

Discussions on Theatre Spaces and Theatre Materials by the Leningrad School¹

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It is well known that the reformation of theatre practices accompanied the emergence of stage directors in the early 20th century. Meanwhile, in Russia, the focus shifted from drama text to stage in the late 19th century. By the early 20th century, friction between drama text and direction became conspicuous. The perspective change in theatre in practice—mainly in Europe—simultaneously caused a change in the study of the discipline. As scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte notes, these theoretical shifts encouraged Max Herrmann and others to produce ‘theatre studies (*Theaterwissenschaft*)’. Herrmann-style theatre studies were imported into Russia while Russian-style theatre studies were formulated by the Leningrad School, through the Department of Theatre History at the Institute of Art History in Leningrad. In the 1920s, A. Gvozdev (1887–1939), the head of the Department of Theatre History in the Institute of Art History, played a central role in the development of the movement. In his 1924 thesis, *Results and Tasks of Theatre History Studies*, Gvozdev states the following:

There is no doubt that the environment of general theatrical life in our time contributes to the establishment of a ‘purely theatrical’ point of view of research. The search for new ways of theatre at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, which put forward the slogan ‘theatricalisation of theatre’ (Georg Fuchs) and revealed the practical possibilities of ‘pure theatre’, not only illuminated the historical past of theatre with a new bright light, but also created in society the mood on which the future theatre historian would be able to rely. (Gvozdev 1924: 85)

The activities of the Institute of Art History, as its name implies, were essentially historical studies. While Gvozdev and his colleagues positioned contem-

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porary theatre in a historical context, they also anticipated its implications for the future. The scholar pointed out that these *new theatre ideas* were inspired not only by practicality but also by the involvement of researchers. Indeed, he notes:

However, we should not overestimate the impact of the contemporary issues of theatrical life on scientific activities. [...] The renewal of theatre history studies comes not from practical innovative practitioners of theatre, but from the academic environment of laboratories in universities, which is not damaged by quarrels and debates about new theatre. (ibid: 85)

Despite an appreciation for contemporary theatre practice, Gvozdev proposed that an academic approach was needed, stating:

There is no deeper disconnection between life practise and academic and aesthetic arguments than in theatre. Theatre people have repeatedly appealed for help to study on theatre, and have always been exposed to the formidable ignorance—nescimus—in front of them. [...] To change this situation is an urgent issue today. (ibid: 121)

Here, Gvozdev's use of the term 'nescimus' refers to the lack of knowledge about theatrical performance history, a subject neglected by theatre research as literary studies. Gvozdev opined that no existing language of literary studies can describe theatre performance as a union of various arts, and that if theatre practitioners pursue *autonomous theatre* (which is independent from text), a new language is required to interrogate it. He was trying to solve this problem using theatre history as a framework—or perhaps trying to decode theatre history from the aforementioned perspective.

Gvozdev describes the idea of 'original methods' as 'a major task of theatre history as an academic'. (ibid: 85) Researchers should remain cognisant that various elements that comprise theatre performance (such as stage design, costumes, acting, music, and audiences) have not been recognised as subjects by literary studies. When it comes to conducting such research, Gvozdev cites Max Herrmann as a pioneer. In his dissertation, Gvozdev discusses in detail Herrmann's *Research on the History of German Theatre of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, published in 1914.

According to Gvozdev, Herrmann's book is divided into two parts. The first is an effort to restore the *tragedy of Horn-skinned Siegfried* by Hans Sachs in 1557, which was performed at St. Malta's Church in Nuremberg. The second is dedicated to deciphering illustrations of the stage in the plays of Publius

Terentius and the books of Swiss Renaissance playwrights. (ibid: 92–93) In the first part, Herrmann derives the hypothesis of the size and form of the theatrical space from limited materials. He also tries to restore the virtual theatrical space and correct it by applying stage direction in the text related to that space. This method, which Gvozdev termed ‘topographic projection’ (топографическая проекция) (ibid: 94), enabled theatre history researchers to visualize an accurate spatial grasp, which Gvozdev then evaluated.

