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THE LEFT FRONT THEATRE
MIGRATION OF THE IDEA BETWEEN RUSSIA AND GERMANY IN 1920 AND 30S

Nikolai PESOCHINSKY

I should start with the explanation of my topic. Of course "Left Front theatre" is a very wide notion, especially if we consider different countries and a wide range of time. I could talk about the Left Front just as a certain cultural group (Mayakovsky, Tretyakov, magazine LEF published from 1923 by Rodchenko, and New LEF) but the theatre scene is associated with other interesting ideas of the "left theatre" and not only in its institutional form. In other countries it appeared in a very different way if we consider Piscator's Proletarian theatre, Brecht's epic drama etc. There is something important in common in that theatre movement. So I understand my subject as the exchange of ideas of the "left theatre" in a wide meaning, development of the idea of non-representational, anti-main stream art, avant-garde theater that abolished dependence of theatre from the literary drama, and strived for greater social impact of the dramatic art.

Idea of Futuristic changes in arts came to Russia in the period when the artmakers conceived national culture as an integral part of the European culture (in a more strong way than it was in the second half of the 19th century) and they were very open to cultural influences.

One of the first migrations from Germany to Russia of the idea of revolution in theatre could be noticed as early as in 1907 in Vsevolod Meyerhold's theoretical article *Theatre History and Techniques*. Russian director explained the idea of Georg Fuchs (from his book *Die Schaubuhne der Zukunft*) about the refusal from the Renaissance quasi-realistic concept of theatre space in favor of more abstract "relief" plans. This could be considered as one of the first steps towards the practical creation of the theatre of the poetic suggestion instead of the representational art on stage. (Meyerhold immediately developed this idea in

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his production of *Tristan and Isolde* at Mariinsky theatre in 1909, and wrote a theoretical essay about the production). As early as in 1906-09 Meyerhold made more than 200 pages of records from the books by Fuchs, Hagemann, Wagner, Appia. When Meyerhold visited Berlin in 1907 he watched several productions at Kammerspiele (Aglavene and Celisette, Spring's Awakening) and left his controversial response, he believed these productions were in mid-channel between the naturalistic and poetic theatre. Meyerhold had correspondence with Walter Gropius. Russian audience was impressed with Reinhardt's production of *Oedipus Rex* by Hoffmannstahl (adaptation of Sophocles's tragedy).

Left front appeared on the aesthetic roots of the Futurist and avant-garde art of 1910s. The most clear form of the theatre that was really "left" in both political and aesthetical attitudes was Theatre October – Meyerhold's project mainly manifested in Theatre RSFSR 1 in 1920-21.

Left Front in Soviet Russia was not the official art movement. Bolsheviks considered their attitude to this kind of culture as a marriage of convenience. They themselves believed in more or less realistic art, though it should be highly didactic in its political meaning. Culture commissar Lunacharsky called to creation of the realistic drama that would depict the proletarian contemporaneity, and his slogan was "Back to Ostrovsky" i.e. back to the social drama of mid-19th century. Style of Moscow Maly Theatre (national theatre that did not go through the reform of new drama and of the directing art) satisfied the aesthetic beliefs of the leading group of the ruling Bolsheviks party. Lenin himself expressed his attitude to the experimental art quite clearly: "I don't feel joy of Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism and of all that '-isms', I don't understand them. And it doesn't matter what the highly educated people numbered by dozen want to see in the arts" (Recorded by Clara Zetkin, published in 1924). Bolsheviks tried to stop the development of the Proletcult group which professed in its theories (Bogdanov, Pletnyov) Futuristic and post-Symbolist ideas of merging real life and the artistic reality, philosophy of the evolution of the society through "Dionysian" "orgiastic" collective actions, Proletcult called to non-professional artistic activities with huge crowds of people involved. Trotsky was that party leader who supported ideas of Left Art as a part of eternal revolution, he wrote several articles about Futurism. But from 1925 Trotsky became less and less powerful person in the leadership.

Comparing to Lenin's and Lunacharsky's beliefs Left Front relied on the Futuristic Theories. In the field of theatre theory it meant development of highly abstract non-representational concept of dramatic action. Left critic Emmanuel Beskin explained ideas of theatre as "a live biotechnical machine which uses the stage as just a floor but has nothing to do with the stage box as a decoration; this machine does not create a performance as an object of visual impression; in this

kind of performance the new acting school works on the basis of understanding the integral structure of the action, the acting is based on the play of physical volumes and forces in three dimensions; the acting relies on the work and the muscular reflexes of human bodies and on live technical interaction with all material objects of play. Beauty as an idealistic satisfaction is denied". This formula actually describes the constructivist ("productivist") theatre aesthetics.

