

THE BOLSHOI MEETS BOLSHEVISM:  
MOVING BODIES AND BODY POLITICS, 1917-1934

By

Douglas M. Priest

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## ABSTRACT

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Following the Russian Revolution in 1917, the historically aristocratic Bolshoi Ballet came face to face with Bolshevik politics for the first time. Examining the collision of this institution and its art with socialist politics through the analysis of archival documents, published material, and ballets themselves, this dissertation explains ballet's persisting allure and cultural power in the early Soviet Union. The resulting negotiation of aesthetic and political values that played out in a discourse of and about bodies on the Bolshoi Theater's stage and inside the studios of the Bolshoi's Ballet School reveals Bolshevik uncertainty about the role of high culture in their new society and helped to define the contentious relationship between old and new in the 1920s. Furthermore, the most hostile attack on ballet coming from socialists, anti-formalism, paradoxically provided a rhetorical shield for classical ballet by silencing formalist critiques. Thus, the collision resulted not in one side "winning," but rather in a contested environment in which dancers embodied both tradition and revolution. Finally, the persistence of classical ballet in the 1920s, particularly at the Ballet School, allowed for the Bolshoi Ballet's eventual ascendancy to world-renowned ballet company following the second World War. This work illuminates the Bolshoi Ballet's artistic work from 1917 to 1934, its place and importance in the context of early Soviet culture, and the art form's cultural power in the Soviet Union.

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For Babe.

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## INTRODUCTION

The combination of socialism and ballet does not make any sense. At least, it does not make any intuitive sense. It is, I think, necessary to acknowledge this at the outset. When describing my work to colleagues, friends, scholars, or the neighbors, the almost universal response has been a variation on “well, how did that work?” How, indeed. In conducting the research for this project, it became clear to me quite quickly that this is, in fact, precisely the correct question to be asking because it was precisely the question politicians and artists alike were asking in the 1920s about ballet in the young Soviet Union. The contradiction was named, solutions were proposed, and yet it persisted. In many ways, this work has been about trying to make sense of what feels intuitively to be irreconcilable – the coexistence of a distinctly imperial and aristocratic art form with the revolutionary politics of the Bolsheviks. Although the questions of precisely *how* it survived and *why* it survived are part of unraveling the mystery, the question that rose to the forefront while working my way through archival and periodical sources took a form that will be quite familiar to cultural historians: *what did ballet(s) mean?*

In trying to answer this question, the rest of the puzzle begins to take shape. It is not a story about artists fighting for artistic autonomy against a state that wanted to destroy their art. In fact, the line between artists, state actors, and audience members is almost entirely blurry. If there is something remarkable about the Bolshoi Ballet’s experience of the revolution and the 1920s, it is that things were surprisingly stable. The early years were, at the same time, marked by uncertainty: uncertainty about the direction of ballet in the post-revolution world and uncertainty about how the Bolsheviks would handle the formerly imperial cultural institutions like the Bolshoi Theater. This establishes one of the key contradictions in explaining the Bolshoi Ballet’s experience of the 1920s: the uncertainty that existed after the revolution and the



paradoxical stability that emerged from it. After the tumultuous early years, wracked by civil war, the search for something called socialist ballet began in earnest only in 1922. However, by then, several artistic and institutional standards had been established that would continue to influence the direction of ballet at the Bolshoi Theater. The Ballet School, which taught classical ballet to its students throughout this period, became the base from which teachers could continue teaching classical ballet technique, and which in turn continued to inform ballet's artistic directions after the revolution. Secondly, classical artists remained in influential positions at the Bolshoi despite the reorganization of the state theaters imposed by the Bolsheviks following the revolution. When it came to the Bolshoi Theater's decisions about its repertoire, directions for new choreography, and the artists that were employed inside its walls, classically trained artists continue to exert their will. Their influence was not always *conservative*, but was almost universally *preservative*.

"As all problems in a socialist society," Trotsky wrote, "the problems of life which formerly were solved spontaneously and automatically, and the problems of art which were in the custody of special priestly castes - will become the property of all people, one can say with certainty that collective interests and passions and individual competition will have the widest scope and the most unlimited opportunity."<sup>1</sup> Writing in 1922 and 1923, Trotsky conceived of the arts as belonging to the people in a socialist society. The arts would be subject to competing forces, social and individual. In this passage Trotsky's argument is not about the relationship of the arts to the public, but rather that a flourishing socialist art would be created out of the individual and collective creativity that would be allowed and unleashed under socialism. It is worth noting that the competition that Trotsky refers to is not a competition that arises from the

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Art and Revolution, Writings on Literature, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 64.  
\*Formerly titled *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art*, ed. Paul N. Seigel.

desire for person gain, but from genuine disagreements about the good of the whole. This idealistic stance shows Trotsky's conviction that the revolution was not for the revolution's sake, nor for that matter would art in a socialist state be for the sake of socialism *per se*. Instead, Trotsky argues that socialism will create the conditions for artistic flourishing. Trotsky's ideals might seem, in hindsight, naïve. However, for much of the early years after the revolution the cultural atmosphere remained exploratory and provisional. For a time, at least, an open artistic discourse did seem possible and it was no different in ballet's elite realm.

The Bolshoi Theater was not the only site of ballet in the Soviet Union. I have chosen to study just the experience of the Bolshoi Theater from 1917 to 1934 for two reasons. First, although this is not an institutional study of the Bolshoi Theater, focusing on a single institution allows a detailed analysis of the interaction and overlaps between the institution itself, the state, the artists and their art. One of the great insights that has come from focusing on the experience of the Bolshoi Ballet in particular is an appreciation for just how blurry the lines were between the aforementioned groups, and how provisional and ad hoc "socialist ballet" really was. Second, the Bolshoi Ballet stepped onto the world stage following World War II as a renowned dance company. By studying the Bolshoi's formative years in the Soviet Union specifically, I am also able to argue that, despite the difficulties the Theater faced in trying to reconcile its art form with socialism, the uncertain, stormy, early years provided the foundation for its later international success.

### **Moving Bodies and Body Politics**

This is a study about the meaning and importance of moving bodies. Therefore, this work follows in the footsteps of other historical works that have recently started to take seriously the importance of bodies. Historians have, however, still much to learn about how to study bodies in

a historical context. Cut off, as we are, from the actual bodies that we are studying, much of our work can be difficult. Photos and film can help, but they do not fully substitute for the kind of ethnographic study anthropologists and dance ethnographers engage in regularly when studying bodies and movement. In this study, I have tried to incorporate methods and insights afforded to us by scholars of dance as a way of focusing on bodies and their meaning. This kind of analysis that appears throughout the study is placed alongside more conventional cultural and social historical analysis. Bodies do not exist *in* a particular historical context; they are part of that historical context. In bringing to bear both the analytical frameworks of cultural anthropologists and historians, I bridge the gap between the two wherever possible. Historians borrowing from anthropologists is, by now, hardly remarkable. However, in the context of the study of moving bodies, the combination is, I think, relatively novel.

As an art form, ballet embodies a particular set of aristocratic, nineteenth-century, European values. These values arise from the historical conditions in which ballet developed and thrived. Although I will not discuss this point exhaustively here, this study takes as obvious that ballet is a historically contingent, European art form.<sup>2</sup> Although it is a somewhat outmoded idea by now, I reject the notion that ballet is somehow universal. Despite the fact that few scholars openly discuss ballet in this fashion anymore, hints at things like ballet's obvious, inherent beauty and universal quality occasionally creep into discussions of the art form. Take, for example, Susan Leigh Foster, who has written on gender and dance. Even as Foster analyzes the sexual signs and critiques the gendered movement as an "object of revulsion under feminist scrutiny" she seems unable to treat ballet dispassionately and does not pretend to hide her

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<sup>2</sup> This point was perhaps most saliently made by Joann Kealiinohomoku, in "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance," in *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader* ed. Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (Wesleyan University Press, 2001). I will return to the discussion of ballet and its relationship to ethnic dance in chapter four.

attraction to the form.<sup>3</sup> The ballerina is at once an “object of revulsion,” yet is “magnetically magical” and “enchants us.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, she asserts that “the world sees more and more of her [the ballerina] as ballet, taken up by former colonies in the Pacific and Latin America, and also in China and Japan spreads across the globe. Strong contender for a universal standard of physical achievement in dance, ballet, with its pedagogical orderliness and clear criteria for excellence, promises a homogenizing medium for the expression of cultural difference.”<sup>5</sup> This is quite a remarkable statement. While it is certainly fair to acknowledge that ballet has spread far beyond its geographical origin, in large part due to European colonization and colonialism, arguing that ballet can be a universal form for the expression of cultural difference seems to be a statement of incredible hubris. It is particularly noteworthy that this statement comes in what is otherwise an article critiquing the way that ballet has reinforced a particular kind of conservative, traditional gender roles. While her statement about the universality of ballet does not devalue her analysis of gender or her work on the history of dance in general, both of which are of high academic quality, it does rely on a kind of cognitive dissonance that is apparent in much of the literature.<sup>6</sup>

Other scholars have certainly struck back against this kind of assumption. Evan Alderson calls into question “traditional aesthetics” that have informed scholarly opinion on and analysis of ballet, which he suggests posits aesthetics as a “autonomous realm.”<sup>7</sup> The problem with this conception of an autonomous aesthetics is the presumption that aesthetic value is a category of

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Leigh Foster “The ballerina’s phallic pointe” in *Corporealities: Dancing knowledge, culture and power*. ed. Susan Leigh Foster (London: Routledge, 1996), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, Foster’s writings on how to approach the history of dance have also had a profoundly important influence on myself as a scholar of dance. Her work is referenced later in this introduction as an important and innovative example of writing dance history.

<sup>7</sup> Evan Alderson, “Ballet as Ideology: Giselle, Act 2” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*. ed. Jane C. Desmond (Duke University Press: Durham, 1997), 121.

cultural value that is either universal or timeless. Therefore, it ignores cultural context in the same way in which ideological arguments often try to make “tendentious positions appear natural and inevitable.”<sup>8</sup> I reject the idea that ballet is either universal or natural in its aesthetic. In the case of ballet, the claim that the genre is aesthetically pleasing, which is in fact irrelevant in an academic context, should not distract from the values apparent in the movement, values which scholars have had no trouble identifying in other non-western contexts. If ballet is a historically and culturally contingent art form, as it is, then its form and meaning cannot be taken for granted. The dance world itself has certainly begun to take note of these issues, with ballet artists becoming particularly conscious of their art’s relationship to gender. But, as Cynthia Novak notes, “the innovations in gender representation that have occurred, particularly in the ballets of the past half-century, remain marginal in the ballet repertory.”<sup>9</sup>

This is particularly notable in the context of the literature on early Soviet ballet, which has often argued or taken as obviously true the fact that early Soviet ballets were inherently inferior to the ballets being created and performed elsewhere in the world.<sup>10</sup> Implicitly, when not explicitly, these scholars all seem to assume that ballet “should have” been something different than what it was in the early Soviet Union. I can hardly contest the idea that the revolution played an important role in shaping the direction of ballet in the early Soviet Union. However, I do contest the idea that there is, inherently, something that ballet “should” be. Whether or not I or another scholar would prefer to sit down and watch a ballet performed by the Ballets Russes in the 1910s, a Soviet ballet in the 1920s, or the New York City Ballet today, must be ultimately

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>9</sup> Cynthia Novak, “Ballet, Gender and Cultural Power,” in *Dance, Gender and Culture* ed. Helen Thomas (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 43.

<sup>10</sup> This attitude stretches as far back as the late 1960s, and is apparent in Mary Grace Swift, *The Art of the Dance in the U.S.S.R* (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1968). This idea is mirrored, albeit with some qualification by Jennifer Homans in *Apollo’s Angels* (New York: Random House, 2010). Christina Ezrahi’s *Swans of the Kremlin* (Pittsburgh: University Pittsburgh Press, 2012) takes as somewhat axiomatic that ballet in the USSR was hemmed in by political considerations at the expense of the art form.

irrelevant to our analysis of Soviet ballet. The question of what ballet meant in its Soviet context remains paramount, both to do justice to the art that was being produced there and for the sake of being able to place that history within the larger literature on dance and Soviet history alike.

The Bolshoi Theater's history, and the Russian ballet tradition in general, played an important role in influencing the art form across the revolutionary divide. At the Bolshoi, the Romantic tradition, coming as it did through Russian and French interaction in the ballet world, played a particularly important role in influencing the Bolshoi Theater's post-revolutionary choreography in the 1920s. The values embedded in ballet are not merely communicated through its narratives; they are portrayed through the choreography, the movement and the relationship between bodies on stage. Because ballet is *not* a universal mode of expression through movement, it is paramount to consider historical context when evaluating the meaning conveyed by balletic bodies, but it also requires the scholar to be attuned to those bodies themselves. To assume that balletic bodies are *merely* a mirror that reflect dominant culture does a disservice to the art form, which was not only reflective of broader culture, but also creative.

One such scholar who has grappled with this question is the above-mentioned Susan Foster who, notably has written about the topic in two different contexts. In the context of history, she argues that writing about dance requires as "proprioceptive affiliation between past and present bodies."<sup>11</sup> Writing a history of dance, then, requires the willingness to engage with historical bodies as more than objects or subjects of study, but on their own terms. In other words, the body is not simply "written upon" (or about) but also "writes."<sup>12</sup> While Foster's introduction does outline the need to come up with ways to transcribe experiential knowledge on the paper, the essays contained in the rest of the volume do little to actually implement this task.

