revolutionary worlds alike, and three theatres were competing for production rights to *The Suicide*. Then things went terribly wrong. Erdman's comic rebellion against institutionalised poverty, the dangers of celebrity, and the lure of political power could make any government gulp and, as Soviet society slid into totalitarianism, Stalin banned the play. Erdman was exiled to Siberia; Meyerhold, the famous director, was later executed, partly for his work on the production. The script was smuggled abroad in various versions, but Erdman never saw it realized on stage.



Joseph Stalin
BBC image of controversial
billboard from Moscow, 2010

Nikolai Erdman: Playwright, Exile

i. From Russian Empire to Soviet State: the Political Context of Erdman's Life

Nikolai Erdman was born in Moscow on November 16, 1900. Before he was twenty, he witnessed failed uprisings against the corrupt and backward administration of Tsar Nicholas II, the bloody disaster of Russia's experience in the First World War, the tsar's abdication, the Bolshevik Revolution, civil war and the consolidation of a communist government. The speed and extremity of these changes created a bi-polar mood, of hope for the future and despair at the current social and economic chaos, that fuelled Erdman's satire.

“Workers of the World Unite! You have Nothing to Lose but your Chains”

(Marx 1847)

In February 1917, at the height of the First World War, Tsarist Russia came to an abrupt end with the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II. A temporary government, or Duma, was hurriedly convened. Around the world, groups of Russian political exiles rallied to join Russian working class dissidents in overthrowing this conservative Provisional Government that was struggling to maintain the war effort. The International Communist movement envisioned a new, utopian society built on the scientific principles of Marxism. With the end of Tsarist censorship Communist Party membership swelled considerably so that by October 1917, Bolshevik (majority faction of the Communist party) membership had reached a third of a million (Pitches 30). The divided government and the economic crisis made the time ripe for a complete overturn of the power base.

On the 24th of October, 1917, Vladimir Lenin led the Bolshevik (majority) faction of the Communist Party in the “Bloodless Revolution”, storming the Provisional Government out of office by taking over its centres of finance and communication. The new Bolshevik regime faced both external and internal enemies: their rapid triumph had to be defended across the vast territory of Russia as neighbouring countries attempted to invade and the “White Russian” property owning classes allied to stop the revolution. By 1921, however, the Bolsheviks’ Red Army had gained control of most of the country and, in the December of 1922, the central government of the Soviet Union was formally established. A new set of proletarian officials were elected to run peoples’ soviets, committees and commissions, with all answering to the Supreme Soviet. The primary goals of the new Communist state were the “re-distribution of wealth and the re-education of the population into more cultured, rational modes of living and working” (Hilton 939).

At the time of the October Revolution, Erdman was a fledgling high school poet whose first publications were identified as part of the radical Imagist movement, led by Sergei Esenin (Freedman, *Silence’s Roar* 23). He was drafted into the Red Army at the height of the civil war; the re-organization of the education system meant that, like many others, he never finished his education. When he returned to Moscow in 1923, he was ready to work artistically to bolster the aims of the revolution by satirizing the remnants of the old tsarist empire: aristocrats, capitalists and bourgeois, and complainers.

The success of the civil war was inspired by the grand vision for the “future new man” in the new Russia. Leon Trotsky, a key revolutionary leader and Red Guard commander, described it in a series of articles published in Pravda in 1924 (Leidy 1). The following are excerpts from *Literature and Revolution*:



*Erdman mid 1920's
Page 85 Freedman The Major Plays.*



*Stylized portrait of Lenin abstracted
by Nigel Scott for DART's production.*



Erdman in Red Army Uniform, 1922. Freedman Major Plays, 114

“The care for food and education, which lies like a millstone on the present-day family, will be removed, and will become the subject of social initiative and of an endless collective creativeness. Woman will at last free herself from her semi-servile condition... Communist life will not be formed blindly [...] but will be built consciously, will be tested by thought, will be directed and corrected... [Man will] raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman.”

How much of Trotsky’s utopian vision came to pass? In terms of “an endless collective creativeness”, the New Economic Policy era was indeed “a time of great experimentation in the arts” (Leidy 2), a time for artists like Mayakovsky, Meyerhold, Vakhtangov and Erdman to try new artistic forms. Trotsky himself, however, was maneuvered out of power. In 1927, he was accused by the OGPU (Secret Police) of planning a coup and exiled to Kazakhstan. As for “woman will at last free herself from her semi-servile condition” – the Bolshevik policy on women’s liberation from patriarchy and the constraints of the nuclear family were soon suspended and forgotten. Soldiers demobilised after the war replaced women workers in a variety of trades and industries. As factories and state agencies “decreased spending on childcare institutions and communal dining halls” (Goldman 2), it became increasingly difficult for women to obtain well-paid employment. They typically worked the lowest paid jobs (usually in the textile industry) and they were “paid less than men for fulfilling the same labour quotas” (2). Unions explained the wage difference by citing women’s lack of skill and training, while the Party advocated an “all-male urban proletarian base” (2), relegating women back to the home sphere. As William Leidy puts it, “fundamental shift in society requires time to occur because the old norms of language and behaviour can only change gradually” (5).



Cigarette Advert showing “Our Brand Cigarettes” used by all classes of Soviet Society: Soldier, Peasant, Intellectual (looking backwards); bourgeois lady, peasant, decadent NEP woman and man. Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia) Kiaer and Naiman, 140.

Fears that Russia’s revolution could be overturned and that the great struggle for freedom might have been for nothing shadowed Trotsky’s grandiose visions. Propaganda declared that vigilance to safeguard the revolution must be every citizen’s number one priority. People became increasingly anxious and vulnerable: food and goods distribution had ground to a halt, causing widespread famine during and after the civil war. Rationing had to implemented in 1927 due to on-going food shortages; in 1921 Moscow, 78% of the economy was transacted on the black market (Rayfield, 151).

Lenin recognized that a period of stabilization was needed and he introduced the New Economic Policy, or “state capitalism”, by decree in March 1921. The NEP “did not strictly conform to communist principles” (Blium 280). Lenin intended it to be a temporary stop-gap measure until the Soviet economy could be “modernised”, eliminating all private enterprise; it lasted until Stalin repealed it in 1930.

ii. The New Economic Policy World: An Opportunity and Inspiration for Erdman

The NEP kick-started the Soviet economy, allowing “private capital to set up small businesses and even operate state concessions; it let peasants farm the land as if they owned it and allowed businessman and intellectuals to travel abroad” (Rayfield 97). A consumer culture was created, one that “emphasized the status of the working classes as beneficiaries of modern society” (Hilton 940). State retailers (such as the State Department Store) marketed their wares for their working-class clientele (939). Although state retailers regulated a new culture of buying and selling and acted as a primary merchant, they were outperformed by craftier private merchants, with their attractive retail stores, markets, restaurants, cafes and nightclubs (940). Private publishing was allowed, but Glavlit, the State directorate for literature was introduced in 1922 to control its expression (Rayfield,123).

It was a confusing time, ideologically. Citizens observed entrepreneurs making business profits, yet all public discourse shunned such ventures as disgustingly retrograde. Propoganda held up for admiration the extreme work ethic of working class illiterates such as Erdman’s character, Serafima. A State food store advertisement from 1924 (Cox 128) shows a skinny consumer painfully squeezed between a fat peasant wholesaler and an even fatter NEPman until money falls from his pockets. The accompanying verse reads:

Who here is the most unhappy?

Obviously, you are, squeezed between the wholesaler and the middleman.