Herrmann reconstructed the space of the church where the play was performed, the location of the audiences, and the position of the performers. This was achieved by reading individual details from leftover materials and restoring the image in its entirety through this reading. Gvozdev noted that the Herrmann approach served ‘to decisively distinguish theatre history from drama history’ (ibid: 94). While Gvozdev praised Herrmann, he wrote that ‘theatre—the stage, acting, directing, and the audience—is a factor of autonomous art that exists according to its own rule’. (ibid: 94) Herrmann’s words, ‘theatre art is an art of space’ (*Theaterkunst ist eine Raumkunst*) became the route from drama studies as a literary study to theatre studies as a study of performance. According to Gvozdev, ‘researchers have a duty to consider the space in which stage actions are developed. Moreover, reconstruction of theatrical space is the first step toward defining the actors’ movements, props, and the stage set’. (ibid: 94) As such, he attempted to describe theatre’s *autonomy* [from text] from the perspective of academics. It refers to an attitude for analysing the kind of situation created by ‘theatrical space’ and how it forms ‘performance’.

Gvozdev and other members of the Leningrad School regularly held seminars and conferences on theatre history at the Institute of Art History. They discussed various aspects of performance and published their conclusions in *On the Theatre*, which contained their annals of essays on the institute’s Theatre History and Theatre Theories Division. For example, V. Solov’ev’s ‘The Performing of Things (вещи) in Theatre Performance’ was a summary of a report at a public meeting held at the institute’s Theatre History and Theatre Theories Division on 20 December 1925. The beginning of the thesis states the following: ‘The illustrative part of the report was developed jointly with

the chief of the Theatre Laboratory of the Institute, N. P. Izvekov'. (Solov'ev 1926: 51)²

Solov'ev also clarifies his position: 'If not so long ago the history of theatre was considered as the history of dramatic literature, nowadays the history of theatre is usually understood as the history of theatrical performances'. He also suggests that 'studying various elements individually leads the studies towards a one-sided consideration' and that there is a need for an 'axis' that enables the consideration as something that can integrate various elements discussed individually, something with mutual interaction. One element that may function as the 'axis' is 'things'. According to him, 'things in theatre performance' inhabited the stage long before actors recognised the role of costumes; furthermore, things are part of the stage's spatial design—they are also among the 'main elements of theatrical phenomena (*mise en scène* in French, *Incenierung* in German)'. (ibid: 51)

In this thesis, Solov'ev analyses the role of things in theatre performance, separating them into two categories: dynamic and static. The term 'dynamic' refers, in his words, to 'what directly joins in the play and exists on an equal footing with actors, as if it plays a special role without lines'. (ibid: 52) For example, it is 'Khlestakov's letter read in the last scene of Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, or the window where Podkolyosin jumps out in Gogol's *Marriage*'. (ibid: 52) In other words, if Khlestakov's letter and the window in *Marriage* disappear from the play, the performance would be interrupted and rendered incomplete. In some cases, it is not only the story's progress, but also the existence of the thing that defines the actor's existence and physicality on stage. For example, an object that is too large to exist in everyday life stipulates the physicality of the actor who performs with it and conveys a comical impression. Thus, theatre employs a number of things with 'purposes' in performance, and Solov'ev positions such things as 'dynamic'. (ibid: 52)

Regarding 'static' things, Solov'ev does not propose any specific functions and offers a general theory. To illustrate the concept of static things, he writes, 'there is a table in the parlour which shows that they are middle class. On one of the tables, we should find an album with photo cards, and on the walls there will be paintings, such as Kaulbach's *The Virgin Mary* or Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead*'. (ibid: 52) Such things often appear during the performance even though 'no

² At the actual time of the report, several assistants demonstrated the performance based on Solov'ev's report, and there is a brief supplementary commentary on the scene.

one even touches the album, and no one looks at the wall paintings'. (ibid: 52) In other words, these things do not play any role beyond portraying the characters as a middle-class family, and are not actively involved in the progress of the performance. Solov'ev places these things as 'static and have the meaning of decorative and descriptive'. (ibid: 52)

Solov'ev further states that, 'the whole history of the designing of things in theatrical space can probably be observed as a fierce struggle between these two principles'. (ibid: 52) Indeed, he contends that the dynamic existence of things that have a purpose on the stage precedes the static and decorative existence from a historical perspective. For example, regarding the comedy of Aristophanes, Solov'ev notes the various ways in which the purposeful state of things appear on stage.