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

Perhaps this is why a year later, Foster edited an additional volume titled *Corporealities* that more prominently features attempts at just that. In brief, the introduction and the essays within frequently change fonts, include verse, lists, white space, and other structural techniques with the goal of inspiring the experience of movement in the reader. Foster writes that the essays in the volume “persevere in the arduous task of traducing movement into words, bodily phrasing into syntactical structure, and movement quality into metaphor.”<sup>13</sup> Great effort has gone into not just describing the movement itself and analyzing its meaning in social and cultural context but in attempting to inspire in the reader to experience something analogous to the movement itself. Foster’s introduction to the work includes an uncommonly brief introduction of the works contained within because “such summaries presume a stillness for the reader’s body that violates the spirit of our collective choreography. They also direct attention away from the impact of the volume as a whole, whose combined gestures say far more than any single body’s motion could.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the essays go beyond merely trying to inspire a particular experience in the reader while describing movement, but is also an exercise in inspiring a (hopefully) somatic experience in the reader at the level of the entire volume. Ultimately, *Corporealities* is a self-consciously experimental book. Its style of writing experience has not been duplicated on a large scale, but the fact that it was written at all shows the seriousness with which those in dance studies have grappled with the question of writing experience and its importance to the field. I cannot claim to have made a comparable effort within this text, standing as I am with a foot in both the fields of dance studies and history, to influence the somatic experience of my reader. However, Foster’s ideology about the importance of experience and “proprioceptive affiliation”

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<sup>13</sup> Susan Foster, “Introduction” in *Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power* ed. Susan Foster (London: Routledge, 2006), xiv.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

has influenced both my research and approach to this project. It is in this spirit that I dive headlong into the discussion of dances and movements that are temporally distant.

In her lecture “Modern Theories of Human Movement” Drid Williams emphasizes the role of human agency (the agency of the dancer) in the study of dance. She acknowledges freely “that people who dance do so for many reasons,” and adds the “the important point is that they *have* reasons for the beliefs and intentions which produce their forms of dancing.”<sup>15</sup> This assertion is to clearly reject the notion that movement and dance have a purely naturalistic explanation that portrays dance as “prior to or independent of human intentions, beliefs, or socio-linguistic contexts.”<sup>16</sup> According to Williams, this naturalistic explanation is a non-starter for the study of dance and does not provide any useable theoretical framework or methodology with which one can analyze dance. Worse still according to Williams, “to seek for the origins of dancing or its essences” is not academically satisfying because it assumes a universality which is simply not present in practice and therefore does not address apparent cultural differences.<sup>17</sup>

This focus on human agency is the theoretical framework that also informs a collection of essays edited by Brenda Farnell entitled *Human Action Signs in Cultural Context*. Like Williams, Farnell argues that studies of dance that rely on description of visible characteristics is “barren because from an anthropological perspective it is the ‘invisible’ - features of social organization, cultural values, and human beliefs and intentions - that determine the meanings of the visible.”<sup>18</sup> Although this analysis is on the surface similar to the more outdated perception of dance as subordinate, Farnell is actually seeking to rehabilitate movement and the meaning of actions by

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<sup>15</sup> Drid Williams, *Ten Lectures on Theories of the Dance* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1991), 208.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Brenda Farnell, *Human Action Signs in Cultural Context: The Visible and Invisible in Movement and Dance* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 2.



rejecting the notion that the observable movement is itself separate.<sup>19</sup> Instead, she argues that that observable movement is closely tied to “semiotic practices, including the uses of spoken language, cultural conceptions of the body, persons, space, time, action and much more.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore movement in this conception is judged neither as mere behavior nor by its social function, but by its meaning, with human agency being acknowledged through the human role as “meaning-maker.”<sup>21</sup> It is from this perspective that I write both about the discourse *about* bodies, in this context the language used to discuss ballets, and the discourse *of* bodies, that relies on analyzing dance itself in the broad sense described by Farnell.

The study of ballet is often accompanied by a discussion of music, which is seen as fundamentally important to the ballet. There is a large body of literature devoted to the study of ballet’s music, to which this study does not claim to contribute.<sup>22</sup> I do not contest the importance of music, nor do I seek to undermine the literature on ballet that understands music as centrally important. However, the present study is chiefly concerned with the physicality of movement, the meaning of bodies, and how those two things conspired, within the context of early Soviet ballet at the Bolshoi Theater, to create a world of meaning that is often overlooked, or that has in some cases been lost entirely. Nonetheless, I suspect the relative lack of discussion of music will strike some readers as an odd omission. I argue that classical ballet technique is the most fundamental and important aspect of ballet, as an art form. Whether one talks of Petipa’s ballet,

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<sup>19</sup> The emphasis on action and intentionality, and its relationship to movement, are in part a reaction to previous scholars who undermined or underemphasized its role. For example, Haig Khatchadourian’s “Movement and Action in the Performing Arts,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 37 No. 1 (Autumn, 1978), that “movements of the actors and actresses are not actions, but only movements representing imaginary actions.” (36).

<sup>20</sup> Farnell, 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example: Alexander Mikhailovic and Jeanne Fuchs. “Tchaikovsky’s Ballets: Interpretation and Performance.” *Tchaikovsky and his contemporaries: A centennial symposium*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999, 295-312, Richard Tarushkin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Works Through Mavra* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), Stephanie Jordan, *Moving Music: Dialogues with Music in Twentieth Century Ballet* (Princeton: Princeton Book Co. Publishing, 2002).

Diaghilev's ballet, Balanchine's ballet, Classicism, Romanticism, the Mariinsky, the Bolshoi or the New York City Ballet, the foundation on which all of them are built remains ballet technique. This is true regardless of the fact that there are different schools of ballet technique, or the fact that these schools have sometimes been at odds with one another. In addition to my general interest in bodies and their cultural meaning, it is also for this reason I focus on the analysis and discussion of movement in ballet.

Finally, I am particularly indebted to the work of Lynn Garafola. Garafola's exhaustive, comprehensive study *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* provided me with a basic model for understanding ballet from a historical standpoint. Garafola's framework relies on the analytic troika of Art, Enterprise, and Audience. Garafola's organization allows her to clearly and fully analyze each specific dimension by segregating them within the structure of the book, while retraining the ability to analyze the entire Ballets Russes at the level of the work as a whole. However, the segregation of these themes does deemphasize their overlap and relationship to the Ballets Russes vis-a-vis dance itself. When conceiving this project, I originally proposed to analyze the Bolshoi Ballet through the study of its art and artists, its relationship to the state, and through audience reception. These themes have remained analytically important to the present work. However, the more research that I conducted, the more I understood that such divisions seemed arbitrary in the face of a very messy, dynamic history that often placed actors into more than one of these categories. Therefore, they made less sense as distinct analytic, or even actor's categories. Nonetheless, the three categories provide a general framework for the kinds of questions that this work seeks to answer. Who were the artists? How did they come to make the art that they made? What did it mean to them? Who watched it? To what extent did the state influence the entire enterprise?

In pursuit of answering these questions, I focus on uncovering and analyzing “the whole dance event,” the importance of which is emphasized by dance ethnographer Deidre Sklar.<sup>23</sup> In the pursuit of a theory of dance ethnography, Sklar argued that if one is to study dance, then it is important not to focus only on the dance itself, but the entire performance. Meaning is not generated only through the dance itself, as if performed in a vacuum, but by the space and the audience as well. When employing ethnographic methods, the ethnographer has the advantage of being present during the performance. Historians, however, can only construct our analysis from the available source material. In that sense, this study is not and does not claim to be a true dance ethnography of ballet at the Bolshoi Theater in the 1920s. However, it does take to heart Sklar’s insistence on evaluating the whole dance event. Adapting the idea of the dance event to the study of history, I have expanded the idea of the “whole dance event.” In this study “the whole dance event” includes the entire experience of choreographing, preparing for, and finally performing the dance, the space in which the dance occurs, and the audience response to the performance. It is therefore important to build as complete a historical picture as possible and to analyze dance with that knowledge in mind.

### **Ballet and Dance in Russia**

Although this is not a history of ballet in Russia before 1917, it is impossible to discuss ballet without at least some discussion of the art’s historical background prior to the Revolution. In the nineteenth century, ballet was characterized by the combination of the French and Russian traditions and most notably the influence of Marius Petipa. Born in 1818 and dying in 1910, Petipa’s direct influence spanned nearly a century and defined many of the standards that contemporary artists and audiences continue to associate with ballet. French by birth, Petipa’s

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<sup>23</sup> Deidre Sklar, “On Dance Ethnography,” *Dance Research Journal* Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring 1991), 8.

most influential period was during his long run as dancer and ballet master in St. Petersburg. In addition to being a part of countless productions and revivals of classical and Romantic ballets, many of which became the *de facto* default versions of those ballets, he also helped to establish St. Petersburg as the center of the ballet world. The relationship between Moscow's Bolshoi Theater and St. Petersburg's Imperial (Mariinsky) Theater was also established in this period. It was not until well after the revolution that Petersburg's dominance in the Russian ballet world began to wane.<sup>24</sup>

The early twentieth century, by comparison, was dominated by the striking developments of Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, which despite being of largely Russian origin spent much of its time in Western Europe and in fact never performed in Russia. Diaghilev and his Ballets Russes created a new vision for ballet that was both radical and influential.<sup>25</sup> In the end it created an artistic lineage that would form the basis of a new direction in twentieth-century ballet. Lynn Garafola summarizes the lineage: "with Nijinsky, ballet crossed the threshold of modernism; with Massine, it formed an alliance with futurism; with Nijinska, it absorbed the abstract method of constructivism; with Balanchine, it mated with neoclassical idealism."<sup>26</sup> It is not an exaggeration to say the Ballets Russes had more influence on the direction of ballet in the twentieth century than any other single ballet company. This included ballet in the early Soviet Union. However, its influence there was somewhat less than it was abroad.

The Ballets Russes, as a ballet company, also split Russian ballet between the art form in Russia and Russian ballet abroad. The split was not very pronounced before the revolution.

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<sup>24</sup> Tim Scholl, *From Petipa to Balanchine: Classical Revival and the Modernisation of Ballet* (London: Routledge, 1994), 113.

<sup>25</sup> For more on Diaghilev himself see: Sjeng Scheijen, *Diaghilev: A Life*, trans. Jane Hedley-Prole and S. J. Leinbach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Richard Buckle, *Diaghilev*, (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York: De Capo Press, 1998), 9.

Modernism and constructivism found their way into the ballet worlds of St. Petersburg and Moscow in spite of the fact that much of the innovation came from Russian artists abroad. Dancers came and went and returned to Russia, allowing for plenty of intermingling between the Russian ballet companies inside the country and the Ballets Russes. Despite being based in Western Europe, the Ballets Russes was, as its name suggests, decidedly Russian. However, the revolution served to exacerbate this distinction. Balanchine ultimately left for the United States.<sup>27</sup> Mikhail Mordkin left Russia shortly after the revolution and soon he too found himself in America. Those that remained in Russia had still been influenced by the Ballets Russes's modernism, but were for the most part not directly part of its lineage.

The early twentieth century saw other significant changes in the dance world as well, punctuated most significantly by the birth of modern dance. Isadora Duncan, considered by many to be the originator of modern dance, had a particularly unique connection to dance in Russia. Isadora Duncan first arrived in Russia in the 1905 – a landmark year for other reasons too, of course – and immediately had an impact on the way dance was understood in the country. Duncan's dance could hardly have been more different in principle from the highly structured, highly technical form that was classical ballet. She danced without shoes, she eschewed ballet's emphasis on technique, and embraced a kind of personal freedom to move as one wished. To Duncan, dance was a form of personal expression. To a dance world steeped in nineteenth-century ballet, she bordered on revelatory.<sup>28</sup> Duncan did not transform ballet overnight, but her

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<sup>27</sup> On Balanchine see: Bernard Taper, *Balanchine: A Biography 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), Charles M. Joseph, *Stravinsky and Balanchine: A Journey of Invention* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), and most recently Elizabeth Kendall, *Balanchine & the Lost Muse: Revolution and the Making of a Choreographer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> There is an entire literature on Duncan herself that is too vast to reference here in any significant portion. On Isadora Duncan in the United States see: Ann Daly, *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). Duncan's influence on modernism, particularly notably in the context of Russian developments in the dance world in the early twentieth century, has also been discussed in Carrie J. Perston, "The Motor in the Soul: Isadora Duncan and Modernist Performance" *Modernism/Modernity* Vol. 12 No. 2 (April 2005),

influence was wide ranging. She inspired ballet and what would in hindsight be called “modern” dancers alike.

Elizabeth Souritz, important to this study for her work on Soviet choreographers, also wrote on the importance and place of Isadora Duncan in Russian dance. According to Souritz, Duncan arrived in Russia at a moment when a new generation of choreographers was beginning to question the wisdom of Petipa, the incomparable choreographer and ballet master whose work defined late nineteenth century Russian ballet. This point is of critical importance. One cannot see Duncan’s influence as impinging on an unbroken and unchanging art form that stretched back into the eighteenth century. Instead, she emerged at a time when ballet was already exploring new directions. There was already an interest, in Russia and elsewhere, in using the basic foundation of classical ballet technique as a jumping off point for new choreography. Both Fokine and Gorsky, prior to the Russian Revolution, expressed an interest in Duncan’s emphasis on “freedom” both thematically and choreographically. However, “neither... suggested replacing ballet with free Duncan dance.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Duncan’s influence was important in the world of ballet, but it did not fundamentally overturn its foundations. Although Duncan did spark other dance experiments in Russia outside of the ballet world, such work is somewhat outside the scope of this study.<sup>30</sup>

Duncan’s influence on ballet in the post-revolutionary period was, however, far different. Timing, here, was of critical importance. When Duncan had arrived in 1905, with a message of rejecting the past, she was perceived as a forward-looking radical. Not everyone agreed with the

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273-289. Finally, her influence continues to interest scholars with work on her persistent influence ongoing. See the recent Andrea Mantell Seidel, *Isadora Duncan in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Capturing the Art and Spirit of the Dancer’s Legacy* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Souritz, “Isadora Duncan’s Influence on Dance in Russia” *Dance Chronicle*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1995), 283.

<sup>30</sup> Notably, see another article by Elizabeth Souritz: “The Island of Dance” *Dance Chronicle*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1994): 1-92.

future towards which she looked, but there could be no doubt she was an agent of change. In the 1920s, Duncan (and “Duncanism” as her ideas about dance came to be known) were seen as part of the past that the Revolution was hoping to leave behind. Her style was seen as “old fashioned and primitive.”<sup>31</sup> As Souritz notes, her company did continue to exist in the Soviet Union, although after Duncan’s death in 1927 its prestige began to fade and largely struggled along until it was shut down in 1949.<sup>32</sup> By the end of the 1920s, Duncanism became shorthand for dance that avoided strong narratives and relied too heavily on form.<sup>33</sup> Even ballet itself occasionally came under fire for “Duncanist” tendencies. Isadora Duncan’s place in this story is, then, not central. But her ideas did remain influential enough throughout the early Soviet period to become part of the discourse about dance.