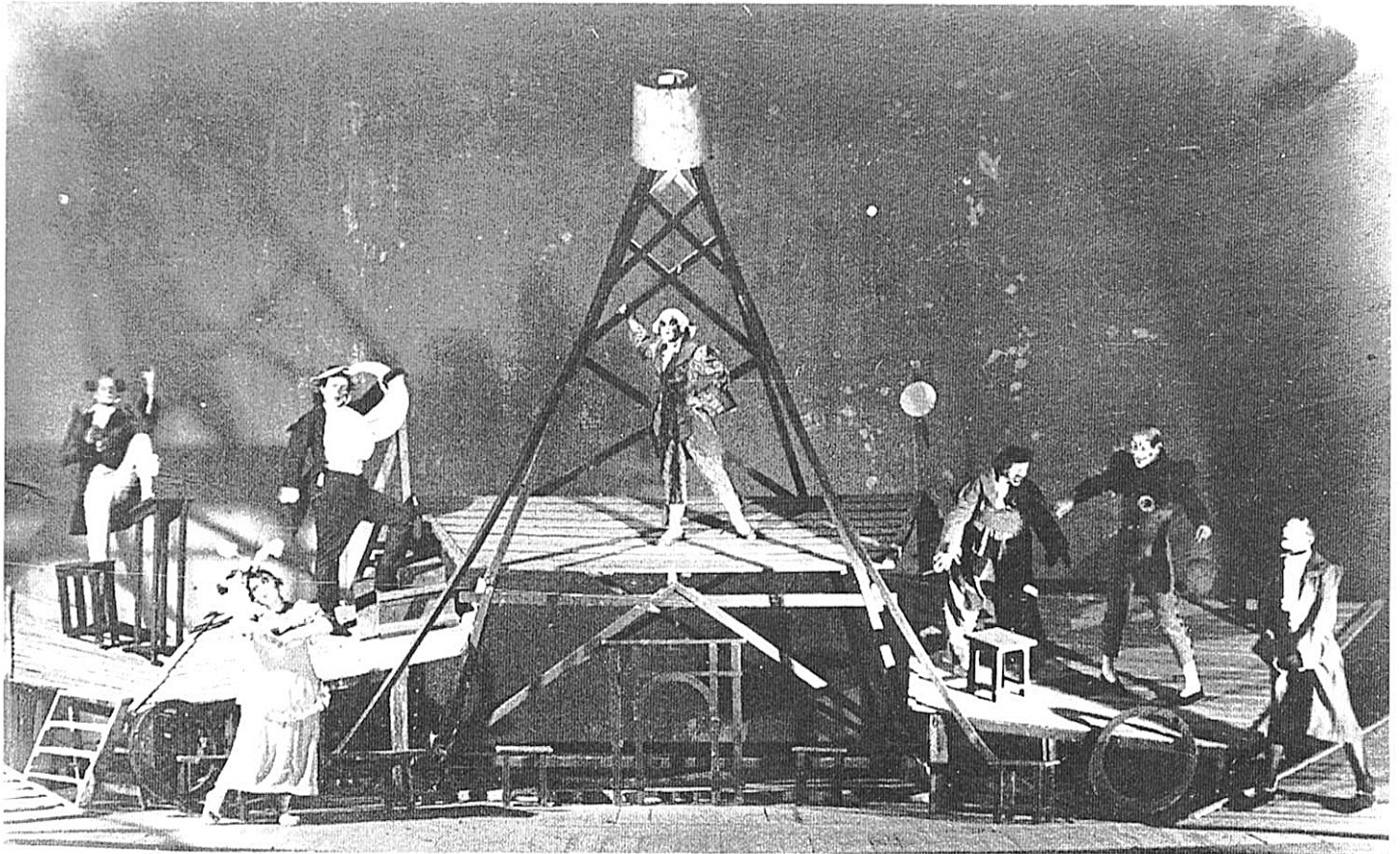
But WE are ready to send goods to your home, quickly and at wholesale prices!



Thanks to the commercial freedoms permitted by the NEP, a host of small-form theatres in the shape of cabarets, clubs and theatrical/poetic cafés cropped up in Moscow. Many of the cabarets had a demand for dramatic texts in the form of satirical parody (Freedman Silence’s Roar 29-31). Erdman, a frequenter of such cabarets, quickly found work as a parodist and lyricist for venues like the Experimental-Heroic Theatre and the Crooked Jimmy. He was quickly in demand, writing around twenty short plays and sketches (34-35) as well as longer adaptations (a Russian version of Labiche’s farce Piggy Bank) and opera librettos(Offenbach’s operetta Madame Archduke was produced at Nikolai Foregger’s Mastfor Theatre). Erdman adapted the classic Russian vaudeville, Lev Gurych Sinichkin, for the Vakhtangov Theatre (Freedman Major Plays x). Even after it’s author’s exile, the Vakhtangov Theatre kept Sinichkin as part of its repertoire, despite the potential dangers.

Citizen squeezed between kulak and NEP merchant.

Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia) Kiaer and Naiman, 129.



A scene from Erdman's adaptation of *The Piggy Bank*, 1922. Freedman, *A Meeting About Laughter*, fig 9, 121.



The Warrant, Varka (Zinaida Raikh) and Valerian (Sergei Martinson) 1924. (Please scan) Braun: Meyerhold, *A Revolution in Theatre*, 215.

The successful and prolific young Erdman completed his first full-length play, *The Warrant*, in 1924. Vsevolod Meyerhold agreed to stage it at his Theatre of the Revolution. All Erdman's characters depict stereotypical counter-revolutionary whiners who flourished during the NEP. They hope they can turn back history, or at least regain the social power they enjoyed in the former Tsarist state. Soviet audiences laughed at first, but five years later these characters were interpreted as tainted by their social class, as well as morally corrupt; they represented an ideological corruption thought to be infectious for audiences who needed to be taught proper revolutionary morals.

The NEP era was good to Erdman but it did not last. Following Lenin's death in 1924 and a brief internal struggle for power, Joseph Stalin seized leadership of the party. By 1927, Trotsky, Bukharin and other former leaders were disgraced as State enemies. The NEP was dissolved at the end of 1928 to make way for Stalin's first Five Year Plan, which would industrialize the country. Blium calls 1929 the "great turning point", as social and economic life in Russia shifted drastically towards totalitarian control (279), while suspicion and dissent regarding the correct party line increasingly divided the populace. Stalin "was running a party 'machine', with a well-oiled bureaucracy and the determined aim of productivity" (Pitches 39). For the machine to run smoothly, it was crucial that all parts were in agreement, even if it meant abandoning the ideals for which the revolution had begun (41). Anyone not aligned with the rest of the machine was an enemy, in league with Trotsky or other foreigners.

In 1929, it was made illegal to teach any form of religion in schools. By 1930, 98% of churches had been appropriated by the State, and the priesthood was no longer a recognized profession. Works with religious themes, if printed, were required to use no capital letters on words such as god, lord, and holy spirit, in order to maximize the separation of Church from State (Blum 277). Poets such as Sergei Esenin, a one-time associate of Erdman, whose work had a “peasant spirituality” were criticised and censored; State control of communications became absolute in order to “protect the revolution”. Citizens were warned that foreigners were constantly attempting to undermine the revolution, and to report on all anti-Soviet activity. In 1928 the first “show-trials” occurred, in which erstwhile revolutionaries confessed to international espionage and sabotage of Soviet mines and production factories (Rayfield 160). Among the artists of Glavlit, furious and paranoid debates arose as to what form of art should best serve the revolution. Stalin’s regime “ordered the ‘canonization’ of the Leader’s image”, wherein anything that might damage his appearance was dissociated from him (including satire and physical images) (Blum 274). Little by little, the rights of Soviet citizens, even to joke about counter-revolutionaries, disappeared along with the NEP.

Erdman’s exile occurred in the early phase of these crack-downs, which possibly explains why he was only exiled, instead of executed. Given Semyon’s phone call to the Kremlin in *The Suicide*, and his complaint “I find Marx boring!” one could surmise that Erdman ‘got off lightly’. After exile, his image was removed from text book photographs where he appeared with Stanislavsky; he received no credit for the screenplays by which he made his living until after he won the Stalin Prize in 1951 (Freedman, *Silence’s Roar* 3). The edgy, vaudeville naughtiness and the radical physicality of Erdman’s theatre disappeared from Soviet stages along with the satirical curiosity that had spawned it.

“Is the communist movement anti religious? Yes. Must our party wage a war against religion. Yes. It must conduct a war against religion by means of propoganda, agitation, the preaching of atheism, the uncovering ties between religion and the exploitive ruling class, the replacement of the religious world view by a scientific, materialistic world view, by wide and deep natural-scientific and enlightening scientific activity.” E. Yaroslavsky. Chair, League of the Godless, 1925.



Svirlag corrective labour camp, featured large patriarchal portraits of Stalin as “Great Leader”. Rayfield, fig 30, 294

iii. A Time for Artistic Experiment: What the Revolution Meant for Theatre

Treplev: “New forms are what we need. New forms, and if there aren’t any, we’d be better off without anything at all.”

Chekhov, The Seagull 1973, Methuen, p.43

Before the Revolution, experiment in artistic form was often associated with activism for social justice and a desire for change. European movements in Symbolism, Naturalism and Futurism inspired Russian artists from the turn of the twentieth century but, in a furor of exchange, numerous avant garde concepts were exported back from Russia.

Viktor Schlovsky and the Formalists coined the phrase *ostranenie* (defamiliarization), later borrowed by Bertolt Brecht, who believed it captured the social function of art. Legend has it that Tratyakov, Erdman’s main rival as an up-and-coming playwright, actually taught the term to Brecht when he visited Moscow in 1935. Alexander Tairov’s Kamerny Theatre embraced Constructivist design, which inspired members of the influential Bauhaus Art School in Germany.