In the Middle Ages, the use of decorative things became widespread in the practise of plays, which mainly consisted of enthusiasts and amateurs, and school theatre. During these shows, things abstracted various characters and were used to indicate the role played by characters on stage (for example, 'the one who administers the law has a balance and a blindfold over their eyes; the one who administers the truth has a mirror'. (ibid: 53)). In the tradition of ballet and opera, which emerged in the late 16th century, things on the stage were treated as though static use was the only option.

It was in Renaissance professional performances when things once again took on a dynamic and purposeful role. The theatre performances in this era, along with Italian impromptu comedies, were heavily influenced by mediaeval jongleur and histrion; they regained the dynamism that was forgotten in amateur performances. In Italian improvised comedy, props influenced the progress of scenes on the stage and set the direction for their evolution. As linguistic expression became dominant during the 18th and 19th centuries, progress on the stage leaned excessively toward the logical interpretation of play texts, and the presence of things in the performance was reduced to mere décor or 'accidental details' on the stage.

Solov'ev transcribes theatre history from the perspective of the existence of things on the stage, noting an extension of such theatre history in that modern times have once again shifted to the organic use of things. As an example, he refers to the implementation by Russian director Vs. Meyerhold (1874–1940) during that era. Solov'ev observes that the actors at the Meyerhold Theatre have high levels of physical ability and nourish their reflexes, thereby gaining an organic connection with things. For example, *the Forest* (A. Ostrovsky), which Meyerhold directed in 1924, shows a scene involving a

maid, Aksyusha, and a territorial mistress, Gurmyzhskaya. Aksyusha is drying the laundry when 'the laundry pile, squeeze rolls, and wrinkle-stretching bars give the movements of the actress extreme conciseness and expressiveness. At the same time, these emphasise the importance of everything that is done on the stage'. (ibid: 58)

According to Solov'ev, the most important component in the use of things in these new theatrical tides can be seen in the villa in *A Profitable Position* (A. Ostrovsky), which was also directed by Meyerhold. In this work, staged in 1923, the villa where Zhadov and Pauline live was set up on constructivist scaffolds. There, the characters did not simply perform the appearance of the lives existing in the play. The construction of the villa, in Solov'ev's words, functioned as a 'complex theatre device' (сложный театральный прибор) (ibid: 59) and was a place to demonstrate the actors' physicality.

This attitude was shared by Gvozdev's 'On the Shift of Theatrical Systems' (Gvozdev 1926), which was included in the same collection of essays, *On the Theatre*. Here, Gvozdev transcribes theatre history in terms of stage structure. He discusses the characteristics of two basic types of stage space found between the 16th to 19th centuries: the 'court-style, box stage' and the 'temporary stage in the fair'. He discusses these two forms binarily, and from various perspectives, such as the relation between the actors' performance and the audience; moreover, he attempts to account for the history of a temporary stage that is not a box stage. Gvozdev, who constructs theatre history from the space of performance, states that space composition determines each condition on the stage.

For example, assume a 'night scene' is in progress; the lighting in a box stage can easily indicate that it is 'night'. One can use a technical device to create such an illusion (as the actor's personal abilities do not matter here). Conversely, on a fair stage, the success of the 'night scene' depends entirely on the professional skills and techniques of individual actors—even sunlight shining on them from above is assumed to be irrelevant. (ibid: 8-9) In addition, Gvozdev indicates that the dramaturgy changes accordingly. He says, 'on the fairground stages, it (dramaturgy) will rely on actors and offer him the necessary verbal material for the deployment of his performances, and more weight is placed on words that are understandable to audiences on the fairgrounds'. Alternatively, 'on a box stage, they aim to use all of the stage mechanisms, and match the taste of the selected audience who sit in arm-chairs and box seats in a richly decorated hall'. (ibid: 9)

Ultimately, Gvozdev considers that 'the system of theatre will be determined by the place of action, on the topographic conditions in which grows a theatrical performance designed for a certain stage area and a certain composition of audience that is closely related to this topography'. (ibid: 9) Based on this assertion, it may be said that the history of plays is not positioned in the literary history of the playwright's personal creation, but rather in terms of stage setting, and theatre history exists according to it.