### **Art and Culture in the Soviet Union**

Ballet was not the only art to come out of Russia’s imperial past. The arts and culture have long captured the imagination of historians and scholars of the Soviet Union, who have collectively created an enormous body of work on the subject in the early Soviet Union. While literature is discussed in further detail within the chapters of this work, it is important to establish at the beginning the general literature to which this study contributes. With more mainstream, usually American, focus going to the Soviet Union under Stalin, the Cold War era, or both, the 1920s Soviet experience can often be forgotten.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Souritz, “Isadora Duncan’s Influence on Dance in Russia,” 287.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 290. The Soviet Union in 1949 was, of course, drastically different than the country had been in the 1920s and even the early 1930s. The fact that Duncan’s company kept itself afloat for so many years is notable, but it also speaks to one of the larger arguments of this work with regard to ballet. The early Soviet Union as far less hostile to art dance than has been supposed. Duncan’s company was, ultimately, not particularly influential in the Soviet Union, but it did exist for nearly thirty years. For more on Duncan’s school see: Lily Dikovskaya and Gerard Hill, *In Isadora’s Steps: The Story of Isadora Duncan’s school in Moscow, told by her favorite pupil* (London: Book Guild Ltd, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> For more on this topic, see chapters five and six.

<sup>34</sup> Scholars of the Soviet Union will already be familiar with the rather substantial and significant historiography of culture in the 1920s. Here, I outline several important works on the arts and culture in the 1920s with which this

In her discussion of Soviet music, Amy Nelson argues that “the Bolsheviks firmly believed that the liberating potential of the revolution would only be achieved with the evolution of a new level of consciousness that involved changes in everything from morality, hygiene, and forms of personal address to education, the use of technology, and new modes of artistic expression”<sup>35</sup> Nelson is not the only scholar to make this point, but it is well taken. The arts should not be viewed as independent of other state desires and institution but part of the broader Bolshevik project. The “new man,” the creation of which was essential to the success of the Soviet state according to Bolshevik ideology, was central to the development of Bolshevik policy towards the arts. There was a very intimate connection between the Bolsheviks’ project to change society and their project to change the individual. Amy Nelson’s discussion of music provides a particularly good lens through which to understand the state’s attitude towards the people and the arts, and is particularly relevant in the discussion of dance, which shares a form that is inherently open to interpretation.

“Music’s ability,” she argues, “to influence the emotions and its nonrepresentational qualities presented [the left] with unique challenges.”<sup>36</sup> If we accept Nelson’s statement, then music posed a hurdle that was absent or less prominent in other arts because of its ability to evoke emotional responses from listeners in an abstract fashion. While the narrative of a film could be controlled and audiences’ responses predicted with reasonable accuracy, she argues that music proved far more difficult to regulate effectively. It also proved more difficult to create popular music that contained distinctly Bolshevik overtones. As with foreign films, Nelson argues “the gypsy genre, dance music, much of it imported from the West, enjoyed tremendous

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work is in conversation and which should establish for non-experts the kind of academic discourse surrounding the arts and culture in the Soviet Union.

<sup>35</sup> Amy Nelson, *Music for the Revolution: Musicians and Power in Early Soviet Russia* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 9.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.



popularity.”<sup>37</sup> “The people” seem to have cared far less for the struggles of the artistic community to conceive of and create a truly novel form of music that would help foster the creation of the socialist “new man” than for simple entertainment, a finding that arises in again and again in discussions of early Soviet art.

Even the extremely and explicitly politicized graphic art of early Soviet political posters took inspiration from the imperial iconography that came before it. Unlike cinema or theater, both of which also had more radical artistic traditions acting as forces that political pressure had to negotiate, political posters drew on a form already accustomed to accommodating institutionalized power. Even when the state was not directly involved in dictating content of political posters, the artistic tradition from which they arose lent itself to quickly forming a familiar and repetitive repertoire. In equating Bolshevik political posters to pre-revolutionary Russian iconography, Victoria Bonnell identifies a more conservative artistic tradition. “The centrality of visual images and rituals,” she explains, “in old regime pageantry and especially the Russian Orthodox Church made for a highly visual traditional culture.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, the inherently visual imagery of posters allowed the Bolsheviks to leverage the art form to reach a wider, generally illiterate audience that was already well versed in interpreting symbols. Drawing on pre-revolutionary iconography, it can also be said that early Soviet art drew on its pre-revolution heritage even when it took an explicitly socialist character.

She writes, “By 1920, Bolshevik artists had generated distinctive images that incorporated elements from various traditions but were also unmistakably expressive of the Bolshevik ethos.”<sup>39</sup> At least from the perspective of reproducing symbols the Russian people

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>38</sup> Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 7.

would easily understand, Bonnell argues that the political posters largely drew upon existent tropes. In this way, Bolshevik political posters can be seen as continuing an artistic tradition originating in the Imperial era. While it is not uncommon, like in the instance of cinema, to see a brief period of radical experimentation in the 1920s, followed by a conservative turn beginning in 1928, political posters seemed to have followed an especially conservative and political path immediately following the civil war.<sup>40</sup> However, Bonnell also contends “prior to 1931, the dispersion of poster production among many different organizations and institutions precluded any centralized directives concerning content or execution.”<sup>41</sup> In this case, the artistic tradition of iconography encouraged more a more unified art form even when explicitly state control was absent. Nonetheless, by the beginning of the 1930s, state control became far more rigid. When comparing the theater and political posters (iconography), the importance of pre-revolutionary artistic traditions becomes very apparent. Theater tended to quickly adopt revolutionary ideals due to its history in engaging with civil society but also tended to encourage a much wider variety of forms that were used to express that attitude. In contrast while political posters also tended to reflect revolutionary ideals, the history of iconography encouraged a standard array of images to arise very quickly.

The most complete work on the topic of the early Soviet ballet is by Elizabeth Souritz. Souritz produced a work titled *Soviet Choreographers in the 1920s*, which stands as the best history of Russian ballet in this era. Originally published in 1979 in Moscow and translated into English only in 1990, Souritz’s work is influential to both the Russophone and Anglophone

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<sup>40</sup> Here I am referring to Nicolas Timasheff’s theory of the “Great Retreat.” See: Nicolas Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York: E.P Dutton & Co, 1946). This general arc of early Soviet cultural history is confounded by art forms, like ballet, that kept their pre-revolutionary traditions through the revolution and into the 1930s. Bonnell’s discussion of iconography *cum* political posters, suggests that the “Great Retreat” narrative is challenged even in explicitly political art. This is discussed in detail later.

<sup>41</sup> Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 11.

literature on Soviet ballet. Although Souritz confines her study mainly to a handful of choreographers living in Petrograd and Moscow, it does rely, in part, on archival material. Her work is well researched. In the following work, I only rarely contest the basic narrative that she constructs. However, her focus on choreographers limits her ability to engage in larger analysis of the works and their place in the larger picture of Soviet culture during the 1920s. Despite its limitations, her work is the most frequently cited single work in the present study and appears when our narratives overlap. Unfortunately, as one reviewer wrote after reading the English translation upon its publication in 1991 “Souritz went as far as she felt possible, but stopped short before fulfilling the curiosity she has created in the reader.”<sup>42</sup> Perhaps, as the reviewer suggests, Souritz felt limited by the political climate because she was writing in the Soviet Union. The weaknesses in the work, at least from the present point of view, are in her methodological approach, rather than in any explicit or implicit political stance that she takes in the work.<sup>43</sup> In the end, the book raises more questions than it answers. In the context of this project, such questions served as jumping off points that sometimes steered the direction of archival exploration. However, where our source bases overlap, it was necessary to reexamine them in the light of more recent methodological developments in the study of dance, movement and culture, which help to answer the questions that reading her work raises in the first place. Therefore, when her work is cited, it is often to give her credit for having written about a particular event, instance, or work of art, or to highlight how our analyses differ.

Christina Ezrahi’s 2012 *Swans of the Kremlin*, a study of “ballet and power” in the Soviet Union, is the most recent Anglophone work that addresses the ballet in its Soviet context. By her

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<sup>42</sup> José Sasportes, “Revolutionary Soviet Dance” review of *Soviet Choreographers in the 1920s* by Elizabeth Souritz; Lynn Visson; Sally Baner. *Dance Chronicle*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1991), 108.

<sup>43</sup> This is not to say that the methodology and politics were or are entirely separate, but rather that regardless of political influence and intention, the deficiencies can be framed in a mainly methodological way. Souritz was clearly not trying to whitewash any ideological pressure or state involvement in the ballet.

own admission her work discusses the 1920s and 30s, but “focuses on the golden age of Soviet ballet, the 1950s and 1960s”<sup>44</sup> Because of Ezrahi’s much farther-reaching temporal scope, only a small section of her work overlaps with this one. However, her research on the era is still strong, and her discussion of the 1920s and 30s is worthwhile. As with Souritz’s work, it appears throughout the text when our narratives cross paths. In particular, I agree with Ezrahi that it is important to focus on what she calls the “Soviet cultural project.” According to Ezrahi the project consisted of utopian aspiration and educational transformation.<sup>45</sup> Both of these aspects played an important role in the direction of the arts in the early Soviet Union. Furthermore, I agree with Ezrahi’s determination to “avoid the traditional emphasis on ideological control as a force that crushed artistic creativity in the Soviet Union and to emphasize instead the complexity of the relationship between art and politics in the Soviet Union.”<sup>46</sup> In one sense, Ezrahi is entirely correct. Things were far less defined than they have often been depicted. However, Ezrahi’s over-arching framework and argument suggest that she sees an underlying, fundamental opposition between the two.

Ezrahi’s work, also based on well-conducted archival research, focuses on the idea of what she calls “artistic repossession.” The term stands for the idea that “artists repossessed or creatively adapted and redefined what the Soviet regime sought to control.”<sup>47</sup> This idea fundamentally presupposes the kind of distinction and opposition between arts and politics that Ezrahi claims, just pages earlier, to want to transcend. In the end, it assumes an idealized form of artistic creation that exists outside the realm of politics and that ballet and politics were forced together by a Bolshevik desire to shape the cultural world. Implicitly, at least, the “traditional

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<sup>44</sup> Christina Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

emphasis on ideological control as a force that crushed artistic creativity in the Soviet Union”

seems to reappear in this part of Ezrahi’s argument. To wit:

“However hard the regime tried to control artistic life, artists at the Kirov and Bolshoi Ballet companies developed strategies to cope with the political-ideological realities of the life of an artist in the Soviet Union, reclaiming, to a certain extent, autonomy from a system they had no choice but to accept. By doing so, incremental adaption could thus become a form of resistance, leading to a subversion of the system without necessarily presupposing its conscious rejection by the artists.”<sup>48</sup>

Ezrahi’s analysis, then, is not so much about a fundamental shift in analysis to the aforementioned “Soviet cultural project,” but rather centered on a slightly different conclusion. Instead of crushing artistic creativity, the Bolsheviks merely *tried* (and failed) to crush artistic creativity. There can be no doubt that the Bolsheviks were interested in controlling art and culture. However, by establishing this dichotomy, it becomes difficult to see art produced in this cultural environment as anything but somehow stained by politics. While I do not deny the influence of political considerations in ballet, I argue that that the dichotomy leads to a rather unfulfilling analysis of the artists and their art. Partly, our differences arise from our different periodization. The 1950s and 1960s that *Swans of the Kremlin’s* focuses on were different than the 1920s and early 1930s. However, by including the 1920s and 1930s in analysis, she mischaracterizes a period that was chiefly influenced by uncertainty and lack of direction as a period defined by artistic and political struggle. It was only after 1934, with the official adoption of socialist realism, that ballet had a politically clear direction. To place my analysis within the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 9.

context of the “Soviet cultural project,” it is also, therefore, necessary to place this work within the larger scholarship of early Soviet culture.<sup>49</sup>

### **Dance and History**

Implicit in our study of dance, and of ballet in particular, has often been that the composers and choreographers are the most important artists involved in the creation and production of a ballet. On the one hand, this reflects the frequent reality that the choreographer does, in fact, play a disproportionate role in creating the work that the audience eventually sees performed on stage. On the other hand, there are dozens of others involved in the creation and, importantly, the performance of a given dance. This is, in and of itself, hardly a novel observation. However, historians have frequently privileged the choreographer (and in the case of ballets, the composers) over a study that attempts to more fully appreciate the contributions and experiences of all of the artists involved. In part, this has to do with the sources available to us. We are more likely to find a libretto, a score or some other document scratched with the marginal notes of one the more well-known artists than the musings of a dancer in the *corps de ballet*. As historians we are, after all, bound to the sources available to us.

But this trend also betrays an assumption about dances that go beyond their choreographers. The dance, the ballet, the work itself is assumed to exist somehow separate from

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<sup>49</sup> The historiography of early Soviet culture is very rich. Rather than include an even more elongated section in the introduction, outlining all the historiographical relevance of the of the present work, I have included more detailed discussion of the literature within the main body of the work. This, allows me to more closely relate the content of this study and my arguments to the larger literature. Broadly speaking, I see this work contributing to discussions of early Soviet culture and the transition to the so-called “cultural revolution.” Richard Stites’s *Revolutionary Dreams* has proven an invaluable work and artfully describes the situation of experimentalism and optimism in the early Soviet Union that, I argue, greatly influenced the experience of artists in ballet. In regard to culture revolution, see in particular Sheila Fitzpatrick’s *The Cultural Front*, as well as Michael David-Fox’s “What is Cultural Revolution?” in *The Russian Review* (Vol. 58 No. 2, 1999), 181-201. Finally, the ballet’s place as one of the “high arts” in Russia and then the Soviet Union necessitates discussion of the relationship between elite and popular (or mass) culture. V. L. Soskin’s *Rossiiskaia sovetskaia kul’tura 1917-1927* (Novosibirsk: Izd-vo SO-RAN, 2004), has proven to be an important work in placing the role of the intelligentsia in creating Soviet culture prior to 1928. Such a list could go on for pages, but the reader will, I hope, find much more value in reading my historiographical analysis within the chapters of this work.

the performance. If music exists as a score, then certainly a dance can exist in notation. However, when we record a dance using Labanotation (or another method) we are declaring that the notation itself is the dance, rather than the performance. This assumption deemphasizes the importance of the performance and the importance of artistic practice. If one were to record the notation of a particular dance according to the precise choreography and then meticulously record the notation of a particular performance of that dance, there would inevitably be considerable differences. Which version is “more” the dance, the version that is on paper and has never been performance in practice, or an actual performance? The short answer is that a notated dance is, much like a score, the directions for how to perform a particular work of art. But is it equivalent to that work of art? The work itself exists as it is performed, and the meaning of that work is tied to its performance.