Constructivist Image #1 The Dawn. Design by Dmitriev 1920 for Meyerhold’s production of play by Belgian Symbolist Emile Verhaeren

Constructivism rejected surfaces in favour of revealing the structure of buildings in the same way that the structure of society should be visible. Constructivist artists turned to folk art for inspiration, rejecting the divisions between “high” and “low” art forms. They saw movement and transformation as the essence of theatre – not mimicry, illusion, or representation. They sought to move the theatre outside the constraints of the indoor building and to play for popular audiences. Erdman’s brother, Boris, was a well-known set designer for Moscow’s best theatres (20) and the confluence of art-deco with cubism can be seen in his constructivist designs throughout the dynamic period of the NEP.

At the Moscow Art Theatre, Konstantin Stanislavsky challenged pictorial-realist theatre conventions with his new “scientific” approach to acting as behaviour-generated “naturalism”. Vsevolod Meyerhold began as a student of Stanislavsky, who supported him throughout his career, but broke away from his mentor’s committed naturalism. Meyerhold founded the Fellowship of the New Drama, and became co-director of Stanislavsky’s Theatre Studio, which offered him a space for stylistic innovation and experimentation. By the time of the revolution, he was a noted director in his own right, utilizing musicality and a distinctive physicality in his performances. He began a teaching programme that focused on Commedia dell’Arte techniques (Pitches 25-26) including acrobatics and slapstick.

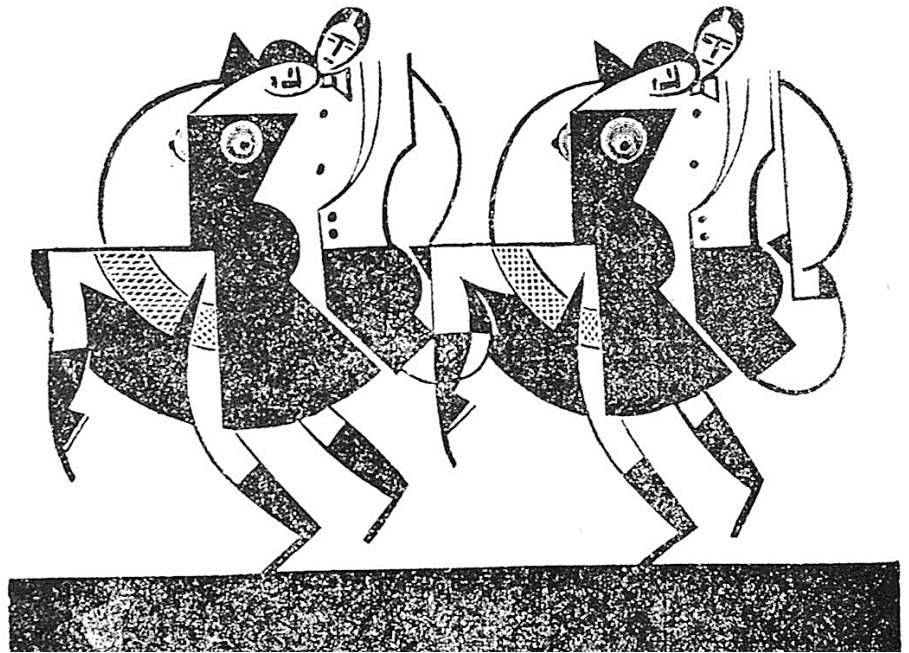
Meyerhold had been an advocate for political change under the Tsarist regime, and fought for the Red Army during the Civil War. He responded quickly to the changing times. Three weeks after the October Revolution, he attended a meeting with Anatoly Lunacharsky, the minister for education and the arts (30). Meyerhold promised a theatre art that would express the new political and cultural environment. All the Moscow theatres began a desperate search for the new generation of playwrights who could write to this vision.

The playwrights Gorky and Mayakovsky provided Meyerhold with works that enabled him to experiment with circus stylizations that used his actors' training. His propagandistic productions of Mayakovsky's *Mystery Bouffe* were acclaimed for their dynamic physicality. However, Meyerhold wanted to find more subtle and energetic ways of depicting the world because the problem with the two dimensional, cartoon approach was that "negative, anti-Soviet characters were depicted comically; positive characters were depicted monumentally... the bad guys were more fun than the good" (Geldern 45). He combined everything he had learned in symbolist gesture, circus acrobatics and Taylorist ideas of "efficient movement for workers" to develop a new approach to actor training that reflected the factory-like aesthetic of the current age. The result was biomechanics. For Meyerhold it was "an objective system, focusing on the external apparatus of the actor and designed to create a responsive, efficient and productive actor" (33). This is a kind of constructivism for the actor, in which the athleticism and spatial directionality of the actor's body is the principal resource of theatrical expression (34).

Meyerhold finds "the writer of the Soviet future"

Meyerhold noted Erdman as an upcoming comic writer, and eagerly produced his first play, *The Warrant*, so beginning an eight-year-long creative partnership. *The Warrant* opened on April 20, 1925, to great success for both author and director (Freedman Major Plays ix) Its acrobatic biomechanic performance style was touted as being the style most appropriate for the new theatre of the revolution. Over the following year, *The Warrant* was performed in over thirty theatres and clubs; it was later translated into German and produced in Berlin's Renaissance Theatre in 1926 (ix).

Фокс-трот.



A meeting About Laughter, fig 11 and 13. Boris Erdman's costume designs for i) a program of Spanish dances and ii) a program of foxtrots.



Silence's Roar Photo Collection Caricature of Vsevolod Meyerhold (left) and Konstantin Stanislavsky (right) doing battle, then being reconciled by the notion of a "worker's theatre" 1926.



Set Design by Malevich for Mystery Bouffe, 1918.

Erdman was the toast of Moscow. Three theatres (the Kamerny, the Moscow Art Theatre and Meyerhold's Theatre) were competing for the rights to his second play. As he worked to complete *The Suicide*, however, the creative atmosphere of the NEP period began to chill. The power of the "essential committee" OGPU (the Secret Police) increased, and the fear of social infiltration by foreigners was rampant. Imagist poet Sergei Esenin had "either committed suicide or had been murdered by the secret police", Glavlit had almost total control of literature, and Stalin had become the most powerful man in the Soviet Union (xii).

*Meyerhold's attempt to produce *The Suicide**



Cartoon of biomechanics (please scan) Drawing by Vladimir Lyutse, 1922 (Braun 173).

Erdman's personality as an "equal opportunity satirist" (Leidy 12) meant that he had made some enemies in NEP Moscow, many of whom had taken critical pot-shots at *The Warrant*. Freedman notes (that Stalin is named in the play as an authority legitimising the title document. Ironically, Meyerhold had requested that the name of a well-known

Party official be substituted for the at-the-time- little known Stalin. Stalin was undoubtedly aware of Erdman's work, and was dubious about him.

The Suicide was probably completed in 1930 when "readings of it took place at the Moscow Art Theatre in April 1930 and at the Vakhtangov Theatre in September of the same year" (Freedman Major Plays xii). The censor banned the play as unsuitable for the Moscow public on September 25, 1930. However, support for the play endured among many who had attended the readings, and Stanislavsky wrote to Stalin in effort to overturn the decision. Stalin eventually agreed, though he commented that some of his closest comrades regarded it as "rather empty and even harmful" (Silence's Roar 6-7) later reportedly commenting that "Erdman [was] rather petty, rather shallow" (7). The ban was overturned in November 1931 (Freedman Major Plays xii) and, challenging Stanislavsky to a competition to see who could devise the most revolutionary version of the play, Meyerhold's theatre began staging it (Freedman Silence's Roar 149. Vasily Saknovsky rehearsed the first two acts from December to May, 1932, then Meyerhold took over the direction.

Meyerhold chose to show the dress-rehearsal to a closed audience of high-placed officials in October 1932 (xii). Stalin was expected to be in attendance; instead, he sent Party Secretary and head of the censorship board, Lazar Kaganovich (Freedman Silence's Roar 7). The performance initiated hot discussion by the members of the artistic committee, the censors and other officials who attended. The artistic-political council of the

Vakhtangov Theatre took issue with many elements of the play. While they noted Erdman was a talented author, his “direction of ridiculing the Soviet public” was found to be very risky (A Meeting About Laughter 192). Georgy Adamovich Artamonov, the deputy director of the theatre, commented: “If a play like this were to be presented on stage for the spectator, it would cause a reaction that would be extremely disadvantageous for us. Whom does this play mobilize and for whom would such a production be intended? Obviously, neither the working spectator nor the Soviet intelligentsia [...] what good would such a call to our clear enemies do the Vakhtangov Theatre—when our path leads in the exact opposite direction?” (193). At the close of the event, Kaganovich told Meyerhold, “There’s no need to work on this play” and *The Suicide* was banned for good (Major Plays xii).

Donald Rayfield believes that Erdman’s fate was probably sealed when, at a dinner with Stalin, some of his satirical verses was recited by a drunken actor, Vasili Kachalov. Freedman speculates that the verse *A Lullabye* was the culprit. It concludes with the quatrain “All people in the world/ Sleep in millions of different beds.../ But only Comrade Stalin/ Never sleeps in the Kremlin” (Freedman *Silence’s Roar* 7).