In some way it was a refusal of theatre as just a kind of arts (converting it into creation of the parallel reality, or infusion into the everyday life). Emmanuel Beskin (a theatre critic who supported the left idea in theatre) loved to quote Schpengl's thesis: "I will be happy to exchange all the modern arts for the magnificent clear highly sophisticated forms of the high-speed boat or for the exquisite and precise experiments in chemistry or in optics". It was also the idea of the turn from the "old" culture and from the "old" world to the "new" one. Vladimir Blum was sure that "the old fashioned and highly moralistic Eurasia that has its theatre headquarters on Theatre Square [he meant old-fashioned realistic Maly Theatre] is extremely boring comparing to the ravishing and risky Euro-America [he meant leftist constructivist performances that were accused by Bolsheviks as pro-American in their entertaining style], and this theoretician of the Russian leftist theatre proclaimed: "Long live Euro-Americanism!" (Vladimir Blum, 1922).

They dreamed about the theatre of the future – "in about 10 years": "Some portable theatre vehicle will be constructed in the director's workshop. It will have dozen of platforms and small stages. Everything will be moving in that vehicle. Comedians move around all that space – they run, they tumble, they stalk, they jump, they do it precisely – dozen and hundred of comedians who are perfect in their craftsmanship. What will they play on than theatre vehicle that becomes a live system? I don't know. Perhaps today they play political review, perhaps tomorrow they play a tragedy, and the next day they may probably play some farce or a pantomime. The audience will request the repertoire, and maybe the audience will participate in the play. Much more important than this question of the repertoire is the fact that this live singing and playing vehicle will be the only type of the theatre in the future, in will be the type of theatre that will be able to overcome the reality with the new reality that is constructed from the most real elements in the new unity" (Mikhail Zagorsky, 1922). This passage proves, that the "new" (abstract) form of the new theatre was more essential for Russian left wing theorists than the "new" (political) ideology expressed as a story. This was really innovative approach of the "Left" art as a part of the avant-garde. Message to the spectator was sent not through the material (ideology) but through the form of the artefact.

Left Front was enthusiastic about many productions that not necessarily (10)

had open political message, they just should be based on the “futuristic” aesthetics. General philosophy of art was really important for them, they did not care so much about the definite content of each show. That is why one of the first emblematic productions of the Russian Leftist theatre was *Magnanimous Cuckold* by Crommelynck directed by Meyerhold (the new Belgian farce about fanaticism, about jealousy and about the contradictions of human feelings – and nothing about politics and proletariat).

Meyerhold, Eisenstein, Tretyakov, Bebutov and other directors who presented the most vivid productions of the Leftist theatre used miscellaneous literary sources – including Russian and European drama of the 19th and 20th century. They were able to make their theatre express new mentality through theatrical form on any material. For example Meyerhold used the Symbolistic drama by Emile Verhaeren *The Dawns* written in 1898 and converted it into the production which gave birth to many elements of the “Leftist” theatre of the future: combining the fictional story and discussion of contemporary events; montage of episodes as the basic structure of the show; combination of different plots in one integral drama; presentation of the characters as suggestive figures without creating “full life characters”; mixture of genres – comic and tragic sequences; direct contact of the performers with the audience; bringing production out of stage into the audience pit and in other parts of the theatre building, and later to the open air; discussion after the performance going from the matters of the production to the life issues; participation of famous politicians in theatre discussion; communication of the actors and the director with the spectators before and after the show; exhibition in the theatre of different posters and objects related to the performance topic. All these features of the new type of “uslovny” theatre (“theatre of free suggestion”) were repeated and developed in Meyerhold’s second production of Mayakovsky’s *Mystery-Bouffe* (1921), with its location in the “global” space for parody of Biblical events, and later it continued in many performances of the first half of 1920s. Breaking the border between the “artistic” and “authentic” realities continued, some productions were performed in the open air, in many plays Meyerhold used play of the actors with objects and machinery from the real life (real truck rode up on stage in *The Earth Rampant*, 1923).