This is not to say that the intent of the librettists and choreographers is without meaning and importance, but rather that the meaning itself can also be understood through the careful analysis of the artwork. Here, as before, I borrow from dance studies scholars who emphasize the importance of cultural context when analyzing works of art. One of the ways that the present study differs from other works that discuss Soviet ballet is that I am primarily interested in the way that movement existed within the context of the early Soviet Union. There can be no doubt that the ballet’s own history played an important role in influencing the direction of the art form as it appeared in the Soviet Union. However, I argue that it is necessary to deliberately resist the urge to compare too closely the ballets that were being created and performed in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and into the early 1930s with ballets being created and performed in other parts of the world. This shift in focus, from the ballet world itself as a kind of larger cultural context, to the Soviet Union as the context of chief importance, sets this work apart. In that

respect, I am not concerned with whether or not the works that appear as objects of analysis in the present study are “better” or “worse” than ballet in other places, but rather what their meaning and importance was to and in the cultural world of the 1920s Soviet Union.<sup>50</sup>

I cannot claim to have entirely transcended all of the problems I have outlined here. My work too often focuses on choreographers and librettos, and sometimes institutions and administrators. I have, however, tried to highlight the experience of the dancers and the importance of performance whenever possible. This extends not just to the most famous dancers – Asaf Messerer, Ekaterina Gelster, etc. – but also to the experience of the dancers at the Bolshoi more generally. In order to examine the experience of dancers I have incorporated discussion of the training at the Bolshoi Ballet School to give insight into the ways the average dancer was trained and what his or her life was been like while in training. This direction, clearly influenced by the methods of social history, is not incidentally in line with my assertion that ballet itself was preserved first and foremost at the level of its education and training in the Bolshoi’s Theater’s Ballet School.

In the Bolshoi Theater’s case, the educational aspect had a dual nature. First, the type of education that Christina Ezrahi mentioned briefly is her introduction to *Swans of the Kremlin*; the arts would help to educate and raise the cultural level of the Soviet people. Second, education in ballet itself was an important part of ballet’s continued prominence as high art in the Soviet Union. Education in ballet itself, however, has not featured prominently in discussions of ballet as an art form in the Soviet Union nor in scholarship on education. By introducing the aspect of education to the discussion of ballet, I establish ballet training as an important, fundamental aspect to the preservation of classical technique in the Bolshoi Theater. By the time that Socialist

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<sup>50</sup> This historiographical point will be raised several times in the work. If it seems that I belabor the point, it is only because it is one of the most important historiographical arguments that I am making, and therefore wish to remind the reader at times when the impulse to compare to other works seems irresistible even, at times, to me.



Realism became the artistic law of the land in 1934, a moment that Ezrahi identifies as crucial to the official de-emphasis of ballet technique, that same technique was already well and truly established as here to stay at the Bolshoi Theater.

Furthermore, the revolution in Russia opened up avenues for expressing ideas and concerns that were not always available to dancers previously. Although much of the hierarchy at the Bolshoi was retained across the revolutionary divide, changes in the ways that artists interacted with the state and the declared rights of ordinary workers did, in fact, also empower artists at the Bolshoi in other ways. Artists had mechanisms, mainly through their union, to appeal decisions they did not like about their situation, conditions and performance contract. They also, albeit rarely, had the opportunity to voice their own concerns about the direction of ballet broadly, or ballet at the Bolshoi more specifically. This remained largely the purview of the elite within the Bolshoi, but sources like meeting minutes, personal letters, appeals and declarations found in the Bolshoi Theater's fond at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art do allow for a small window into the attitudes and experiences of ordinary dancers.

I have arranged this study into six chapters. The first two chapters establish the cultural, political, and most importantly, educational environment in Russia during the early years after the revolution and the Bolshoi Ballet's response to existing as a part of that environment. Bolshevik attitudes towards ballet that were established in the early years, I argue, played a disproportionate role in shaping the discourse about ballet until 1934. Chapters three through six each focus on works of art created between 1924 and 1934 and analyze their meaning in the Soviet cultural context. These chapters also take the works as informative of larger cultural, social and political trends. Therefore, the analysis of the works is tightly tied to the larger world of Soviet culture.

Chapter one, “Uncertainty in War, Revolution and Ballet,” deals with the uncertainty of 1917 and its aftermath and how the Bolshoi Theater navigated that uncertainty. In response to the political tumultuous period, the Bolshoi fell back on what it knew how to do best – classical ballet. The theater faced economic hardship and political opposition in its early years, but was only in very few instances at risk of being shut down for a longer period of time. The early years were not so much a struggle to survive, as they were a story of an institution learning to navigate a difficult economic and political system characterized by political upheaval, economic uncertainty and a breadth of opinions on the place of the imperial arts in the new society. While the October Revolution did come accompanied by the eventual reorganization of the Bolshoi Theater’s administration, and new state administrations for dealing with cultural institutions, the Bolshoi Theater remained surprisingly intact during the otherwise destructive Civil War. While the Bolshoi Theater did not stage any entirely new, original ballets between 1917 and 1921, it did establish that regular seasons featuring classical ballets were a part of the new post-revolution cultural world. The artists that had been there before the revolution, for the most part, continued to do their work. The result was what might seem like an unexpected stability and continuity between the pre- and post-revolutionary ballet at the Bolshoi Theater.

Chapter two, “Classical Foundations, Socialist Structures”, argues that one of the most important and fundamental aspects of ballet’s survival in the young Soviet Union was the success of the Bolshoi Theater’s Ballet School in preserving and continuing to teach classical ballet. At the same time, education and cultural policy took a substantial turn after the Civil War and with the adoption of the New Economic Policy. As the Bolshoi Theater shifted to accommodate such changes, the beginnings of what can truly be called a public debate over ballet began to emerge, particularly in publications like the art journal *Zhizn’ Iskusstva*. As that

discussion pushed for the state academic theaters like the Bolshoi to develop their art forms in a socialist direction, they focused mainly on the productions being performed on academic theater stages. As a result, the foundational aspect of ballet – schooling in classical ballet technique – went relatively un-discussed in this emerging public discourse. Together, these two sometimes-contradictory forces provided the initial conditions for the creation of “socialist ballet.” By 1925, classical ballet and socialism were to mingle on stage for the first time.

Chapter three, “*Esmeralda, Daughter of the People: Searching for Socialism in Romantic Ballet on the ‘Big’ Stage.*” argues that the long known 1925 Bolshoi Theater reproduction of *La Esmeralda*, captured the contradictions outlined in the previous chapter nearly perfectly. In recreating a Romantic ballet and infusing it with a socialist message – both in its narrative and choreography choices, the Bolshoi Theater made the case, through its work, that classical ballet and socialism could be reconciled. Not everyone agreed that the ballet was successful in this regard, in many ways reinforcing and reflecting ballet’s hierarchy in an ostensibly socialist context. It is, therefore, not coincidental, I argue, that the very same year saw an uprising among the youth in the Bolshoi Theater that demanded more say and less artistic and administrative control from ballet’s pre-revolutionary old guard. This distinction, between the artistic virtuosity and status of the Ballet’s principal dancers and the relative obscurity and powerlessness of the average, almost always younger, members of the *corps de ballet* caused ripples throughout the Bolshoi Theater. Ultimately, little changed as a result of their protests, and the old guard continued well into the 1920s at the head of the Bolshoi Ballet. There, they continued to make choices about the artistic direction for the troupe. Finally, the chapter explores the artistic differences that emerged from creating art for a large institution like the Bolshoi Theater and the smaller, more popular art forms like amateur theater. The institutional inertia that existed at the

Bolshoi Theater, including its highly respected status as a cultural force, made it much less responsive to revolutionary impulses than was possible than those art forms being regularly performed on the “small” stages.

Chapter four, “Revolutionary Directions: Imperialism, Gender and *The Red Poppy*” examines the most famous, and first, “Soviet” ballet – *The Red Poppy*. *The Red Poppy* arose directly from the circumstances that had been established by the 1925 reproduction of *Esmeralda*, and featured the same principal dancers. Although the production of *The Red Poppy* does speak again to the ongoing relevance of classical ballet, the ballet also must be analyzed for its choreographic and narrative themes. Out of an explicitly socialist narrative came a ballet that reinforced traditional gender stereotypes and relationships, as well as reproducing much of the imperialist, orientalist imagery of was a large part of romantic ballet. *The Red Poppy*, set in China, establishes a somewhat unintuitive international context for the discussion of socialist ballet. While the ballet world was shifting westward in the 1920s, *The Red Poppy*’s Chinese setting allows for analysis of socialist ballet that draws from Chinese ballet after the 1949 revolution in China. This analytical framework allows for further analysis of explicitly “socialist” ballet without relying on a comparative framework that relies on ballet’s development in “the West” to stand in as the default or baseline standard against which Soviet ballet has been more frequently contrasted. Using this framework, it is possible to discuss issues of gender and imperialism in the first Soviet ballet. I conclude that the influence of classical ballet technique and choreographic conventions influenced the creation of a revolutionary work that conveyed very many pre-revolutionary values.

Chapter five, “Football at the Bolshoi,” examines the collision between socialism, sport, and ballet, with the Bolshoi Ballet’s 1928 ballet “The Footballer.” *The Footballer*, the Bolshoi

Theater hoped, would blend the popular sport with a socialist message that would make the ballet interesting and appealing to a socialist, working-class, Muscovite audience. The resulting choreography and movement, drawing from both the movement vocabularies of football and ballet, contrasted the wild with the disciplined. In analyzing the choreography and movement, it is possible to gain a finer understanding of how bodies were understood in the Soviet Union. Under this analysis, the chapter concluded that ballet, despite its imperial origin, actually displayed desirable characteristics, including fitness and discipline. The “new Soviet man” (and woman!) had something to learn from both football and ballet. At the same time, the Bolshoi Theater, including the school under its oversight, underwent reorganizations that were designed to push the theater in a more socialist direction. *The Footballer* also came at a time marked by the early shifts in cultural policy generally associated with the Cultural Revolution. In this chapter, I examine the Cultural Revolution in the context of ballet and conclude that the Cultural Revolution may have been cause for changes in personnel at the Bolshoi, but did not mark a substantial shift in either the questions that were being asked about ballet and socialism or the answers that the artists found when trying to respond.

Chapter six, “The Brigade of the World Proletariat,” discusses a choreography competition hosted by the Bolshoi Theater beginning in 1932. With the goal of a truly socialist ballet still unrealized, the competition was designed to help promote works that could be rightly called socialist. The theme of the competition, reiterated in the chapter title, placed the focus of the ongoing search for socialist ballet clearly on *theme*. The competition, visited mainly by amateurs or young professionals who were still relatively undeveloped as artists, proved to be a rather unmitigated disaster. No satisfactory works were presented. However, the judges, made up mainly of artists from the Bolshoi Theater alongside representatives of from Glaviskusstvo,

spoke mainly of the works unsuitability in terms of ballet, not socialism. This speaks again to the lingering aesthetic power of ballet that continued to persist in spite of attacks against it. When push came to shove, people wanted to see classical technique and classical choreography. When ballet strayed from this formula, it came off as amateurish, poorly developed and often spoke to, as the judges saw, the lack of talent among the artists that had submitted work for the competition.

The February Revolution was the beginning of an uncertain period at the Bolshoi Theater. The political and economic upheaval of the Revolution and the Civil War that followed close behind, established an atmosphere in which the Bolshoi Theater was forced to take a rather conservative stance. In order to successfully produce seasons of ballet throughout those trying times, it fell back on the ballets that it knew best as part of the classical repertoire. Although a period of relative stability did emerge by 1922, the foundation of classical repertory in the Soviet context, as well as uncertainty about the future of ballet continued on through the 1920s and into the 1930s. The same questions that were asked in the early 1920s – “What is socialist ballet?” chief among them – were being asked at the end of the 1920s. It is not coincidental, I think, that the very same question that defined 1920s Soviet ballet arises in present-day scholars when confronted with the topic of this work. Therefore, in much the same way that this work is an attempt to understand that process, those historical actors were confronting the same questions themselves. In trying to answer the question myself, this work is, in part, a narrative of different ways artists at the Bolshoi Ballet attempted to answer those questions from 1917 until 1934, when Socialist Realism became the official answer.

In a paradoxical way, the de-emphasis on form, that is to say classical technique, that became associated with Socialist Realism in ballet was the “best” thing that happened to ballet in

the early Soviet Union. By de-emphasizing form in the artistic and intellectual discourse, this impetus made it increasingly difficult to sharply criticize classical ballet technique. With an emphasis on ballet's dramatic elements, this discursive movement that became a part of the broader anti-formalism of the late 1920s eventually informed ballet's version of Socialism Realism. It took form out of the spotlight, and allowed it flourish elsewhere, at the Ballet School. It is not an exaggeration to say that, in the long run, classical ballet thrived at the Bolshoi Theater precisely because of the educational foundation that was revitalized in the early 1920s and the anti-formalism that emerged by the end of the 1920s. By 1934, the formal adoption of Socialist Realism even further diminished the role of form in ballet as it appeared on stage. However, ballet's technique itself, still being taught at the Ballet School, continued on un-phased. In the meantime, the Bolshoi Theater had created ballets that put the collision between classical dance and revolutionary socialism on center stage.