Erdman tried to continue working in Moscow after his play was banned. He wrote “a series of satirical musical halls revues” (Freedman Major Plays xii) with Vladimir Mass. However, official opinion had turned against him, and his work was brutally attacked by critics and censors. Mass and Erdman were both arrested a year later, in 1933. At the time they had completed the screenplay for *Jolly Fellows* – a film that became a great favourite of Stalin-- and were in the process of filming it (xii). Erdman spent a week in the notorious Lubyanka prison and was exiled to Siberia on a three-year sentence; there is speculation that his work on the popular film mitigated his sentence.

Three months later, Meyerhold’s theatre was closed, partly due to Meyerhold’s ongoing requests to stage *The Suicide*, but more because he was incapable of accepting the earnest political correctness that was demanded by the artistic authorities.

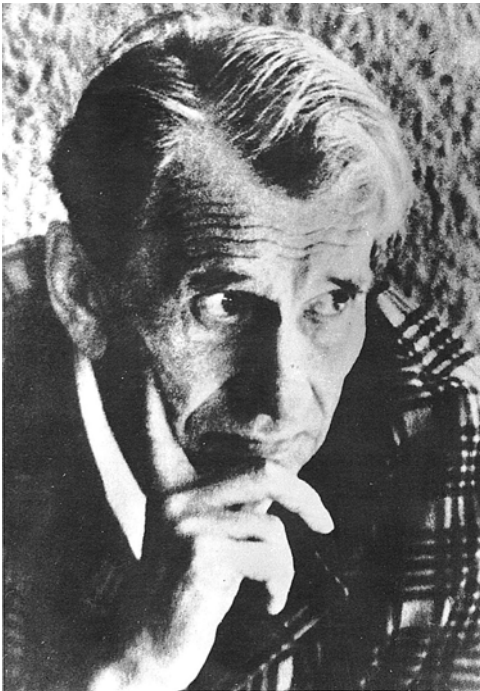
This Socialist Realism had to be “unflinchingly positive in its presentation of the Revolution and pointedly organized [...] towards remoulding the mentality of the people in the spirit of socialism” (Pitches 41). Everyone was to revel in the success of the revolution. This was the opposite of what Meyerhold’s vision, with his commedia inspired investigations of human greed and physical hierarchy. In 1937, in “An Alien Theatre” published in *Pravda* by Platon Kherzhentsev, chairman of the Committee on Artistic Affairs, accused Meyerhold of “systematic departure from Soviet Reality, political distortion of this reality and ...seditious slander on our life” (*Silence’s Roar* 180). The systemic purging of individuals on ideological grounds is difficult to understand in a pluralistic democracy, but at the

**“The GPU arrested Aesop
And smashed his glasses
and his teeth up.
The moral of our fable’s this:
Don’t ever dare to take the piss”**
(Rayfield 359).

**Bukharin “We must inculcate a
completely instrinctive attitude
of impassioned hatred towards
our class enemy”**
(Neumann, 265)

time, “You were either an ally or an enemy of Soviet Power. This absoluteness applied with special force and particularly bizarre effect to class identity: you were either “proletarian”, in which case you were innately an ally, or “bourgeois”, hence innately an enemy” (Fitzpatrick 24).

Stanislavsky tried to protect Meyerhold by giving him work, but Meyerhold had been identified as an artist ‘dangerous to the state’ and lacked the international prestige that protected Stanislavsky himself. After years of harassment, Meyerhold was arrested by Soviet police in 1939. He was tortured, forced to confess to charges of spying, “plotting to assassinate Stalin [and] being part of a counter-revolutionary Trotsky organisation” (42). In February 1940, at the age of sixty-five, Meyerhold was executed in a Moscow prison.



Nikolai Erdman 1970

iv. Life After Exile

Some commentators believe that Erdman’s exile in Siberia kept him out of sight during the arrests, disappearances and killings that marked the purges of the Great Terror that followed in the 1930’s. After his sentence, he was not permitted to reside in Moscow or associate with his old circle, but he did not stop writing. Between 1937 and 1970, he quietly completed “filmscripts, stage adaptations, libretti for operetta and sketches for stand-up comics” (Freedman Meeting xiii). Oddly enough, in 1941, a film that used an Erdman script won the Stalin Prize for best film of the year. This film was *Volga-Volga* and it was one of Stalin’s favourite films (Silence’s Roar 8). This possibly enabled a degree of rehabilitation. During the Second World War, Erdman was drafted to serve in a convict’s battalion and nearly starved. However, in a twist of fate that sounds like one of his own satires, with Stalin’s consent, he was allowed to join the Song and Dance Ensemble of the Secret Police.

After Stalin’s death, Erdman attempted to get *The Suicide* re-evaluated by the censors of the successive regimes. There were tentative plans to stage *The Suicide* at the Vakhtangov Theatre and the Mayakovsky Theatre in 1956, but they never came to fruition. At the Taganka Theatre in 1965, Yury Lyubimov worked on a production for a month before being ordered to discontinue (Borovsky and Leach 391).

The Suicide finally received its world première in Sweden 1968, a year and a half before Erdman’s death (Freedman Major Plays xiii). Johan Falck’s production at the Stadsteatern triggered worldwide interest in Erdman’s work. Erdman’s biography describes poignantly how he sat up all night waiting for the reviews of the first, Swedish, production. This was the closest he came to realizing the theatrical promise that Meyerhold had recognized. Nikolai Erdman died on August 10, 1970.

v. The Belated Popularity of The Suicide

In 1978, *The Suicide* was produced in English at the Theatre Compact in Toronto by Alan Richardson. The American première followed, directed by Robert O'Rourke at the New York Farce Company. The most successful productions were Ron Daniels' with the Royal Shakespeare Company (1979) and Jonas Jurasas with Trinity Square (1980), sparking an English 1980s interest in Erdman. Daniels' production was staged at The Other Place, the Warehouse and The Aldwych, all to great success. Jurasas later directed the play at the old ANTA Theatre, with Derek Jacobi in the role of Semyon (Freedman Major Plays xiii-xiv).

The Suicide was not performed in the Soviet Union until 1982, when the Moscow Theatre of Satire performed an edited version play six times (Leidy 11) before closure. It was not until 1987 that the full, uncensored text was performed, in a much-edited production by Yuri Lyubimov. After the fall of the Wall, however, *The Suicide* became the fourth most-staged play in the Soviet Union (Freedman Major Plays, xiv). Many translations and adaptations have been made; to our knowledge there are at least nine versions published in English.



Major Plays Derek Meader (Viktor, above) and Richard Jenkins (Semyon below) in *The Suicide* at Trinity Square Repertory, Providence, R.I., 1980. Photo: Constance Brown (*Major Plays* fig 14).

Is there a Political Message in The Suicide?

There has been disagreement about the political message of the play ever since its first reading. Should audiences love and admire Semyon for his naivety and honesty, or is he as self-centred as the others? Is the entire play a cautionary tale about self-serving, bourgeois individuals?

We believe that the play does have a message, and that it speaks principally to three groups of people. Firstly, those who feel that they ought to have a voice in their democratic government, but that they have been silenced by big business, lobbyists and political trends that benefit professional white-collar groups while pushing ordinary people to the margins. Secondly, those



who notice a growing discrimination against working laborers like Semyon, whether this be the undermining of unions and benefit protections, the importation of migrant workers at the level of second class citizens, or simply that labourers are seldom featured on TV, in fiction or the press in the positive light received by the professional classes: as Diana Kendall writes, in our media-defined world, “The working class is truly the silenced majority” (138). Thirdly, we believe *The Suicide* has contemporary resonance in Semyon’s insistence that the voice of the usually silent 99% be heard.

Some attitudes that were core to the Occupy Movement are echoed in Erdman’s play through its satire of the cults of personality and the simplification of message into sound bytes encouraged by politics. Semyon learns to value a new kind of community—the people around him, whether he agrees with them or not. He finds a new self-respect that is not based on his economic earning power, but his joy in life. He asserts the value of life above all ideology and principle – a message too dangerous for Stalin’s Russia, but one that resonates in our divided world today.

The following describes the principal divergences of our adaptation from what John Freedman calls the “closest translation”, by Peter Tegel in 1979, of Erdman’s most commonly accepted text. We begin by describing the different ways that audiences in Erdman’s Moscow would have understood the key characters in his satire, in contrast to our Canadian audience today.

i. The ideological argument over the characters

Semyon

The interpretation of Semyon’s moral significance was the main topic in the “Meeting About Laughter” in 1930, where Lazar Kaganovitch, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and chief censor, banned the play. Bolshevik critics genuinely felt that, if audiences loved Semyon character despite his

lazy, self-centred individualism, this would cause a social rot that would undermine the Marxist revolution. A Canadian audience, not especially aware of Erdman's Soviet reality, are free to love Semyon's Arlequino type qualities without guilt. Semyon's individualism lines up perfectly with capitalist beliefs; in the age of *The Simpsons*, it would be difficult to make a Canadian audience dislike his Arlequino-like, childish self-centredness. This awareness affected our interpretation of Semyon and all the characters.