Analysing such stage space as the axis for describing theatre history, Gvozdev further tries to describe the structure of the audience, the actor's performance, and the character of the dramaturgy that works for the actor in each 'correlation'. Notably, the primary concern here is the presence of a stage space, and the dramaturgy follows. This is reminiscent of the relationship between directors and drama text that has existed since the 20th century. Meyerhold often referred to himself as the 'author of performance', a stance in which the existing drama text was modified; consequently, he was criticised for blaspheming against the classics. Referring to Gvozdev's logic, Meyerhold's attempt has legitimacy 'in theatre history' precisely because the play exists due to the presence of stage space.

The problem, however, was that such history was forgotten during the early 20th century. 'There is currently no fair stage around us', Gvozdev said.

Along with the growth of industrial capitalism in the 19th century, the fair as a factor of economic life is being destroyed. Along with the fair, the fair-grounds and the associated system of 'popular' theatre finally disappear. [...] However, the decisive disappearance of the system of 'popular' theatre must be compared with the crucial fact of our theatrical reality—the box stage is kept steady and included in the basics of the material in today's construction of theatre. [...] The establishment of the 'court' theatre system as a system of stage art in general in Europe, its triumph over the system of 'popular' theatre and the resulting 'separation from the people', so characteristic of theatre of the new era, thus have become the focus of attention of theatre sociologists and the central problem of scientific theatre studies. (ibid: 10-11)

From this problem of consciousness, predeclaring that it is just a 'rough outline', Gvozdev describes 'how the "box stage" of the court-style theatre was born, how it spread throughout Europe in a triumphal march, where and how it collided with the system of "popular" theatre, and how the struggle of the systems ended in each country' (ibid: 11) as the history of the struggle between the "court-style, box stage" and the "popular-temporary stage in a fair".

In this context, a detailed recounting of Gvozdev's description is beyond the scope of this essay. The opera house, wherein operas and ballets are held, and which Gvozdev presents as a completed version of the box stage, is clearly a theatre style that early-20th-century directors tried to overcome.

Yet, from the perspective of theatre history, this is just one possibility that considers the theatrical space. Gvozdev, while conscious of the simplification of the discussion, describes theatre history in terms of space in a binary opposition, opting to present 'another tradition' that replaces theatre history as literary history. Referring to Max Reinhardt and others' theatre reform movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Gvozdev states, 'Theatres lost trust in the immutability of the court theatre system, the material base of which has been preserved in the form of opera and ballet buildings with a box stage serving drama. At the same time, they lost the techniques of actors that grew up in the system of popular theatre. Western theatre is now standing at a crossroads'. (*ibid*: 35-36) He further emphasises that theatres have undergone rapid change in the early 20th century and are facing a crisis. Furthermore, he notes:

Theatre has not yet found a way to overcome the epidemic crisis, and painful formal exploration is ahead of them as an unavoidable fate [...] Given the crucial task left over by the October Revolution, Russian theatre must build a new system of theatre for wide audiences. An accurate understanding of the historical destiny of theatre is an essential prerequisite for successful construction. At the same time, clearing the long-standing struggle between the systems of 'court' and 'popular' theatre, in which the shift of the systems is observed, as a high-level synthesis must become a new theatre system of revolutionary democracy. (*ibid*: 36)

As aforementioned, the Leningrad School restructured theatre history from a perspective that differs from that of play history.

In conclusion, there remains the question of the ways in which the activities of the Leningrad School may be evaluated. To this end, we must consider the post-revolutionary Russian context. Much debate concerning the place of 'tradition' in theatre art took place during that time and space. Members of the Leningrad School argued for their own theatre history and, as noted above, championed reform in contemporary theatre practice within the context of their theatre's history. While contemporary theatre practise and avant-garde theatre radically changed the style of performance, these members were trying to support their legitimacy with theory.

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