## CHAPTER 1: Uncertainty in Revolution, War and Ballet

*“...a bourgeois or proletarian government, can only equally destroy the artistic life of the theater.”<sup>1</sup>*

*-Notes from the General Meeting of the Bolshoi Theater Administration, January 1918.*

Reading the above, incidentally during the final weeks of my work in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), I nearly jumped out of my seat. For all of the revolutionary upheaval of 1917, the Bolshoi Theater’s administration had only rarely explicitly mentioned the political situation during the year. It preferred, it seems, to try to remain politically neutral and unassuming. It was not merely a politically safe decision, it also meant that the Theater would remain agile while it was unclear which forces would ultimately prevail in the revolutions of 1917. Between October and January, the administration had remained officially silent about the Revolution that had taken place. And then, in a meeting with the goal of deciding whether or not the Bolshoi Theater needed to make any changes to its schedule for the rest of the 1917-18 season, a surprising, pessimistic, and fatalistic analysis of the political turmoil in the country emerged. The most surprising element of the statement, surely, is the professed uncertainty about whether a bourgeois or proletarian government would prevail. From the point of view of the Bolshoi, at least, it was unclear what kind of government would result from the revolution – but it was sure that the consequences for the theater would be grim either way. The consequences, however, were far from clear.

It was, in part, this uncertainty that drove the Bolshoi Theater in the early years after the revolution. Although those within the Bolshoi Theater had tried throughout 1917 to remain apolitical and to continue their work as usual, the disruption of the revolution weighed on the administrative and artistic minds at the beginning of 1918. To the Bolsheviks, culture could not

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<sup>1</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2 d. 23 l. 14. “Obschii sobranie upravleniia GMBTa,” January 1918. (See point 12).



be apolitical. However, the politics of culture in the early days (and years) of the revolution were multifaceted. Some voices rose in defense of the Bolshoi Theater and its art, while others called for its immediate and permanent closure. While the Bolshoi Theater worried about its own ability to maintain business as usual within its walls, the rest of the country wrestled with the onset of the Civil War. Although the historiography of the revolution has largely moved towards conceiving of the entire period between 1914-1921 as an ongoing crisis, 1917 still was an important year for the Bolshoi Theater.<sup>2</sup> The early days after October started a discussion that nudged formerly imperial cultural forces in Russia to reckon with the now politically relevant relationship between its imperial past, its chaotic present, and its uncertain future.

The Bolshoi Theater, aside from being the home of its artistic troupes, was also a large, sometimes lumbering bureaucracy. An administrative body that I will refer to throughout this work as the Bolshoi Theater's "administration" stood at the head of the institution. This administration was largely a bureaucratic, rather than artistic, body. However, it featured several elder statesmen of Moscow's artistic community. For example, in 1917 Sergei Obukhov, a former operatic soloist at the Bolshoi Theater, was an important administrative figure. The administration handled the Theater's operation and finances, and oversaw the artistic troupes - the ballet, opera and orchestra. Further down the chain of command, each troupe had its own leadership, in the form of directors. The director of the Bolshoi Ballet - Alexander Gorsky at the time of the revolution - oversaw the direction of the company, made decisions about choreography, dancers, and so forth. After the revolution, the Bolshoi Theater was brought under the oversight of Narkompros, and the administration was therefore organizationally bound to

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<sup>2</sup> On this topic, see Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis 1914-1921* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

new state by the end of 1917. Elena Konstantinovna (E. K.) Malinovskaia<sup>3</sup>, a member of the Moscow theatrical community, Bolshevik, and friend to Anatoly Lunacharsky, was put at the head of the state theaters in Moscow in January 1918, but it was not until March 1918 when the government officially moved to Moscow that Narkompros truly became able to exert influence over the Theater.<sup>4</sup> After this time, Malinovskaia influence in the Bolshoi Theater's administration was paramount. She either wrote or signed off on nearly all documents coming out of the administration starting in March. Although Narkompros itself would undergo relatively frequent internal reorganizations during the 1920s, the basic structure of the Bolshoi Theater and its relationship to Narkompros remained intact throughout.

The story of revolution in 1917 has been written numerous times by countless scholars. I do not endeavor, here, to write yet another history of the revolution. Nonetheless, the events of 1917 had a formative influence on the cultural environment that would influence the Bolshoi Theater – artistically as well as institutionally – for years to come. Although some at the Bolshoi Theater saw the artistic and cultural situation as dire, the Bolshoi Theater was faced with the question of how to go on. In January 1918, just prior to Malinovskaia's appointment, its administration deemed it appropriate, and necessary, to simply carry on as it had prior to October. This was the first moment following the October Revolution that the Bolshoi Theater administration consciously made the decision to stay on its pre-revolutionary path when it came to the performance of ballets. This further established the trend, begun between the revolutions

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<sup>3</sup> Elena Malinovskaia was born in 1875 and joined with the Bolsheviks in 1903. Prior to 1917, Malinovskaia had participated in the popular theater community in Moscow and had a relationship with many prominent members of the theatrical community already at the time of the revolution, which made her an ideal candidate to usher the Bolshoi Theater into the post-revolution world. She and her husband Pavel Malinovsky, a successful architect in Moscow, had also been prominent in the Moscow art world during 1917 prior to October. Both were members of the Moscow Soviet's artistic commission that was established in April of the same year. Malinovskaia worked at the Bolshoi Theater and with Narkompros until 1935, when she retired. See: P.A. Markov, ed. "Elena Konstantinovna Malinovskaia" *Teatral'naia Entsiklopediia* Vol 3 (Moscow: Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia, 1964), stb., 1098.

<sup>4</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 112.

of 1917, that the institution would meet uncertainty with tradition. One can imagine that the Bolshoi Theater's administration, still largely unchanged by January 1918 and meeting together just a short walk from Red Square, would have such an uneasy outlook. It had managed to get through the previous year, and even to put together a ballet season replete with classical performances. With the resolution of the revolution still unclear, and the perception that the art would suffer regardless of the outcome, the season continued onwards towards its spring conclusion. This uncertainty and the Bolshoi Theater's reaction to the situation by continuing to perform classical ballets typifies the Theater's reaction to events throughout the revolution and Civil War. But now, we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let us return, first, to 1917.

The year 1917 had seen two revolutions in Russia, the February Revolution and the October Revolution. As the historiography of the revolution has developed, historians have increasingly begun to search for, and find, continuities across the revolutionary divide. The February Revolution, which led to the abdication of the tsar and the soon thereafter establishment of "dual power" created an unpredictable atmosphere in Russia, and the Bolshoi Theater too. The Soviet proved to be the more fertile ground for socialists, while the Provisional Government, stemming as it did from the Duma, was the haven for more liberal politics and politicians. The Soviet of Workers' Deputies and the Provisional Government sparred back and forth between February and October. The time from February to October was marked by several crises. The constant background of World War I continued to be a looming problem for the Provisional Government that had become one of the two centers of power in Russia following the Tsar's abdication and the subsequent end of Imperial power.

The crises of summer 1917 - the July Days, the Kornilov Affair, the near-disintegration of the army – all occurred just as the Bolshoi Theater was preparing for its 1917-18 season. The

political and military lines of the Civil War had yet to be drawn. The July Days, for example, were a period of protests by soldiers and workers that called for the Executive Committee of Petrograd Soviet of Workers' Deputies to wrest political control, once and for all, away from the Provisional Government. A month later, the Kornilov affair stoked the flames of political unrest even more, when General Lavr Kornilov, commander of Russian army beginning in July, led an attempted coup against the Petrograd Soviet. Alexander Kerensky, the leader of the Provisional Government, viewed Kornilov as a potential ally in the fight against the more radical Soviets and appointed him to his position personally. As Sheila Fitzpatrick points out, it is not unreasonable to think that Kornilov might have assumed Kerensky's support in his actions.<sup>5</sup> The political strife between the Soviets and the Provisional Government had boiled into outright military confrontation. If such events in Petrograd might have seemed far away to those living and working in Moscow, they also had their own crises to navigate.

Denizens of Moscow faced incredible hardship during the years of revolution and civil war that posed a critical threat to those living in the city. Moscow was faced with political, economic, and social disorder in 1917. The Bolshoi Theater itself – the building – was even used to host the Provisional Government's State Conference in August 1917. The conference, designed with the hope of bringing some political stability to the late summer, in fact prompted nearly 400,000 people to engage in a one-day general strike in and around Moscow. On 12 August 1917, "crowds of young workers gathered outside the doors of the Bolshoi theater to watch the arriving participants" in the conference.<sup>6</sup> For those working at the Bolshoi Theater, the turbulent politics of 1917 were very close to home and no doubt contributed to the general feeling of unease about the future of the institution and its art.

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<sup>5</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 59.

<sup>6</sup> Diane Koenker, *Moscow Workers and the 1917 Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 126-128.

Diane Koenker also demonstrates the critical loss of urban population during the revolution and civil war as people fled to the countryside, usually in search of food, which was nearly always in shortage. “Between May 1917 and April 1918, the city of Moscow lost 300,000 of its 2 million inhabitants,” and 700,000 more left by the end of 1920, resulting in an approximate halving of the city’s population.<sup>7</sup> The food shortages of 1917 were not the direct result of the revolutionary stirrings in Moscow and Petrograd, but rather the result of blockades and infrastructure problems stemming from Russia’s involvement in World War I.<sup>8</sup> After October, the food shortages took on a particularly political character for the Bolsheviks, who faced the specter of losing support if they could not find a way to feed the country’s urban centers.

Yet, theatrical life in Moscow went on through the crisis. Koenker even argues “the city’s cultural life, especially its theaters, seemed to visitors more vibrant than ever before.”<sup>9</sup> The Bolshoi Theater’s internal concerns run counter to the idea that the theater was *more* vibrant than before, but the fact that it continued to prepare and perform seasons of work at all in the face of such devastating conditions suggests there is an underlying truth to the claim. As the Civil War dragged on and conditions failed to improve – in fact became worse in the cases of 1919 and 1920-21 – “the city’s advantage as a cultural center was offset... by the total absorption of its residents in the struggle for daily existence.”<sup>10</sup> The price of what bread was available in the city skyrocketed by the end of 1921, by which time the price had nearly quadrupled since the

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<sup>7</sup> Diane P. Koenker “Urbanization and Deurbanization in the Russian Revolution and Civil War” in *Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War: Explorations in Social History*. eds. Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg and Ronald Grigor Suny (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 81.

<sup>8</sup> Mauricio Borrero, *Hungry Moscow: Scarcity and Urban Society in the Russian Civil War 1917-1921* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 20.

<sup>9</sup> Koenker, 96.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

beginning of the year.<sup>11</sup> In comparison to the dire conditions facing much of the city, the Bolshoi Theater's continued presence and performances do stand as conspicuous demonstrations of stability. Still, things did not *feel* stable to those within the Bolshoi Theater, who were trying to find and afford food, while at the same time putting together a plan for maintaining their performance schedule.

Sheila Fitzpatrick's classic *The Russian Revolution* outlines three critical themes that appear throughout her discussion: modernization, class, and terror.<sup>12</sup> Fitzpatrick's study is far from monolithic, and the historiography of the revolution has changed somewhat significantly from the time that she originally wrote it, but these pillars of the discussion remain important because they do form a baseline of the kinds of words that are generally associated with the Russian Revolution and its aftermath.<sup>13</sup> The Bolshoi Theater's experience of the revolution subverts the expectation to find these motifs in the study of the revolution. It does not overturn the fact that they are sensible for describing many aspects of the revolution, of course. Although these themes can be used to discuss the experience of the Bolshoi Theater, they most frequently do not capture the art itself and, by extension, the artists within it during the Revolution and Civil War. While the revolution did bring change to the Bolshoi Theater, it had a surprising stability that showed itself immediately in 1917, even prior to October.

Despite the political upheaval of February and the ongoing turmoil and unrest that persisted throughout the summer months, the Bolshoi Ballet prepared for its 1917-18 season just as it had in the past. With historical hindsight on our side, it is quite easy to see February and the

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<sup>11</sup> Borrero, 76.

<sup>12</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 9-13.

<sup>13</sup> In particular, there has been an emphasis on revolutionary violence in World War I and the revolution. See, for example: Peter Holquist, "Violent Russia, Deadly Marxism? Russia in the Epoch of Violence, 1905-21." *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasia History* Vol. 4 No. 3 (August, 2003), 626-652 and Joshua A. Sanborn, "Unsettling the Empire: Violent Migrations and Social Disaster in Russia during World War I." *Journal of Modern History* Vol. 77 No.2 (June 2005), 290-324.

events of the summer (the July Days, the Kornilov Affair, etc.) as steps on the path to October. However, it was by no means obvious or taken for granted that a second revolution was coming to Russia in 1917. Inside the Bolshoi Theater, the February Revolution sparked the beginning of a long period of *uncertainty*. Uncertain is the key word to describe the period from February until relative stability emerged by the end of the 1921. Although there were moments in the four years between 1917 and 1921 on which the Bolshoi Theater's survival did hinge, overall the period was far more marked by the uncertainty of the future of the art form and the uncertainty of the Theater's place within the new society. In other cases, it was simply the uncertainty of how the Theater's administration would heat the building. But, as they say, the show must go on. Inside the Bolshoi Theater, the troupe was getting ready to discharge its performative duty on Russia's grandest stage. Therefore, the era of uncertainty was not marked by chaos within the Bolshoi Theater, but rather by the Ballet relying on the things it knew best, and often what it could do at the least cost.

Thus, with the fall season approaching the ballet continued on with its plan for classical performances. Despite the clearly socialist tinge to 1917, conversation inside the Bolshoi Theater featured almost no mention of it, artistically or otherwise. Instead, the main concern was to keep to the fall performance schedule. The 1917-18 season featured performances of classic ballets, most of which would still not feel out of place on the schedule in today's world-renowned ballet companies:

La Bayadere: 8 times  
Magic Mirror: 4 times  
Don Quixote: 11 times  
The Little Humpbacked Horse: 10 times  
Copellia: 8 times  
Corsair: 9 times  
Swan Lake: 6 times  
Love is Quick (liubov' bystra): 2 times

Raymonda: 2 times  
Sleeping Beauty: 9 times  
La Fille mal gardée: 5 Times<sup>14</sup>

With a couple exceptions, the 1917-18 performance schedule reads like a list of famous Romantic ballets. It is certainly notable that the Bolshoi Theater managed to continue to host performances at all given the revolutionary upheaval happening around it, but from an artistic standpoint the Bolshoi Ballet was hardly creating any revolutionary work even within the context of ballet, let alone the context of political revolution. Even Alexander Gorsky, ballet master and director of the Bolshoi Ballet through the tumultuous period of revolution and civil war, remarked that he was ultimately disappointed with his troupe's inability to create any new work that year.<sup>15</sup> Gorsky was perfectly amenable, in fact thought favorably of, the continued development and "progress" of ballet. Indeed, he had contributed to that development prior to the revolution as an influential member of the Bolshoi Theater and standard-bearer for Mikhail Fokine's ballet developments.<sup>16</sup> The lack of new works makes it difficult to analyze the dance itself. This chapter is, therefore, ultimately about the establishment of a period of uncertainty at the Bolshoi Theater and its consequences rather than about the notability and analysis of Ballet's performances.