Alexander

At the meeting of the artistic-political council of the Vakhtangov Theatre, Alexander was referred to as "kulak", a term used either to designate a wealthy peasant farmer or to refer, in common usage, to any well-off petty businessman (Freedman Meeting 192). Under NEP, politically correct Bolsheviks had to interpret the opportunistic Alexander as morally corrupt. However, as a central tenet of a pluralistic democratic society, Canadian audiences do not see social and moral status as one and the same (Fitzpatrick 24) and, again, we are free to approve of Alexander as a colourful entrepreneur. In fact, Alexander's type was shortly to be rooted out of Russia; the NEP period was his last chance to flourish. Even in 1929, arrests for "counter-revolutionary activity" of NEP men soared: 162,726 were arrested, of whom 2,109 were shot, 25,000 were sent to labour camps to support Stalin's industrialization plan, and the rest were exiled (Rayfield 182). Neither Alexander nor the other NEP lobbyists satirized in the play would have been likely to survive the Great Purges of the upcoming decades.

Yegorechka

In his original text, Erdman calls Yegor "Yegorechka" or, "our dear little Yegor." Of all the characters, the Bolshevik critics found Yegor the most upsetting. As the only Marxist in the play, they needed him to be exemplary, not a buffoon. At the end of the NEP period a hysteria about the ideological purity and class identity of the Party and its members was developing, which Erdman was clearly attempting to mock (Kaganovsky 35-60). Yegor contributes a mockery of Marxism as boring, ugly, incomprehensible, drab and sexless. Erdman's exile to Siberia may well be explained by his depiction of Yegor. Party Membership substituted for the authority of both church and state, and mockery of a Party Member was tantamount to counter revolution. We believe, however, that while Yegor the ideologue is foolish, even dangerous, in reporting his neighbours to various authorities, Erdman does not intend him to seem evil. We wanted Yegor to have a more human face than the stereotypical "totalitarian fanatic" expected by North American audiences; we conceived him as a sad yet ridiculous figure who is desperately lonely, repressed and frustrated. We follow Buffini and Ross-Parker in ending the play with Yegor's suicide rather than that of the off-stage character Fedya Petunin.

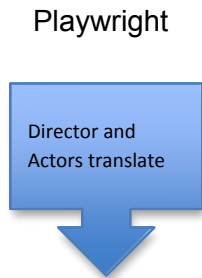


A scene from The Suicide at the Trinity Square Repertory 1980

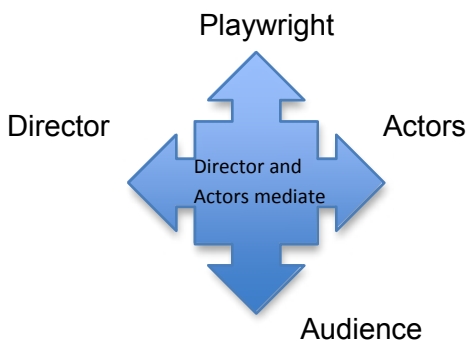
The Suicide: from Russia 1928 to St. Catharines 2012

i. Adapting Existing Plays: the Writer-Director-Audience Relationship

WERKTRAUE



MEYERHOLD



Gottfried Ephraim Lessing, was the playwright and literary critic generally credited as having initiated modern dramaturgy. He started a trend against adaptation in his 18th century journal *Hamburg Dramaturgy*. In Lessing's time, theatre managers routinely altered and adapted playwright's scripts to suit their whims, and Lessing believed vehemently that form and content designed by artists should not be ruptured by craftsmen. He argued that an analogy can never be as powerful as an original expression, and should be scorned as commercial and derivative. Hand in hand with this went Lessing's conviction that the theatre producer should observe "Werktraue" (truth to the work), in which an author's play text should be envisioned and staged as accurately as possible (Schulte and Biguenet, 77).

Meyerhold, the original director of *The Suicide*, challenged this traditional understanding of the writer-director-audience relationship. He argued that the director and actors necessarily stand between the playwright and the audience, and that the most important relationship of the modernist theatre artist was not to the playwright, but to the director's contemporary vision of the play.

In our post-modern times, another shift has taken place, arguing that, like play texts, performances can never be universal. The primary responsibility of the theatre artist becomes, therefore, to shape each individual performance experience for its particular audience in a given time, location, and culture. It is this third perspective that has encouraged us to create a new version of *The Suicide* for here and now.

ii. Why are there so many adaptations of *The Suicide*?

John Freedman, principal scholar and translator of Nikolai Erdman's oeuvre, points out that, in his attempts to get it past the Soviet censor, Erdman revised his play so often over the course of his life that it is difficult to pin down a specific "canonical" text. Most translators of *The Suicide* have chosen to adapt the text in order to shorten it and ease comprehension for a European or North American audience. Interestingly, even the first major Russian producers of the play, in 1989, thought that the context of the "NEP period" would be hard for their audiences to grasp. Director Yuri Lyubimov sought to underscore Erdman's comedy with an awareness of the social devastation his characters would have faced. He inserted biographical scenes from Erdman's life into his play, to emphasize "how our world was neatly turned like a greyed collar: we were left an existence but our lives were destroyed ... Life that is truly alive can be murdered at various levels, including the protoplasmic one of Podsekalinov." (Borovsky 391)

iii. Our Adaptation Process

At first, the Department of Dramatic Arts planned to produce Moira Buffini's fine adaptation of the play, titled *Dying For It*. Buffini shrinks the play by setting it in England in a single location, reducing the number of characters, and cutting it from five to three acts. Her version translates the play's anger about unemployment and poverty very effectively into a British context. However, it seemed an odd choice for us to distance the Russian story even further from our local audience by presenting Buffini's dialogue, with all its British slang. We think that the principal themes of the play resonate with Canadians even though they are Russian traditions. (The home invaded by officious, entitled people, and the fake suicide and the living corpse, were traditions explored by Alexander Sukhovo Kobylin and Leon Tolstoy before Erdman.) Erdman's modern, "revolutionary" themes impact us even more, as Canadians in the era of the Occupy Movement. (Who should dominate the social hierarchy? What self-serving motives hide beneath political slogans?)

We decided not to do an adaptation that removes the action to England or to America, as Robert Ross Parker did recently in his adaptation, *Goodbye Cruel World*. Instead, we left it in a fictionalized Russian world of 1928. It was, after all, a world of possibility: right before Stalin's consolidation of power and just before the hammer fell.

Anna MacAlpine signed on as Gyllian Raby's co-writer in a process inspired by the *Commedia dell'Arte* and Toronto's Occupy Movement. Our adaptation is quite free. We researched Erdman and his conflicted times; we studied the architecture of the play to determine the poetic impact of the scenes and what each contributed to plot; then we wrote it, revising one another's work. We referred to a number of existing adaptations as well as a literal translation, and received feedback on our drafts from our Russian consultant, Larisa Brodsky. We decided to downplay or ignore certain themes that we felt Erdman was obliged to include to protect himself from his political critics, but we wanted to carefully discuss the changes inherent in the decisions we were making. For example, Larisa described Erdman's use of language as highly unusual, reflecting "very particular character types and speech idioms" of the NEP era. As Freedman explains, after the Revolution, the newly empowered lower classes suddenly had the responsibility to be experts on the new "Marxist" scientifically structured society, resulting in clumsy speech pretensions that Erdman delighted in mimicking. We felt that no English translation has managed to capture this, and that our characters would talk like western class-based *Commedia* archetypes.

Our biggest challenge as adapters is that Erdman's negative satire of his characters goes right over the heads of Canadians, who do not see individualism or the entrepreneurial pro-profit spirit as inherently bad or "counter-revolutionary". We decided, therefore, to step away from the extreme grotesques that Erdman presents, and to underscore the humanity and generosity of our characters. In the case of Margarita, for example, her actions (lending Semyon the tuba, hosting his party) can suggest her humanity and compassion, even if she is making money from them. Erdman's audience dismissed her as a restaurant-owning NEPman and profiteer, but we hope our Canadian audience will see her as a survivor and a realist who has retained her compassion in hard times. We aimed to give each character a mask and contra-mask in the *Commedia* tradition that locates tragedy at the heart of comedy.