In 1921-22 Meyerhold developed theory of acting method in his theatre that was later essential for the “Epic theatre”. The actor’s approach to a character (image) without identification with it led to the development of the new theory of mask. The mask was actually a form of the alienation described by the Formalistic school and by Meyerhold in the early 1920-s as the basic principle of the creation and perception of any element of art, including acting. Material (either reality, or a real person, or a character in a play) could only be converted into a theatre

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element (into an image) when a process of its creation (the acting) is to some extent obvious to the audience, which perceives it as fictional. This way of acting was quite contrary to Stanislavsky's method with its tendency to the full inner self-identification with the character (perceived as a real person). To denote this Stanislavsky even used for this the term 'reincarnation' ('perevoploshchenie'). The structure of acting for Meyerhold was opposite. The actor on stage was at the same time both: (A 1) - the actor as the author who has one or several masks; and (A 2) - an image as a fictional phenomenon. A mask could be put on and taken off during the performance.

Artistic method of the "Leftist" theatre quickly spread around in Russia in the very beginning of 1920s. Avant-garde mentality with a lot of devices from the Futurist art made the "leftist" content of any dramatic material. Director Igor' Terentyev (who was considered to be a "typical" personality of the "Left Front" movement) has created performance based on Gogol's classic play *Government Inspector*: it was an obvious deconstruction of the play. Characters appeared in the episodes where they don't take part in the classic version, casting was transgender, many turning points of action were provided with the farcical motivation and with additional meta-plot that brought either contemporary political concept of events, or (more often) changed the play into the early absurdist (abstruse) structure.

Sergei Eisenstein developed the theory and practice of montage of different artistic textures, including mixture of grotesque theater action and film as the projection of the diary of the imagination of the character (for example in his production *Wiseman* based on the adaptation of the 19th Century play by Ostrovsky, at Proletkult Theatre, 1924).

By 1925 the "Leftist" artistic language was not used in its integrity and in its purity on Russian professional theatre stage. Theorists and critics of the Left Front sharply criticized Meyerhold for his return to the deep philosophic grotesque theatricality (Bubus, 1925; Mandate, 1925; *Government Inspector*, 1926; *Woe to Wit*, 1928 etc.). Method of "Left front" drama gradually changed. Sergei Tretyakov's play *I Want a Child* (1926) had many elements of the open political dispute, and theatre space for the production (at Meyerhold Theatre) was constructed by El Lisitzky in a Futuristic style, with towers, slogans and tribunes for speeches. At the same time the style of the play was pretty complex, you can not say for sure if it was utopia or anti-utopia, the characters were very far from any realistic representation, the action looked like new Soviet myth (refusal of personal intimate relations, understanding of love as a decadent feeling, reproduction of the Soviet society based on the logical eugenic system comparable to collective farming); structure of the play reminds junction montage that was usual in the experimental cinema of that time. Brecht wanted to produce

this play in Germany in 1930, but the political reality did not make it possible. Plays of another Left Front founder Vladimir Mayakovsky The Bedbug (1928) and The Bathhouse (1929) also included elements of utopia and anti-utopia, at the same time contemporary reality was represented in a style of comic grotesque (Meyerhold compared the playwright to Moliere). Anyway Russian LEF could not stay on the same platform as it was in the first half of 1920s, and was strongly influenced with the experience of Russian theatre of mid-1920s with its interest to phantasmagoric, apocalyptic and surrealistic tendencies (productions of Gogol's plays, dramaturgy of Bulgakov, new ideas of Stanislavsky – in his productions of Ostrovsky, Beaumarchais and successful development of acting method, method of Michael Chekhov and his metaphysical acting in Hamlet, in Petersburg, in The Case etc.).

In 1920s Russian art was pretty well known in Germany. In 1922 the exhibition of the Leftist painting was brought to Berlin, Weimar and Dusseldorf. Works of Rodchenko, Klutsis, bros. Stenberg, Medunetsky, Altman, Arkhipov were exhibited, all these artists worked much for the experimental theatre. During the exhibition they held discussions about the Leftist art. El Lisitzky participated in discussions with European colleagues.

Moscow Kamerny theatre toured in Germany in 1923, in 1925, in 1930; there was an Agreement of this Russian company with Deutches Theater run by Max Reinhardt; beside it theatre leader Tairov visited Germany in 1922, his book was translated into German. Tours in 1923 were reviewed by more than 50 theatre critics. General impression was about much more radical overcoming the literary material in directing art of Tairov than it was usual in German theatre.