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<sup>14</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2. d. 23 ll. 1-2. "spisok oper i baletov ispolnennykh na stsene GABT za sezon 1917/18" Spring, 1918. I suspect all except "Love is Quick" will be recognizable to many readers. Love is Quick was a ballet by Alexander Gorsky, featuring Ekaterina Geltser and Mikhail Mordkin in principal roles, that premiered at the Bolshoi Theater in 1913. See: V. M. Krasovskaia, *Russkii baletnyi teatr nachala xx veka. Ch. 1 Khoreografi and Ch. 2 Tantsovschiki* (Leningrad, 1970 and 1972).

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers*, 85-86.

<sup>16</sup> Fokine (whose first named is often rendered as Michel despite his Russian origin) was an influential dancer and choreographer who danced at the Mariinsky Theater in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before becoming a choreographer The Ballets Russes. Fokine left Europe for America after the beginning of World War I, where he became one of the influential contributors to the development of ballet in the United States. He is also notable for his fusion of modernism and ballet. On Fokine see: Dawn Lille Horwitz, *Michel Fokine* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985).



Importantly, I must add at the conclusion of this discussion of the Russian Revolution, despite the fact that the Bolshoi Theater, and the Bolshoi Ballet in particular, had numerous ties to the pre-revolutionary past, I still see the revolution as an important break. The upheaval was real, the tumult of the Civil War was real, and the dramatic changes to economic life were real. However, the Bolshoi Theater's story suggests that the Bolsheviks also had limitations on their ability to implement policy towards the old order. In fact, in 1917 and 1918 the political situation contributed to the reproduction of ballets that were particularly conservative. Looking at the Bolshoi Theater in the Russian Revolution and Civil War lends further credence to the increasingly popular understanding of the Revolution as a longer process that began in 1914 and did not truly end until 1922.<sup>17</sup>

### **Life in the Theater from February to October**

The aftermath of the February Revolution was felt by the Theater, but its everyday functioning remained basically intact. Dancers in the troupe continued their rehearsals, daily memos were sent out regarding injuries and illnesses and the old Imperial Theater stationary continued to be used until apparently exhausted.<sup>18</sup> Most notably, preparations for the 1917-18 season were made with little explicit concern for politics. The Provisional government was infrequently mentioned and seemed to care little about intervening in the Bolshoi's affairs in the first place. For most members of the ballet troupe, the revolution seemed far away from daily concerns. The general atmosphere within which the Bolshoi was operating was increasingly unstable, but the Bolshoi Theater maintained its own stability by continuing to address the everyday, sometimes mundane, issues that arose within its walls.

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<sup>17</sup> S.A. Smith, "The Historiography of the Russian Revolution 100 Years On" *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* Vol. 16. No.4. (Fall, 2015), 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 4 l. 5

One of the continuing issues in the months between February and October, particularly for men, was the Great War that continued to mire the country. The widespread opposition to the war did not protect members of the ballet from conscripted military service, which was frequent both before and after February.<sup>19</sup> Although the Bolshoi would step in to help its artists avoid mandatory military service, particularly for its artists that it perceive as the most valuable and important, under the Bolsheviks, there appears to have been little to no effort on the part of the Bolshoi Theater to shield its members from being called to the front before October. However, the onset of the Civil War meant that there was a new cause that was calling artists to the army. Through 1921, artists and workers from the theater were regularly called into service.<sup>20</sup>

Amongst the serious political turmoil that continued to wrack Russia through 1917 and the greatest war Europe had ever seen, an amusing event continued to make itself an important part of the Bolshoi's business. In 1914, when initially called to war, S. Gaiko let one of the janitors at the Bolshoi stay in his apartment until he returned from the war. This became interesting to the Bolshoi's administration when it became clear that he was receiving housing funds when in fact he did not need them. For several months, between May and November 1917, it tried to collect the details of the situation and find a solution. At base, it had a simple financial motivation to get back the funds it had paid in excess. Eventually, the investigation concluded that Mikhail Krylov was obligated to pay back 160 rubles.<sup>21</sup> It was not on the top of the Bolshoi Theater's list of issues to deal with in 1917. It was, in the grand scheme of things, a triviality. However, it is indicative of the kind of situations that arose during the year that were not explicitly related to the political turmoil and that continued to occupy the Bolshoi Theater leadership's time. There was only a small amount of money at stake, and it is not an

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<sup>19</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 4 l. 154.

<sup>20</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 168 l. 155.

<sup>21</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 4 l. 255.

exaggeration to assume that the Bolshoi Theater likely spent more money investigating than it got back in the end. However, it showed that the Bolshoi Theater's administration had its attention on mundane activities during 1917 and was not focused solely on the political situation in the country. These kinds of issues were hardly limited to 1917.

Any number of simple administrative regulations and tasks also contributed to the uncertainty inside the Bolshoi Theater, and they continued well past the initial upheaval of 1917. For example, the Bolshoi Theater's tax obligations to the city of Moscow were not obvious even four years after the revolution. In 1921, a resolution by the Moscow Soviet had levied a 10% tax on the Bolshoi Theater. The relationship between the Moscow Soviet, Narkompros<sup>22</sup>, and finally the Bolshoi Theater itself was still unclear. Finally, the question was put before the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, who determined only in December of that year, that yes, the state institutions like the Bolshoi Theater were "subject local taxes."<sup>23</sup> It speaks to the truly provisional and constructive elements of the revolution that such things were sorted out on the fly. It is precisely this kind of fact, that emerged from studying the Bolshoi Theater's archival records, that confound the assumption of a single, coherent, state apparatus that was attempting to impose a singular view. Instead, the Bolsheviks, like the Bolshoi Theater, had to answer questions like this as they arose.

### **Uncertainty in January 1918**

By the time the October Revolution swept the Bolsheviks into power, the 1917-18 season was well underway. By the end of the year there had been little reaction; the season continued as planned. In hindsight, this internal silence on the issue of the revolution seems impossible. In

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<sup>22</sup> In English, The People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, Narkompros was the state organization in charge of culture and education. A discussion of Narkompros features prominently in chapter two.

<sup>23</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 177 l. 6.

fact, it was not clear whether or not the Bolsheviks would retain their power. Between October and January there was not a word from inside the Bolshoi Theater on how the revolution that had taken place would influence the season in progress. However, in January the silence was finally broken. By the end of the month it was officially decided that the season would continue as planned without changes until the end of the season, at which point political considerations would be taken into account if necessary. A general meeting of the management of the Bolshoi Theater, including figures like Gorsky representing the Ballet, decreed in their formal position as “artistic figures and a public institution,” that the theater’s employees belonged to a variety of different political parties and factions and recognized the idea of popular rule.<sup>24</sup> This was about as formal a recognition of Bolshevik power as the Theater could muster and established the institution as, if nothing else, not officially antagonistic towards the new ruling party.

The administration was clearly concerned with remaining neutral and inoffensive with its statements. It was unsure about whether or not a bourgeois or proletarian government would ultimately hold power and interested in avoiding any complications. Staying on course with the original 1917 plan through the end of the season was a politically uncontroversial decision and put off having to make any political decisions until the situation had become more clear and more stable. Furthermore, changing the ballet troupe’s plan significantly in January would have been difficult anyway; with only about four months to go in the season, it was practically too late to make substantial changes. Months of preparation would have been thrown out in favor of a quickly thrown together replacement, with little time for the artists to adjust to any proposed changes. In the months after October, the Bolshoi Theater was able to retain its position as a public institution while positioning itself in a politically uncontroversial position.

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<sup>24</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2. d. 23 ll. 10-12. See point ten. Note: This was the same meeting cited for the quote at the opening of this chapter.

The frustrated directors of the opera and ballet also concluded “not one of these political parties...has any kind of arts program.”<sup>25</sup> This was, of course, untrue. Narkompros, led by Lunacharsky, was very interested in becoming the steward of proletarian culture. We cannot fault the Bolshoi Theater’s administration for not realizing this in January 1918. The first Bolshevik edicts were still being made. It was only in that same month, January 1918 that Lunacharsky placed E.K. Malinovskaia at the head of the state theaters in Moscow, Bolshoi Theater included. Even after the change there was little indication that the “political party” had more than minor interest in shaping, or funding, the Theater in the short term. While Malinovskaia was a long time Bolshevik, she was also a well-established member of Moscow’s art, and particular theater, community.<sup>26</sup> The revolution’s effect on theatrical and artistic life was far from clear, just three months after the fact. Furthermore, having already lived through an uncertain year in 1917, it seemed entirely possible to the likes of Gorsky that October had simply been another in a long line of political crises. A quarter of a year later, October did not stand out to those inside the Bolshoi Theater as the onset of a new era for the institution. It represented yet another event that added to the mounting uncertainty that had headlined nearly an entire year.

Although the management was interested in buying themselves time by taking a wait-and-see position, by the time the 1918-1919 season came around little had changed in practice. The uncertainty that had surrounded the 1917-18 season continued into the following year and, once again, the Bolshoi Theater and its artists were left trying to find their place in the new society. Once again, the theater was left to put together a season of works that relied entirely on convention. That this trend continued during the second ballet season under Bolshevik rule

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<sup>25</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 23 l. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 112.

cemented the classical canon as part of the Bolshoi Theater's repertoire in post-revolution Russia.

### **Survival?**

Christina Ezrahi's *Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia* only briefly touches on the period of 1917-1921. Ezrahi characterizes the entire period between 1917 and 1922 as a period that can be best described as one of "survival." The Bolshoi Theater, she argues, was "repeatedly under the threat of closure."<sup>27</sup> "While numerous ideological attacks were directed against them," she argues, "on the occasions where closing the theaters was seriously debated, events seemed to be driven primarily by economic considerations, reflecting the general commitment of the top leadership to preserve Russia's cultural heritage."<sup>28</sup> Economic concerns did feature prominently in the discussion in 1919, when the closing the theater was up for serious discussion.<sup>29</sup> This analytic division between economic and ideological concerns is unnecessary and must be, at the very least, complicated. Despite the desire among some, like Anatoly Lunacharsky, to preserve cultural heritage for the sake of acculturating the masses, the economic and political issues were not separate. For example, the reasons expressed for the apprehension about funding the Bolshoi Theater took an explicitly political tone. Funding a symbol of imperial culture proved to be politically difficult to justify when, at the same time, other projects that the Bolsheviks were inclined towards, such as schooling, were undergoing financial difficulty. Although his was, at base, a concern that stemmed from economic shortage, the reasons that the

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<sup>27</sup> Christina Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2012), 23.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

Bolshoi Theater was temporarily on the chopping block stemmed from political ideology as well.<sup>30</sup>

On the one hand, the idea that both ideological and economic concerns were important is correct. On the other hand, Ezrahi's conclusions seem to stem from the understanding that ballet was living in a political environment that was inherently hostile after the revolution. This certainly *is* an intuitive assumption to make, and there are plenty of examples of just such hostility. However, this fundamental juxtaposition, between ballet on the one hand and communism, socialism or the state on the other, mischaracterizes the Bolshoi Theater's place in Russia after the revolution. Namely, it implies that ballet and politics are inherently separate, and that it was only due to the revolution that the two collided with one another. In such circumstances, it appears to be merely happenstance and luck that led the Bolshoi Theater to survive the early years, even if that luck came in the form of staunch defenders like Lunacharsky. It places the Bolshoi Theater, as it were, on the back foot in a struggle with forces that were, at least for a while, dead set on its demise.

To be fair, there certainly were such forces. Proletkult<sup>31</sup> was famously outspoken against imperial artistic traditions like Romanticism, ballet included. As an association of peoples' and workers' cultural organizations, Proletkult often took a very hard line position against pre-revolutionary arts and made the fiercest arguments in favor of a new culture born from the workers themselves. Although Narkompros "sponsored and subsidized" Proletkult, the two were hardly in lock step. Proletkult, in fact, was just as often at odds with Narkompros as with organizations like the Bolshoi Theater. The animosity rose to such a degree that the relationship

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<sup>30</sup> Katerina Clark and Evgeny Dobrenko, *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917-1933*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 23-31.

<sup>31</sup> An artistic and cultural organization in the early Soviet Union, taking its name from Proletarian Culture. For a more thorough discussion of Proletkult, see: Lynn Malley, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Los Angeles: University of California Berkeley Press, 1990).

between the two organizations was debated at the First All-Russian Congress on extramural education in 1919. In the end, the congress resolved that Proletkult should be more tightly integrated with Narkompros. However, Fitzpatrick reports that the congress did agree with Proletkult on several matters and eventually concluded that it would be able to continue to work independently, even as it was more closely brought within Narkompros' bureaucratic purview.<sup>32</sup> These measures suggest that the main concern with Proletkult was actually its popular character and, therefore, the difficulty in exercising institutional control. In light of this early and sustained conflict between Narkompros and Proletkult, two things are apparent. First, that there was often disagreement and fighting, in the early years after the revolution, between state institutions like Narkompros and more popular, self-identified radical, organizations like Proletkult gives further credence to the notion that cultural uncertainty ruled the day after the revolution. Second, in the years after the revolution Narkompros was concerned with trying to bring oversight to cultural organizations, rather than trying to dictate their artistic output from on high. This is relevant to the Bolshoi Theater's experience of the revolution because, as a very hierarchical organization with clear lines of bureaucratic control, Narkompros had a much easier time bringing the theater within its purview. In this way, an explicitly revolutionary artistic organization like Proletkult actually proved to be much more of a challenge to the Bolsheviks' consolidation of power during the Civil War than did the Bolshoi Theater, which was performing classical ballets sometimes condemned as counter-revolutionary week after week.