Meyerhold, the director of *The Suicide*, about a colleague: "Mayakovsky spends more time in poetic fights with "bad workers" (that is, poets who show the slightest interest in private acquisitions and are hence are considered 'beorgeoisified') than against the bourgeoisie itself. Bad workers are worse than class enemies; they profane the ideal of the revolutionary class"

(Boym, 69)

Chart of differences between the original and the adaptation

ORIGINAL	OUR ADAPTATION	COMPARATIVE THOUGHTS
<p>Semyon is rather stupid, selfish, and cowardly. His occasional lyricism and social insight occur by happenstance. Semyon's saving grace—his only difference from the counter-revolutionary lobbyists—is his naive joy in simply being alive. Erdman once claimed that he intended audiences to despise his anti-hero's anti-social, self-serving ways. Semyon does not learn from his experiences; he is an unrepentant buffoon who still thinks only of his stomach.</p>	<p>Semyon is Arlequino in the Commedia dell'Arte pantheon of characters. The crafty, greedy servant whose childish greed, chauvinism, and selfishness delight because they are balanced with his verve, imagination and spontaneity. He blurts out the insight and wisdom of an uncorrupted child. He remains an unrepentant buffoon but, during the play, he learns to conquer his pride and to voice an honesty that politicians should hear.</p>	<p>Semyon's journey teaches him how precious life is—something that politicians forget in the fanatical grip of ideological theory and power politics. Erdman's Semyon voices dangerous thoughts, accusing the government of empty slogans and propaganda, and of failing to deliver on the Revolution. While this made him a counter-revolutionary in Soviet society, he becomes a spokesman for 99% in our own.</p>
<p>Masha (Maria Lukianovna) is a good (ex-Catholic) girl: modest, loving, hard-working and obedient to her husband. The lobbyists make eight jokes about her sexual availability once Semyon appears to be dead. Erdman commented that she is the only character 'who actually works' and that her genuine love for her husband creates a humane backdrop for the play.</p>	<p>Masha's Commedia type is Columbina, the feisty, true-hearted servant-girl. She loves Semyon but she doesn't put up with his baloney. She does her best to be honest, repeatedly calling Semyon's bluff and forcing him to "face the music".</p>	<p>Masha's journey becomes much richer if she has the freedom of expression of a more modern woman. She can crack jokes, as well as suffer grief. She is more active and less of a butt for the sexual jokes of the male characters. We believe that she still provides the moral core of the play (Silence's Roar 125).</p>
<p>Serafima is the mother-in-law from hell, who lives the other side of a curtain in the hallway apartment.</p>	<p>Serafima's archetype of the Crone features in grotesque Commedia that surfaced after the French Revolution: she rubs her hands at disaster because she only expects the worst. The adaptation has not changed her.</p>	<p>In her Soviet context, Serafima satirizes the obsessive commitment to work that Stalin glorified by honouring workers such as Alexander Stakhanov. Impossible production quotas set in the Five Year Plans of the 1930's put enormous stress on citizens and helped to develop a deadly culture of blame.</p>
<p>Alexander Kalabushkin is a heartless "middle man" seeking only to profit from his lottery for Semyon's cause of death. He personifies the infamous "NEPman" who would sell his grandmother for a profit.</p>	<p>Alexander is Brighella, Arlequino's crafty, bull-like sidekick. He is a 'Good Neighbour', albeit a black marketeer and a ladies man. He tries to help as well as to profit, which creates an interesting dilemma: despite himself, he feels responsible for Semyon's "death" and grows enough to form a meaningful relationship with Margarita.</p>	<p>Erdman's critical exposee of Alexander as a struggling "NEPman" is difficult to convey to a Canadian audience because we are culturally conditioned to applaud Alexander's entrepreneurial initiative. Erdman would probably have rejected the Alexander/Margarita romance as un-Marxist "sentimentality", despite our attempt to keep it a matter-of-fact recognition that likes attract.</p>
<p>Margarita's affair with Alexander functions to underscore her capitalist decadence and her "NEPmen profiteering" as owner of a private restaurant. She lends Semyon a tuba but also encourages him to drink to the point he follow through on his promise of suicide.</p>	<p>Our Margarita is modeled on the Commedia character Franceschina, a crafty realist. She is a successful businesswoman who has suffered: she lost a leg during the Civil War. Her tough exterior harbours compassion and generosity, as well as loyalty. Unlike her Soviet original, our Margarita's moral values are quite separate to her economic class.</p>	<p>We increased Margarita's role in the story, to provide a foil for the shameful motives of the lobbyists (including her lover, Alexander Kalabushkin). The character journeys of Alexander and Margarita pull the play back from broad farce (where characters never learn) into comedy: two cynical and world-weary characters are enabled to grow a richer humanity.</p>
<p>Yegor spoofs of the "New Scientific Lifestyle" in Soviet propaganda. If it can be explained as "science", anything goes. This includes Yegor's peeping through a keyhole at Masha in the bathroom, reporting his neighbor Alexander for being as scientifically evil as a spot on the sun with his "anti-Soviet orgies", and his narrow interpretation of Marxism as his own taste. Yegor is completely uneducated despite his Bolshevik jargon; he misquotes Shakespeare at length in Act 5.</p>	<p>Yegor is Il Capitano, the braggart captain—all bluster and no courage. He is a lonely, repressed man who resents the happiness of others but has the capacity for love. He loves Masha (rather than watching her through a keyhole). Semyon's call to the Kremlin awakens Yegor, but Masha rejects his love. Unable to move forward, and unwilling to revert to his past way of being, Yegor shoots himself.</p>	<p>Erdman's negative portrayal of Yegor as a card carrying Marxist, is carried through in the adaptation. However, we are much more psychological in exploring the reasons behind his fanaticism and eccentricity. Our Yegor is intensely unhappy and undergoes a longer journey. His feelings for Masha are deep, and motivate a tragic ending. Because Yegor is the only Marxist Party member, Erdman could not have chosen to kill him, yet there are many clues that Yegor is deeply frustrated and unhappy.</p>
<p>Kleopatra Maximovna is the most decadent, self-obsessed character of the lot. Diva-like, she wallows in the sentimental romance of the Symbolist poets, creating dramas where she is the star. Kleo has three lengthy monologues where she rants about her dark past, her beauty, and her irresistibility.</p>	<p>Kleopatra is the Venetian Cortigiana (courtesan) of the Commedia. We reduced her role a little, cutting some repetitive speeches. We also beefed up her on-stage rivalry with Raisa Filipovna, and allowed her to win the competition for Viktor's love.</p>	<p>Kleopatra's egocentric excesses are as funny today as ever; her character archetype is great favourite in TV sit coms. Her character remains as Erdman envisioned her.</p>