In 1922 the book by Lev Ehrenburg *However It Turns Around* was published in Germany, it presented the ideas of Russian Constructivist Art. Meyerhold Theatre was known by many journal articles, Meyerhold had contacts and correspondence with some experimental groups in Germany, though guest tours of his theatre did not happen before 1930 (though were planned in 1926 and in 1928). Reinhardt invited Meyerhold to make a production of Hamlet in Germany in 1930, but it never happened. Tours of Meyerhold theatre in Berlin provoked controversial response. One of the critics (Falck) explained it with the fact that Germans saw the original thing later than they saw the copies of it. (This proves once more that Meyerhold's theatre ideas were considered to be well known in Germany before the visit of his theatre and were used in local theatre productions). Nevertheless some leaders of experimental theatre (like Walter Gropius) appreciated productions by Meyerhold as a sample of the Total theatre.

Sergei Tretyakov, one of the main personalities of the Left Front in Russia visited Germany before Hitler came to power. He visited communes of farmers,

but also established contacts with left-wingers in the German culture, he became friends with Bertolt Brecht and he was a source of knowledge about Russian Left art. Tretyakov's play *Roar China* (first produced at Meyerhold's Theatre in 1925) was also produced in Germany, and it run several dozen times.

Common understanding of the development of theatre art in Germany and Russia could be found in the projects of the new theatre buildings created by Walter Gropius for Piscator (in 1927) and by Mikhail Barkhin and Sergei Vakhtangov for Meyerhold (1931) – combination of ideas of Greek amphitheatre, circus arena, Shakespeare's empty space stage, Kabuki with constructivist and industrialist concepts. In general Bauhaus (open in 1919, supervised by Gropius) had many common features with the Soviet Art School VHUTEMAS in the concepts of teaching, and also in the ideology of uniting all the arts under the aegis of the architecture. According to the philosophy of the Constructivism artists should aim on the recreation of the social environment.

Many principles of "Left theatre" dramatic construction that were typical for the Soviet art may be found in the dramaturgy of Bertolt Brecht. Partly it could be explained with the general process of the development of the non-representational theatre all over Europe (Futurism, Dada, Expressionism, early Surrealism). Nevertheless some certain specific features of the "leftist form" were continuously used and manifested by the Russian "Left" theatre: an open division of the actor's part into A (1) – author and A (2) – character; non-representational productivist set-design; direct reference of the classical plot to the contemporary political reality; mocking reputable historic characters; direct contact of the performers with the audience; didactic comment of the dramatic events as à parte to the audience; montage structure of the play; juxtaposition of comic and dramatic sequences in the same play; parallel action on different parts of theatre space; insertion of music-hall numbers into the dramatic action; screening of movie abstracts and slides as comments to the action. This complex of devices of the dramatic form in the early 1920s existed just in Russian theatre, it was widely discussed in theatre press, and from here the energy of this kind of "uslovny" theatre (theatre of free suggestion) influenced European theatremakers.

Erwin Piscator's agit-prop production *Despite All* (1925, Proletarian Theatre) used many of the same theatrical devices. It was a free and didactic montage of the episodes from the history of World War 1 made as a simultaneous montage of speeches, of comments, photographs and film abstracts. In another production *Storm over Gotland* Piscator included the film abstracts depicting Russian revolution in the story of events which happened in the 14th century. Later Piscator continued with mixing theatre and cinema textures. It was a new artistic synthesis, a "total" theatre. In 1927 he made a production based on the Russian contemporary historiographical play (*Rasputin* by Alexei Tolstoi).

it was staged on a revolving hemisphere with scenes played within its opening segments, films and photographs were integrated with the action, texts were projected on screens flanking the stage.

"The directors of the Proletarian Theatre must aim for simplicity of expression, lucidity of structure, and a clear effect on the feelings of a working-class audience. Subordination of all artistic aims to the revolutionary goal: conscious emphasis on and cultivation of the idea of class struggle." "The...task facing the Proletarian Theatre is to make an educative, propagandist impact on those members of the masses who are as yet politically undecided or indifferent, or who have not yet understood that a proletarian state cannot adopt bourgeois art and the bourgeois method of 'enjoying' art." (Piscator's 'The Programme of the Proletarian Theatre' 1920). Piscator believed that theatre equipped with strong technical expression is able to influence crowd of people and defeat the individualistic qualities in the human mentality. These ideas were very close to the program Theatre October proclaimed by Meyerhold in Russia in 1920-21.