Using Proletkult as an example of ideological pressure facing the Bolshoi Theater, therefore, fails to fully grapple with the complex cultural atmosphere of the early Soviet Union. This distinction is not meant to rank the degree to which various cultural institutions, Proletkult and the Bolshoi Theater among them, were repressed. Rather, it is meant to make

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<sup>32</sup>Fitzpatrick, *Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 107-108.



perfectly clear that the Bolshoi Theater was one cultural institution among many that was trying to navigate the revolution. The Bolshoi Theater is best understood not as standing in opposition to the cultural turmoil that accompanied the uncertain direction for the arts and culture after the revolution, but as one of the institutions that helped to create and shape that direction. It is for this reason that the Bolshoi Theater's contribution to the artistic and cultural environment throughout the 1920s are important when viewed in the context of the cultural history of the early Soviet Union, rather than as a blip or deviation in the long history of ballet broadly speaking.

Presenting the Bolshoi Theater as *only* under attack also devalues the institutional strength of the Bolshoi Theater and the relative stability in personnel that the Bolshoi Theater had helped it persist through the early, post-revolution period. It also, ultimately, devalues the importance of the Bolshoi Theater's Ballet School in carrying on the classical tradition in the Soviet Union. Therefore, Ezrahi's conclusion that the Bolshoi Theater did face serious obstacles, both from intentional actors who sought to discredit and destroy pre-revolutionary institutions and culture and the general economic situation of the Civil War that did threaten the theater's ability to keep its doors open, is correct. However, she mischaracterizes the Bolshoi Theater and its ballet troupe in terms of the power that they maintained through the revolution and into the 1920s and 1930s. Still, Ezrahi does conclude in light of the entire Soviet era that "ultimately, ballet proved stronger than politics."<sup>33</sup>

First and foremost, there was not such a clear distinction between ballet and politics that they can be cleanly divided and compared. The Bolshoi Theater itself was, of course, a state institution. Bringing the Bolshoi Theater under the purview of the state as a "state academic theater" did not, by any stretch, turn all its artists into sympathetic communists. Furthermore,

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<sup>33</sup> Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 9.

ballet was not, either before or after the revolution, apolitical. Although the politics of the revolution created a particular political prism, in the form of Bolshevism, through which discussion of the ballet would scatter, ballet artists were ultimately not engaging in a struggle to remain static or apolitical. The relationship between ballet and politics was, rather, part of a larger negotiation between the past and present that only took its most rudimentary form during the Civil War. However, it did mean that they, particularly at the upper levels of the ballet troupe, directly interacted with the state on a regular basis.

We cannot classify, therefore, someone like Vasily Tikhomirov, who eventually became director of Bolshoi Ballet, as entirely an “artist” which he clearly was, or as an agent of the state. This becomes all the more clear when looking at the divisions that emerged within the Bolshoi Theater itself. The divisions between “artist” and “agent of the state” were not always clear. Furthermore, the artists, while interested in pursuing their own artistic ends, often benefitted from being members of a state institution. Beginning in 1917, the division between the Bolshoi Theater and the state was not always clear. Indeed, ballet dancers often expressed far more opposition and antagonism towards people like Tikhomirov than they did against more explicitly state actors.<sup>34</sup>

Secondly, this presumes a kind of single, undifferentiated “power” struggle between political and cultural institutions. In Ezrahi’s conception, this power struggle was ultimately over artistic autonomy.<sup>35</sup> Ballet had a certain kind of power in the Soviet Union, but it was cultural power and aesthetic power, power that stemmed from Russia’s past and persisted through the revolution, that allowed it to persist and, eventually, thrive. Lunacharsky’s defense of ballet as a cultural artifact worth saving for the working class is certainly the most talked about example of

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<sup>34</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>35</sup> Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kramlin*, 9.

this power and its influence in the early Soviet Union. However, as the 1920s wore on, the extent of ballet's cultural influence became only more clear. The most useful way to understand ballet's power in the Soviet Union, however, is not as a side in the struggle for artistic autonomy. Instead, as a form of cultural power, ballet's power existed alongside state power. In this sense, ballet was a part of early Soviet culture, both reflecting elements of that culture and contributing to it.

The Bolshoi Theater did struggle in the early years. It struggled with shortage. At times, it struggled to pay its artists. Economic shortage manifested itself in various ways and threatened to, at least temporarily, close the theater's doors at times during the Civil War. However, it did not face a concerted struggle over ballet itself. Even as late as 1922, when the theater faced funding cuts, "no demands for artistic reforms were made, nor were any reforms promised."<sup>36</sup> After 1917, the Bolshoi Theater faced, in fact, relatively *little* state pressure to change much of anything outside of its administrative organization. Explicitly political pressure to change or "reform" ballet came slowly, and when it did, the artists at the Bolshoi Theater were in charge of its implementation. This event was actually typical the experience of the Bolshoi Theater throughout the Civil War, and in fact, all the way until the end of the 1920s. Ballet did not "survive" the politics of the Civil War, it simply carried on and remained largely self-directed. It is not surprising, either. In October 1917, Lunacharsky wrote, "the people themselves, consciously or unconsciously, must evolve their own culture."<sup>37</sup> Those chiefly responsible for regulating the culture, and under whose jurisdiction the Bolshoi Theater fell, did not understand it as part of their direct mission in the early years to force ballet in a particular direction.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>37</sup> Anatoly Lunacharsky, *Direktivы VKP(b) I postanovleniia sovetskogo pravitel'stvo o narodnom obrazovanii za 1917-18 gg.*, p. 11, quoted in Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 89.

Although it may seem that I have belabored the point over a relatively small historiographical disagreement, this difference is fundamental. Bolshevik politics and the state do not represent the antagonist in the story of the early Soviet Bolshoi Theater. Likewise, the Bolshoi Theater and its artists are neither heroes nor protagonists. By focusing on the overlapping bureaucracy, the uncertainty that reigned in the early Soviet Union, and the cultural environment, we can open a new avenue of questions about the artists and their art and their place within the burgeoning Soviet Union. Instead of being an end in itself, the fact that the Bolshoi Theater faced a struggle to stay afloat during the Civil War must be reconciled with the fact that its ballet troupe continued to perform classical ballet. What did it mean for proletarian and socialist culture? How did they contribute to building that culture?<sup>38</sup> These questions will continue to be explored throughout this work.

### **Shortage**

The Russian Civil War, following as it did the Russian involvement in World War I, had left the country in relatively desperate shape. As previously discussed, Muscovites faced extreme conditions due to shortages of food in the city during the Civil War. Likewise, the Bolshoi Theater itself faced serious problems with shortage during 1921. After the Central Committee's decision not to close the state theaters in 1919, Bolshoi included, this was one of the few times that the survival of the institution did seem genuinely in question. While the Bolshoi Theater's administration did not have to worry about the political survival of its institution in 1921, it did have to worry about the practical issue of paying its artists for their continued work within its walls. After the 1920-21 season ended in the spring of 1921, funding became a major problem.

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<sup>38</sup> For a fuller discussion of the relationship between the state and society in the revolution and civil war see Diane Koenker, William G. Rosenberg and Ronald G. Suny, eds. *Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War: Explorations in Social History*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

The issue persisted well into summer. The theater's leadership wrote to Lunacharsky on 18 July, outlining the dire nature of the situation. "Work at the State Academic Bolshoi Theater finished on 15 March and since this time the artists have not received a single ruble" it wrote, desperately, to the People's Commissar.<sup>39</sup> This posed two substantial problems for the Bolshoi Theater's administration. First, and most obviously, it faced the problem of paying its artists and other employees. Although the financial situation at the Bolshoi Theater had been difficult throughout the Civil War, it had been able to keep its doors open and artist paid. While it did not have the funds to support the creation and development of entirely new works, as represented by the continued reproduction and performance of classical ballets at the Bolshoi Theater between 1917 and 1921, it had been able to keep things running. It was not simply a problem of the artists not getting paid for their past work. The artists lacked confidence that they would be paid at all. Many had, the administration informed Lunacharsky, refused to return to the theater to prepare for the upcoming 1921-22 season due to the lack of confidence that they would be compensated for their work.<sup>40</sup> They certainly would have preferred to work if possible. They had returned to the Moscow from the summer holiday, hoping that the financial crisis was going to be solved and that they would be able to return to work at the Bolshoi Theater because it had not been easy to find work for them elsewhere either. The situation was very serious. The theater's staff and as artists were, along with many others in Moscow at the time, unable to afford sufficient food.

The Bolshoi Theater administration's clerk, V. Pro, wrote to Lunacharsky informing him that the institution would not be held responsible for ceased work while salaries were not being paid.<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, the Bolshoi was hardly the only institution with tenuous financial stability during 1921 and the increasingly sharp tone did not sit well with Narkompros or Lunacharsky.

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<sup>39</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 177 l. 49.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

When it began to look as though a season might be lost Narkompros, led by Lunacharsky, hatched a radical plan to shake things up at the Bolshoi Theater and, ultimately, to ensure that the 1921 season would go on.<sup>42</sup> On 31 August, Lunacharsky wrote an order to the Bolshoi Theater declaring that the theater would be temporarily closed while a new staff was put into place. It is important to note immediately that the goal here was not to close the theater permanently. Lunacharsky acknowledged the “severe financial crisis,” including the famine that Russia faced in 1921, but insisted that the hardship has resulted in the “sometimes inappropriate and unacceptable forms of claims against the State.”<sup>43</sup> This stands out as perhaps the most politicized moment of this early period of the Bolshoi Theater’s existence in the post-revolutionary world. E.K. Malinovskaia, having been placed the very top of the institution by Lunacharsky years earlier, remained at the head of the Bolshoi Theater. Furthermore, changes were not made to the artistic personnel in the theater. Alexander Gorsky continued on as ballet master, Geltser continued in her role as a principal dancer, and the rest of the ballet troupe remained essentially untouched. This was an unusually politically motivated move, in light of the rest of Lunacharsky’s decisions regarding the Bolshoi Theater from 1917-1921. Although this chapter has argued that explicitly political motivations that targeted the Bolshoi Theater were relatively few, this does stand out as a moment when the politics of the revolution rose to the forefront. Lunacharsky’s gambit worked. Just a short ten days later, the theater was ready to re-open.

On 9 September 1921, the Office of State Theaters, the Soviet of Professional Unions and the All-Union Professional Union of Art Workers, reached an agreement to fund the Bolshoi. Just a day later Malinovskaia sent out a message imploring the workers and artists to return to

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<sup>42</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 177 l. 36.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

begin the “urgent preparation for the opening of the season.”<sup>44</sup> With funding assured and a season to prepare for, the workers returned to their duties at the Bolshoi Theater. Despite the changes to administrative personnel, by mid-September the Bolshoi was back to its normal working conditions, albeit with a late start on the 1921-1922 season. The consistency of artistic personnel, nonetheless, helps to explain how the Bolshoi Ballet was able to put on a full season of works in spite of the changes at the top. As it had in 1917-18, the Ballet resorted to performing the works with which it was most familiar and most prepared for. The program was nearly identical to the 1920-21 season. With little time to prepare, it seems that the repertoire was modified only slightly in order to make use of the preparation of the previous year. However, by the time the autumn set in the worst potential outcome of the crisis had been averted. The Bolshoi avoided a complete shutdown, which would have meant missing the 1921-22 season entirely. Nonetheless, as winter approach the situation remained on a knife’s edge.

Their plight was made worse by the fact that a major fuel shortage hit Moscow in the same year. Before long, rumors began that Narkompros was considering shutting down the theaters in Moscow simply to save the fuel that would be spent running them. The Bolshoi was not the only such theater to face such a problem, but it was certainly the highest profile. Fuel shortages were nothing new to the Soviet Union amidst the Civil War, and neither was the possibility of shutting down theaters in the name of its conservation. In 1919, Narkompros temporarily shut down the Malii (Small) Theater for precisely this reason.<sup>45</sup> The Bolshoi Theater did not shut down in 1919, but by 1921 the rumors, while ultimately false, were certainly understandable. Fuel was legitimately scarce and several times in December the Theater was within days of exhausting its supply of wood that was used to heat the building, which would

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<sup>44</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 177 l. 31.

<sup>45</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 177 l. 1.

have put an end to its ability to hold performances.<sup>46</sup> Despite the problems for the institution, the artists and workers themselves had the potential to suffer the most had the Bolshoi been closed. Whether the theater was closed for political or material reasons, the average artists would have lost their main source of income just the same. Before long, Lunacharsky put an end to the idea that this was being seriously considered, but the fuel problem did need to be solved.<sup>47</sup> In the end, several last minute deals to obtain wood from the surrounding area kept things running. Despite the difficult time paying workers and artists through the summer and early autumn and the fuel shortages which very nearly caused a temporary closure, the 1921-22 season continued mostly as normal.

The Bolshoi Theater had once again managed to navigate uncertain period and put on another season of classical ballet. The Bolshoi Ballet's resiliency was once again on display. Here, the importance of a repertory-based theater helps to provide an explanation for how ballet was able to remain on the stage at the Bolshoi Theater through tumultuous times. Had the Bolshoi Ballet required a full season of new works in 1921, it simply would not have been possible given the time frame it was operating within after the September re-opening. The fact that the theater had its previous season's work from which to draw, combined with the fact that the Narkompros' politically motivated changes hit the administration rather than the artists themselves, meant that it was possible to quickly prepare the theater's season of work.

### **Elite Continuity**

Despite my desire to include the opinions and experiences of less well known dancers and artists inside the Bolshoi Theater, it is simply impossible to discuss them without also discussing the more famous, and therefore more influential, artists at the Bolshoi as well. One

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



such artist is Ekaterina Geltser, famous for her long tenure at the Bolshoi Theater that continued into her fifties. Ekaterina Geltser was born in 1876. After a brief stint at the Mariinsky Theater from 1896-1898, she danced at the Bolshoi in Moscow. It can also not be overlooked that Geltser was married to long-time dance partner Vasily Tikhomirov. This turn of the century “power couple” in the Moscow ballet world continued to exert influence inside the Bolshoi Theater across the revolutionary divide. By 1924, when Tikhomirov ascended to ballet master inside the Bolshoi Theater, he even chose ballets to revive specifically for the purpose of starring his wife. In 1917, the two were already well established within the theater, having performed together for well over a decade there. Prior to the revolution their relationship was of relatively little importance. However, by the mid-1920s the fact that two of the most powerful voices at the Bolshoi were married did begin to have an influence on the direction of the theater.