ORIGINAL	OUR ADAPTATION	COMPARATIVE THOUGHTS
<p>Raisa Filipovna is a second diva-like characters, a fashion designer who competes with Kleopatra for the attention of Oleg Leonidovich, a mostly off-stage character (he appears for three lines in one scene).</p>	<p>Raisa is the mouthy Grazia of the Commedia. In the adaptation she is an activist for women's rights in the new Soviet Russia. She is trying to rehabilitate Viktor as a proletarian poet, competes with Kleopatra for his love, and loses. (Oleg Leonidovich is cut).</p>	<p>Raisa contrasts more effectively with Kleopatra if her belief in Soviet society is antithetical to Kleo's decadent romantic values.</p>
<p>Viktor Viktorovich can be found in many of Erdman's comedy cabaret sketches, boasting of his non-existent talent, and satirically demonstrating the distance between celebrity and talent with his dreadful doggerel and obsession with awards. He was a favourite of Erdman's.</p>	<p>Viktor is the melancholy Pierrot of Commedia, who feels abandoned by the world. His role in the adaptation has expanded to show the poet's dilemma choosing between the poetic traditions of Old Russia (Kleopatra, sleds, gypsies,) and new Russia (Raisa, Socialist Realism factory poetry for workers). We gave Viktor the spoofing of Shakespeare that Yegor speaks at the Act 5 funeral of the original. We made it into a running gag.</p>	<p>Kleopatra and Raisa represent the extremes of Viktor's dilemma, that he shared with many Russians of the NEP era, including Sergei Esenin. At the end of the 'twenties, it was fatal to make the wrong choice, as Viktor does at the end of the adaptation by selecting Kiki's poetry of Symbolist Decadence that praises soul and spirituality. We made this change partly as homage to the many Russian artists who committed suicide or perished in the labour camps, including a number of the original cast of <i>The Suicide</i>. Our Viktor knows it is a politically incorrect choice, and makes it anyway.</p>
<p>Delivery Boy: This character delivers the wreaths from "Eternity Funeral Parlour".</p>	<p>Stepan and Oleg replace him in the adaptation. Their "workman comedy duo" echoes the Zanni characters schtick of the Commedia, as they deliver the coffin.</p>	<p>Since the Thalenburg and Richardson adaptation, the comic delivery of the coffin has been a popular feature of adaptations. We think we have added a few extra lazzi.</p>
<p>Three Tsarist Ladies, Two Old Ladies, Two Dressmakers, a Deacon and a Butcher.</p>	<p>These very small, vaudeville type crowd roles are cut. They don't affect the action of the play, mainly adding a crowd effect. The Deacon repeats the anti-Church narrative that Father Yelpidy already embodies. We replaced them with Grusha, Sonja and Natasha, the gypsy serving girls at Margarita's restaurant.</p>	<p>The Tsarist ladies and the Butcher represented aspects of Old Tsarist and NEP Russia that Erdman wanted to lampoon. Their impact would be lost on a Canadian audience unless we provided exposition to explain their context. We like the gypsy girls of the adaptation because, in addition to strengthening the party atmosphere and the crowd, they remind us peripherally of the plight of the Romany people under Soviet bloc communism</p>
<p>The Deaf Mute Boy appears at the end of Act 2. Semyon pours out his heart to the deaf mute, not realizing he cannot hear.</p>	<p>The Commedia dell'Arte tradition features a number of lazzi that mock deaf or mute characters, and characters with lisps or funny accents. However, we cut the character and shortened Semyon's speech at the end of Act 2, which he now delivers direct to the audience, Commedia style</p>	<p>The deaf mute who "ironically" cannot deliver a response became a 20th century cliché for absurdist writers, including Ionesco (<i>The Bald Soprano</i>) and Arabal (<i>The Emperor and the Architect of Assyria</i>). The assumption that muteness and deafness corresponds with a lack of agency seems dated in contrast to the rest of Erdman's play, and we don't think he intended to make a point, but simply wanted the "lazzo of the wasted confession". This was part of our "cutting for action" strategy to reduce the length of the show.</p>
<p>Fedya Petunin, an offstage character, is respectfully discussed by Aristarkh and Viktor throughout the original play. The final action of the play announces Fedya's suicide: this outstanding citizen has followed Semyon's example. The success, and the dark consequences, of the media campaign celebrating Semyon's death are clear. An epidemic of suicides can be expected.</p>	<p>Fedya Petunin is cut, and Yegor, the Soviet Postman is the character whose suicide ends the adaptation. We thought the original ending seemed "politically correct" for a Stalinist audience who are supposed to dislike Semyon. Our adaptation follows both Buffini and Robert Ross Parker in making Yegor the suicide.</p>	<p>In Erdman's original, Fedya Petunin's suicide means that Aristarkh and Viktor's plot has impacted the public as they planned, at a cost to society that defines them as villains. No-one would care if Semyon died—but Petunin matters, and Semyon's actions have contributed to his death. In the late twenties, there was an epidemic of suicides that gave Soviet society real cause for concern. However, it is difficult for an audience to be affected by the death of an offstage character, no matter how virtuous.</p>

iv. Commedia dell'Arte



Columbina

Commedia dell'Arte translates as "Comedy of Skills": an improvisational style of theatre that began in sixteenth century Italy and flourished in Europe for two hundred years. The first known Guild of Players contract dates from 1546: the players united to seek the protection of the nobility. The artists of the commedia created stock characters who became internationally known for their urban cosmopolitanism, charlatantry, satire of authority, and (extraordinarily in a world divided by religious war), their cynical secularity. The performers were famous for their acrobatic and singing skills, and for the vast repertoire of lazzi (strung together comic routines) with which they peppered their improvised scenarios. They made their living by touring the great centres of Europe by nobles' invitation. Other guilds followed suit. They offered their members apprenticeships, equality of employment, support of sick members and artistic collaboration in creating product, and shares in the company profits.

Commedia embraces carnival values: the superiority of the inferior or the underdog and the vital importance of putting the marginal at the centre of discourse. The improvisers captured the popular psyche and, at the end of the sixteenth century, they spread it all over the known world.

The intensified repression of the Counter Reformation in Italy forced hundreds of Commedia actors and their families to relocate all over Europe (Russia, Poland, Germany, Czech, Hungary, France, and England). At least one hundred of the original companies from Naples, Rome, Venice, Florence, and other important Italian cities left for France, England, Spain, Germany, and Eastern Europe. Their arrival in the town squares around Europe was met with enthusiasm: intellectuals, the ruling classes, the bourgeoisie, and even the lower classes took to these performances with great zeal. Scholars believe that Elizabethan theater – including the works of Shakespeare – would have never been born without the encounters with the Italian Commedia.

The aesthetic of Commedia finds an echo in Nikolai Erdman's vaudeville writing. It is bawdy with operatic emotions, oddball lyricism and a fantastical quality. Above all, it bubbles over with joy. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the traditional forms adapted to pantomime, variety show, musical theatre and film. Even if people have never heard of Commedia dell'Arte, they know the Commedia.



Arlequino

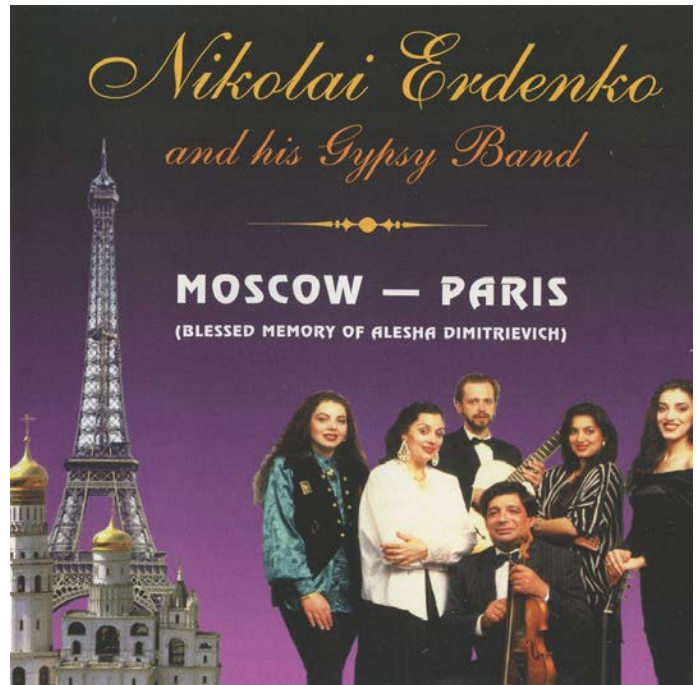
v. Music and Rhythm

Erdman had a Dada-ist's ear for the musicality of the Russian language. He loved puns, paradoxes and funny-sounding words for which English equivalents are hard to find. His major characters often have lengthy monologues that translators struggle to make funny, and which stretch the length of the original play to over 120 pages (well over two hours playing time). We decided to use a gypsy band and an emphasis on rhythm in staging scenes to evoke this sense of musicality that is so easy to lose in translation. "The stage is a drum. Movement is music" is a mantra inspired by Meyerhold's emphasis on rhythm, and it is often repeated during rehearsal.

The music played by the band in our production is based entirely on traditional Russian gypsy folksongs. As the Romany people travelled across Europe, they adapted what they liked from any musical genres they may have encountered. As a result, gypsy music varies greatly from location to location. For example, in Russia, gypsy musicians exchanged styles and flairs with local Jewish klezmer bands. During the nineteenth century, gypsy choirs, musicians and dancers became increasingly popular, leading to ensembles performing for a variety of occasions.

The seven-string guitar and the violin are staples of gypsy music. The clarinet is also popular in folk music stemming from Eastern Europe. Gypsy musicians who made a living through their music would often play whatever instruments they could. Though the tuba may not necessarily have been the most popular instrument amongst gypsies, it is certainly plausible that it could have been played. Gypsy musicians typically performed in restaurants and the like, providing a nightly entertaining showcase (Ekkel 4).

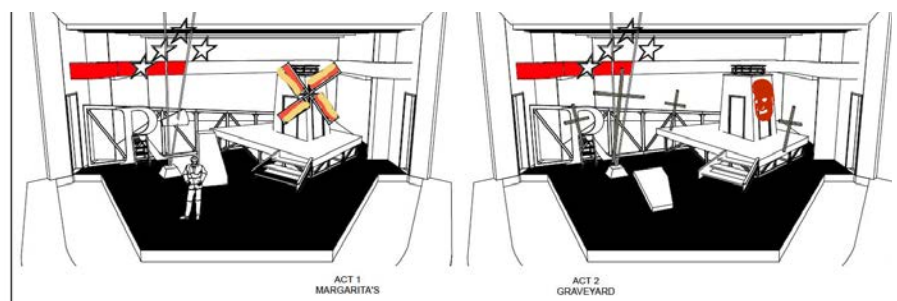
No gypsy song is the same. Each performer makes a variation, relying heavily on improvisation to vary the melody and mood of the piece. Artists such as the band Loyko and Nikolai Erdenko and his family provided inspiration for the structure and ornamentation of the pieces we perform. The music for *The Suicide* was arranged by Anna MacAlpine and is played by the Tsigane Trio: Anna (a graduate of the Department of Dramatic Arts), Sean Rintoul (a current student), and Conor Cooper (a student in the Department of Music).