With more elaborate stage techniques Piscator still believed in the bright and simplified dramatic structure until late 1920s. In his production *Hoppla, Such is Life* (*Hoppla, wir leben!* by Ernst Toller, Theater am Nollendorfplatz, 1927) many Left Front theatre principles were preserved in their clear form. Script was rewritten in a collective way. Acting should be focused on conscious representing social class, motivation behind epic acting. Set was a free-standing scaffolding set on revolving stage. As the play suggested cross-section of society the set literalized this cross-section. There was a multi-storied structure, different acting areas on stage and they symbolized social order. Mass scenes were played in front on main stage area. Drama action was accompanied with simultaneous film projection from four sources (3,000 feet of film was shot, edited with archive material). There was a translucent backing to stage structure. Gauze covered the whole stage for prologue. In the final act characters tap out messages on walls to each other, and messages translated into text flicker silently above their heads from one person to another.

Erwin Piscator was very critical about Russian "Left" theatres, he thought that productions by Tairov and even by Meyerhold are too "aesthetisized", too "formalistic", that they don't follow main targets of theatre - "presenting the truth".

German leftists moved to Russia to live in this country and to experience the socialist society. Some of them came as political emigrants. In early 1930s several actors were in exile in Russia - L.Lebinger, K.Neher, H.Greif, M.Wallenten, H.Malorius and other. There were many German authors at the time in Russia, and the German section was created in the Soviet writers union (it was supervised by Beher). Some of these authors were quite active, e.g., Herwart

Walden (known as an Expressionist) arranged the exhibition of the architecture in 1932 in Moscow, in Leningrad and in Kharkov; he also published more than 100 articles about German literature in the magazines that were published in the USSR in German. Brecht, Feuchtwanger and Bredel were members of the editorial board of the magazine *Das Wort* published in Moscow. Brecht was one of the main authors of this magazine.

Bertolt Brecht lived in Denmark at that time (he was deprived of German citizenship), and he visited Russia in 1932, then in 1935. Sergei Tretyakov (one of the leaders of Left Front) acted as Brecht's interpreter and assistant. Tretyakov translated several plays by Brecht into Russian: *Mother*; *Extreme Penalty*; *St. Joanna of the Slaughter Houses*; he translated also the book about the Epic Theatre. Russian audience was acquainted with *Three Penny Opera* (it was produced at Moscow Kamerny Theatre).

Erwin Piscator first came to Moscow in 1930. He expected to see didactic theatre that would create the communist consciousness, but he admitted that Russian theatre was in fact quite different. It did not look at all like the Proletcult art, and Piscator was disappointed. E.g., after he watched *The Lady of the Camellias*, he made a conclusion that Meyerhold broke with propaganda and moved to aesthetics in his art. Basically Piscator considered experimental theatre that he saw in Russia (including Meyerhold theatre) to be the "super-cultivation of the artistic devices", "abstract thing combined with the specific folklore", "a halt made on the formal matters", "the gap between theatre and life". According to Piscator this kind of theatre is unable to recreate the reality, even the reflection of life is not a direct one, and theatremakers are concentrated on the "all-sufficient formalism".

Anyway, in 1931 Piscator preferred to stay in Russia, and he conceived numerous project of the AGIT-PROP (agitation and propaganda with the means of culture). He admitted deep influence of the contemporary Russian cinema (Pudovkin, Dovzhenko) and wanted to make films in Russia, and he succeeded in shooting one feature film *The Rebellion of the Fishermen*. Piscator had a plan of founding a theatre in the Autonomous region of Russian Germans in the town Engels, and he wanted to invite some outstanding people of theatre from Germany to work there (conditions of life in Engels were very poor, and this did not work out). In 1936 Piscator went to Paris, and there someone warned him of a danger of returning to the USSR in the period of repressions, so later he moved to the USA and to Mexico, and to the German Democratic Republic after WW2. Many German emigrants who stayed in Russia were imprisoned during Stalinist purges. Leaders of the Russian Left Art and theatre Meyerhold, Tretyakov, Terentyev were assassinated as well.

After the struggle with "Formalism", during the period of Socialist realism (16)

(from mid-1930s till mid 50s) ideas of the “Left Front” were taken very suspiciously in the USSR. One of the motives of this attitude is deep connection of the Russian leftist art with aesthetics of avant-garde and absence of a strong emphasis on the communist ideology. German “leftists” seemed to be more reliable to the Soviet culture leaders. Names of Brecht and Piscator were never banned for mentioning as the name of Meyerhold was. The return of the leftist theatre ideas in Russia was associated more with Brecht than with own creators of theatre experiment. Staging of Brecht’s plays (often with some compromise of the epic and psychological theatre methods), tours of Berliner Ensemble in Soviet Union in 1957 preceded return of legacy of own traditions of the poetic theatre. This was another way of migration of the Leftist theatre idea in 1950s and 60s.