The Production: Acting Approach, Set, Costumes and Lighting

The Suicide lurches from slapstick, to poignant lyricism, to the frightening. It is a tale of exploitation as well as one of love. While it is emotionally engaged, it is never sentimental, and the accelerating demands of its physical comedy require absolute energy from every one of its sixteen cast members. As director, Gyllian Raby's mantra has been "This comedy is not for the faint of heart!" The cast began with four days of physical contact improvisation and lazzi drills to develop rhythm and precision in the comic builds. They have explored the forces of action and reaction in rapid fire improvisations supported by movement coaching from Trevor Copp of Tottering Biped Theatre, with cast member Rachel Romanovski assisting. The gypsy musicians provide the rhythmic sensibility that underscores all the action. The aim has been to create an atmosphere that helps the emotional roller-coaster of the play. We want the audience to feel that sorrows are many but temporary, and joys few but lasting. The rapid tempo of the action should mean that we stay one step ahead of the audience, so that the self-aware theatricality of the play surfaces only at the very end, to mitigate the final moment.

Set Designer **Nigel Scott**, with assistant **Stephanie Baxter**, has created a "machine for actors" that comments on the Constructivist dynamics of the Revolutionary era. It features massive trusses, giant fonts, and a windmill, as well as a distorted portrait of Lenin. The height of the theatre is explored with soaring pipe structures; angles are skewed and two dimensional areas offer surfaces for poster banners. Props are minimal, as illusion and representation are not on the agenda. Key items – such as the phone used to call the Kremlin and the megaphone the lobbyists use for their speeches – are oversized. **Roberta Doyle**nd has designed costumes that propose a collision of Russia in the 1920's with contemporary Occupy looks. **Ken Garrett's** lighting tilts from comedy to grotesque as Commedia-style chase antics segue into a totalitarian environment emanating fear and greed.



Events

- 1903: **The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party** divides into two factions: the **Bolsheviks** (under Lenin) and the Mensheviks.
- 1914: World War I begins. Russia mobilizes its army to defend Serbia when Austria-Hungary declares war.
- February 22 – March 2, 1917: the **February Revolution**. Nicholas II abdicates.
- March 15, 1917: The Russian Provisional Government is created.
- October 25, 1917: the **October Revolution**. End of the Russian Provisional Government. Lenin comes to power.
- October 27, 1917: the **Russian Civil War** begins.
- March 1919: the **Communist International** (Comintern) is founded.
- March 21, 1921: the **New Economic Policy** is put into action.
- April 3, 1922: Stalin is appointed General Secretary of the Communist Party.
- October 1922: End of the **Russian Civil War**.
- December 1922: Creation of the **Soviet Union**.
- January 21, 1924: Lenin dies.
- April 20, 1925: Meyerhold stages Erdman's *The Warrant* to great success.
- December 23, 1925: Stalin's leadership is endorsed at the 14th Party Congress.
- October 1, 1928: Stalin initiates the **First Five Year Plan**, beginning state industrialization.
- 1930-1932: Meyerhold attempts to stage *The Suicide*.
- September 25, 1930: *The Suicide* is banned for the first time.
- 1932: *The Suicide* is banned for good.
- 1933: Erdman is arrested and exiled.
- December 5, 1936: The Stalin Constitution comes into effect. The Central Executive Committee becomes the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union.
- 1937-1938: the **Great Purge**. Initiated on July 30, 1937 with the order for the execution and enslavement of "anti-Soviet elementals."
- 1938: Meyerhold's theatre is shut down.
- 1939: Meyerhold is arrested.
- February 2, 1940: Meyerhold is executed.
- 1939-1945: World War II.
- May 15, 1943: the **Comintern** is dissolved.
- March 5, 1953: Stalin dies.
- 1968: World première of *The Suicide* in Sweden.
- 1987: Yuri Lyubimov's production of *The Suicide*.
- December 26, 1991: The **Soviet Union** is dissolved.



Glossary

Bolshevik

Originally a faction of the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), the Bolsheviks came to power during the October Revolution under Vladimir Lenin's leadership. Their party was re-named several times: the Russian Communist Party in 1918, the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) in 1925 and, finally, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1952. In *The Suicide*, it is referenced as the **Party**.

Communism

A revolutionary socialist movement and ideology aimed at creating a classless, moneyless and stateless social order through the means of common ownership. Throughout the twentieth century, socialist states with communist ideology were at intense odds with countries with capitalist economies in the Western world. Major contributors to communist ideology in Russia were Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky.

Comintern

An international communist organization, formally entitled the **Communist International** and also known as the **Third International**. Its goal was the defeat of international bourgeoisie and the creation of an international Soviet republic. It was founded in Moscow in March 1919 during the Russian Civil War.

Gypsy

A common name for the Romani people, an ethnic group of travellers who can trace their origins to the Indian subcontinent. They emigrated throughout the Middle-east and Europe, eventually reaching North America. Over the centuries they have been seen as outsiders, often facing prejudice and persecution. Different divisions of Romani have their own dialects, music and traditions. Also known as **tsigani**.

Intelligentsia

Originally referring to the well-educated, intelligentsia became a social class of "thinking" people who analyzed culture. In pre-revolutionary Russia, it referred to culturally and politically adept aristocrats. In the Soviet Union, however, it was not seen as an adequate social class and was by individuals who wanted to separate themselves from the masses.

Kremlin

Abbreviation for the **Moscow Kremlin**, the seat of government of the Soviet Union (1922-1991). Refers to the location and the highest members of government.

Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924)

A Russian communist revolutionary, Lenin was Russia's leader between 1917 and 1924. He helped to orchestrate the October Revolution and, after taking power, implemented socialist reforms. He created the New Economic Policy, which began the process of industrialization in Russia after the civil war. He had a significant influence on the Marxist-Leninist movement, which supported a "dictatorship of the proletariat", a government created by and for the working class.

Karl Marx (1818-1883)

A German philosopher who greatly impacted the development of the socialist movement. He theorized that all societies experienced a struggle between a higher, ownership class that controls production and a lower, working class that expends the labour to produce the goods. Marx was very critical of capitalism and argued for a society governed by the working class (socialism) that eventually would grow into a stateless, classless society (communism). His most noted work is *The Communist Manifesto* (1848).

Pravda

A Russian political paper associated with the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. It began before World War I and became the leading newspaper of the Soviet Union after the revolution.

Proletariat

A lower, or working, class. In Marxist theory, it refers to the class of a capitalist society that does not have ownership of the means of production.

Red Army

The Workers' and Peasants' Red Army was the revolutionary communist army that grew out of the Russian Revolution, fought during the Russian Civil War, and became the national army of the Soviet Union. During the 1930s, it was one of the largest armies in the world. The "red" refers to the traditional colour of the communist movement.

Russian Civil War (1917-1922)

A conflict in the former Russian Empire between the Bolshevik Red Army and the White Army. The Red Army proved victorious. Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland emerged as a result of the war.

Russian Revolution (1917)

Dissatisfaction with the Imperial autocracy, the political and economic strain of World War I, and discontent among the working class and national minorities caused a series of revolutions that upended the tsarist reign and eventually led to the creation of the Soviet Union. **The February Revolution** saw the abdication of the tsar, who was replaced by members of the Imperial parliament under a provisional government. **The October Revolution** saw the removal of the provisional government by the Bolsheviks, eventually leading to the Russian Civil War (1917-1922).

Joseph Stalin (1878-1953)

The leader of the Soviet Union from 1927 until his death. After Lenin's death in 1924, he rose to power, methodically eliminating any opposition until he had near-absolute power. In the late 1920s, he dissolved Lenin's **New Economic Policy**, pushing instead for rapid industrialization of the country. He favoured the use of the secret police, intelligence agencies and censorship. Between 1936 and 1939, Stalin orchestrated the **Great Purges** (also known as the Great Terror), a campaign of political repression that resulted in the arrest, exile and murder of government officials, wealthy peasant farmers, members of the Red Army, the intelligentsia and many unaffiliated persons. Over a million people are thought to have been executed during this time. "Mr. Moustachio, the top dog", whom Semyon demands to speak to in Act 3, is a reference to Stalin.

Socialism

A political philosophy advocating for an economic system that supports the social ownership of the means of production.

Soviet

A council. During the Russian Revolution, many soviets were created by the working class. Under Lenin, the Bolsheviks promised a government that would be run by the workers' soviets. Eventually the term came to denote any supreme body that governed the authority of a group of soviets. As such, the **Supreme Soviet** became the common name for the governing parliaments in the Soviet Union.

Soviet Union

The Union of **Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)**. A socialist state that formed after the dissolution of Imperial Russia during the Russian Revolution. It was ruled as a single-party state by the Communist Party and experienced an authoritarian rule under Stalin's regime. In December 1991, it was dissolved into fifteen post-Soviet states, the largest of which became the Russia we know today.

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