For a ballerina, Geltser had an enormous, nearly unprecedented, amount of influence with the Bolshoi Ballet. About a month prior to the October Revolution, on 23 September 1917<sup>48</sup>, Geltser signed an agreement with the Bolshoi Theater granting her specific rights and privileges within the theater. In the context of the pre-October revolution ballet is it not particularly notable that a high status ballet dancer would have a rather different economic and social status than the average dancer in the *corps de ballet*. However, the list of special arrangements for Geltser is of particular note given that the artists inside the ballet were just beginning to express a kind of collective pressure on the Bolshoi Theater’s administration in 1917. It would be eight more years before members of the ballet troupe would attempt to aggressively seek more power and influence inside the Theater, but the very same grievances those artists would cite in 1925 can be seen in the variation between Geltser’s treatment and the bare minimum quality of life that the dancers asked for in 1917.

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<sup>48</sup> Julian Calendar.

Geltser's agreement with the Bolshoi Theater did come with some personal limitations. For example, she agreed not to dance on any other stage in Moscow. Furthermore, the Theater clarified in the contract that she did not have any power to entirely dictate her own roles in ballets or take the spot of another dancer if she wanted the part, despite her de facto higher status.<sup>49</sup> However, her husband, Tikhomirov, was ultimately responsible for negotiating such disputes with the theater. She did retain the right to organize one of her own concerts in Moscow during the year. The Bolshoi Theater also guaranteed that she would have the opportunity to perform in a number of ballets (and operas) throughout the year. Finally, her pay reflected the value the Bolshoi Theater saw in having her as a regular performer. The day after each ballet performance, she received 2000 rubles, and when she appeared on stage in the opera, 500 rubles. Here she not only secured a handsome salary for her performances, but guaranteed prompt payment. Should Geltser refuse to or fail to fulfill her end of the bargain and break the contract "for any reason other than serious illness," she was obligated to pay the Bolshoi Theater back a startling 40,000 rubles.<sup>50</sup> One can begin to see the reason that Geltser garnered, at times, a negative reputation among those sympathetic to the revolution.

In his memoir, *Notes of a Red Guard*, Eduard Dune recounts a discussion about Geltser with his wife, Ginda Zaretskaia:

"I was walking home with my wife after seeing *The Red Poppy*, performed by Gel'tser. I was in raptures, captivated by the graceful figure of the dancer, who looked as though she were a young girl. My wife remarked: "You may well be in raptures. She is over sixty, but she has just married a twenty-seven-year-old violinist in the orchestra." She then added, 'I admired her, too, until I saw her treating herself to caviar. That was in 1920, the year when hunger was at its worst.'"<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 1 d. 658 l. 1.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Eduard Dune, *Notes of a Red Guard*, trans. and ed. Diane P. Koenker and S.A. Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 85.

Just as a matter of narrative, Dune, writing twenty-five years after the fact, seems to have mistaken several of the details. *The Red Poppy* premiered in 1927, and Geltser was married, as previously mentioned, to Tikhomirov.<sup>52</sup> Despite these mistakes in Dune's memory, the most important part of the exchange is his wife's righteous indignation in the face of Geltser's excess. There can be no doubt that Geltser was a somewhat divisive figure. Geltser also stands as an example of why it is difficult to so cleanly and clearly divide the story of the early Soviet ballet into a story of "the artists" as a single coherent group and their struggle against "the state." There were significant economic and social divisions among dancers in the Bolshoi Theater. In the long history of ballet, this was simply business as usual. In the context of the early Soviet Union, it suggests that pre-revolutionary organizational norms persisted through changes in leadership and economic, social, and political norms. In the same way they had for a century or more, artists at the top of the ballet world stood out from the rest, both on and off the stage.

Just prior to the beginning of the 1917 ballet season at the Bolshoi Theater, the top artists in the Bolshoi Theater were to be paid in accordance with the agreement between the Ballet Troupe and the Bolshoi Theater's administration. Tikhomirov and Mikhail Mordkin both received 6000 rubles, while Leonid Zhukov, Lavrenti Novinkov and Vladimir Riabtsev each received 5000 rubles.<sup>53</sup> These payments were in addition to their usual salaries. Mordkin's story in the Bolshoi Theater in the revolution begins and, mostly, ends here. He left Moscow shortly after the revolution and eventually settled in the United States in the 1920s, where he became an

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<sup>52</sup> However, the date when they saw *The Red Poppy*, a ballet that was performed for years after 1927, is not clear. He clearly indicates that it was prior to 1927, but putting aside this false memory as an artifact of passed time, it is possible that they saw the ballet after Geltser and Tikhomirov were divorced.

<sup>53</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2 d. 11a l. 6.

influential figure, alongside others like Balanchine, in the American ballet world.<sup>54</sup> Given Geltser's status and pay at the Bolshoi Theater, it is no longer be surprising that other leading figures received bonus pay and held high status within the Theater. Such things were entirely normal inside the Bolshoi Theater both before and after the revolution. What is notable here is that of those named, all but Mordkin continued to be very influential in the Bolshoi Ballet well into the 1920s. This further establishes that the hierarchy within the Bolshoi Ballet changed very little with the revolution. Although E. K. Malinovskaia was placed at the head of the Bolshoi Theater at Lunacharsky's behest following the Revolution, almost all of the internal structure and hierarchy inside the theater remained intact.<sup>55</sup> The consistency of the personnel was perhaps the most major contributing factor to the fact that the Bolshoi Ballet managed to remain artistically intact through the revolution.

In spite of the fact that the Bolshoi faced serious shortages in 1921, the ability for dancers to voice their opinions had already been established and they continued to do so in the face of the theater's difficulties. The Civil War was also a formative period for workers throughout Russia, and artists at the ballet followed suit.<sup>56</sup> A group of artists, specific names unknown, sent a request to the Theater's administration with a request to make food more frequently and easily available during rehearsals and performances. Their demand was relatively simple: four buffets that were available to different members of the theater. They suggested one for the soloists, one for the orchestra, one for the ballet and a final buffet for stage workers.<sup>57</sup> They even went as far

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<sup>54</sup> I mention Mordkin here mainly because I expect this fact to be notable and interesting to those familiar with ballet history. He founded the Mordkin Ballet in the United States in 1926, but the company quickly fell apart following a failed tour. He tried again in 1937, re-forming the Mordkin Ballet, which eventually transformed into the now famous American Ballet Theater.

<sup>55</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 140-141.

<sup>56</sup> For a general discussion see: Lewis Siegelbaum and Ronald Grigor Suny eds. *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class and Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) and William J. Chase, *Workers, Society, and the Soviet State: Labor and Life in Moscow, 1918-1929* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

<sup>57</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 177 l. 24.

as to come up with a possible schedule to explain when each would be open to serve the artists and workers.

Aside from suggesting that even as early as 1921 artists were beginning to exercise their rights and powers as workers to try to change their conditions of labor in the ballet, this request also gives the idea that the hierarchy in the ballet remained an important part of its structure.

Practically, having separate areas did mean that the Bolshoi could open only those applicable to the personnel currently at the theater. However, segregating the buffets by the type of artist or worker did reinforce the hierarchy of the Ballet. It is of particular note that the soloists were to have their own place to eat. The tradition of privileging soloists in the ballet, which extends far beyond the even the Imperial Russian tradition, was certainly apparent even in this seemingly benign situation. The somewhat paradoxical notion that the artists were empowered to make requests on their own behalf within the institution but were also reproducing the hierarchical tradition of the ballet captures the struggle the ballet was already facing in 1921 and would continue to plague the Bolshoi throughout the next decade and a half. Precisely the contradictions that immediately come to mind when one thinks of the collision between ballet and socialism were expressed at the Bolshoi. Yet, this contradiction – of hierarchy being reinforced in the very same document that is in fact an expression of workers' rights – went largely unresolved.

Of course, Eduard Dune's experience of the ballet itself is also notable. To him, Geltser's performance had embodied youth and excitement. Even for someone like Dune, classical ballet was capable of providing a transformative experience. This was yet another root of ballet's stability through the period of uncertainty, and indeed that would help ballet to remain a relevant art form throughout the 1920s. It also speaks to one of the paradoxes, or contradictions, that we

must attempt to reconcile, or at least understand, when speaking of classical ballet in revolutionary Russia. To put it simply, ballet was politically problematic for all the reasons that spring to mind when you think about the collision of socialism and classical ballet. It *was* imperial. It *was* aristocratic. And yet, it was also compelling to a great number of people who called themselves socialist.

### **Conclusion**

This work is neither a study of the Russian Revolution or of the Civil War, yet it does contribute in a small measure to the ongoing historiography of the revolution. The Bolshoi Theater's experience is instructive for two reasons, outlined in this chapter. First, it shows that imperial institutions were not *necessarily* in danger of being destroyed in the Civil War. The Bolshoi Theater stands out because its art is so clearly and unapologetically imperial and aristocratic. Yet, it persisted. Part of this had to do with the simplicity of installing an at least nominally friendly administration at the Bolshoi Theater. As a new state academic theater, the Bolsheviks faced little difficulty in bringing the Bolshoi Theater under Narkompros' oversight, even as it exercised relatively little control in practice. Despite the cultural debates that raged in the capitals, the Bolsheviks had other things to worry about during the period of Civil War. Those cultural debates were central to the Bolshevik vision for transforming society, but the reality of the Civil War dictated that they remained in the backseat after the revolution. As the Bolsheviks sought to consolidate their power, political opposition in the provinces was simply a more pressing matter than whether or not the Bolshoi Theater was going to continue performing *Sleeping Beauty*.

The connection between the Revolution and Civil War, and the desire to deemphasize the importance of 1917 in favor of seeing the period of 1914-1922 as a continuum of crises, is by

now well tread territory in the historiography.<sup>58</sup> Donald Raleigh's recent article in *Kritika*, a companion to the article by S.A. Smith cited earlier in this chapter, makes this point clear. "Many of these studies," Raleigh argues, "have also documented a primitivization and brutalization of the social structure that put the price of the Bolshevik's survival, and therefore the events of 1917, in a new light."<sup>59</sup> In other words, to win the Civil War, the Bolsheviks went to now well-documented, sometimes brutal, measures. The crisis that mandated such action, at least from the Bolshevik point of view, created a somewhat macabre smoke screen for the cultural institutions like the Bolshoi Theater.

At the same time, the period from February 1917 until the end of the Civil War was marked by a near constant sense of uncertainty for cultural institutions in Russia. This was as true for Proletkult, who wanted to use the revolution as an opportunity to push a radical, popular artistic movement for and by the masses, as it was for the Bolshoi Theater. For Proletkult, the uncertainty of the revolution made perfect sense. Although its clashes with Narkompros show the fact that even on the left there was little consensus on cultural direction and policy, it led in some cases to an atmosphere of experimentation. However, in the case of the Bolshoi Theater, the opposite was the case. Both physically and figuratively near the centers of Russian power, the Bolshoi Theater's place after the abdication of the Tsar and the establishment of "Dual Power" was, nonetheless, unclear both to it and to the emerging governments. Unlike Proletkult, the Bolshoi Theater had the strong influence of its history to guide it through uncertain times in the revolution and through the Civil War. The Bolshoi Ballet did precisely what it knew how to do. It performed the classics that were the central in its repertoire and therefore easiest for it to cast and stage.

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<sup>58</sup> For more about this trend see: Donald Raleigh, "The Russian Revolution after All These 100 Years," *Kritika, Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*. Vol. 16 No. 4 (Fall 2015), 794-95

<sup>59</sup> Raleigh, "The Russian Revolution after All These 100 Years," 795.

Alexander Gorsky's displeasure with the Bolshoi Theater's rather mundane and unoriginal 1917-1918 season helps to highlight the significance of the year's work in ballet. While it was an institution steeped in its imperial legacy, and often performed ballets revived from nineteenth century work, the Ballet was not a static organization. The period between 1900 and 1917 had been a period of development and innovation in the ballet world. The Bolshoi Ballet was never the force for innovation that Diaghilev's Ballets Russes had proven to be in its time in Western Europe, but artists like Gorsky still had a soft spot for the mark that Isadora Duncan had left on the Russian ballet world in the first years of the new century and at least partially embraced Fokine's modernism. The uncertainty surrounding the Revolution sparked a moment at the Bolshoi Theater that actually encouraged it to recede nearly entirely into its nineteenth-century repertoire. Such ballets were always part of the ballet troupe's repertoire, and in this case the recession into the nineteenth century was not complete, and should not be understood as a step backward for the art form itself. Furthermore, the cultural and political uncertainty worked in conjunction with economic crises that occasionally rose to extreme severity, as in 1921. The Bolshoi Theater was far from the least funded institution in Russia after the revolution, but its economic situation did make the reproduction of classical ballets a more appealing choice than funding the creation and production of entirely new ballets. These political and economic issues were not entirely separate, and together contributed to the era of uncertainty that coincided with the revolution and Civil War. This, in turn, set the stage for the Bolshoi's lack of new, original work for several years to come. It also helps to demonstrate that, rather than demand reform in ballet, the revolution and the civil war helped to, paradoxically, promote the preservation and continued performance classical ballets at the Bolshoi Theater.



Despite the fact that the Bolshoi Theater appears to have been somewhat dormant during the first years after the revolution, it was actually a formative period that had far reaching influence on the Theater's ballet for the next decade. The period of 1917-1921 established a trend of continuing to perform the classics, and creating an atmosphere in which the future of the ballet was unclear. In truth, few paid close attention to ballet until the end of the Civil War, by which time the Bolshoi Theater had been performing classical ballets for five seasons. By the time the Bolshoi Theater and ballet in general did come under greater scrutiny, critics faced not only the uphill battle of fighting against the Theater's pre-revolutionary history, but also years of post-revolution history that had carried on that tradition.

## CHAPTER 2: Classical Foundations, Socialist Structures

While rumors of the Bolshoi Theater's demise were greatly exaggerated in 1919, and then again in 1921, it is not an exaggeration to say that 1921 was a year of crisis in the arts and education. The onset of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the Soviet Union caused a dramatic shift in economic life and state support for institutions.<sup>1</sup> Narkompros's educational policies were hit particularly hard by NEP in the early 1920s, as schools became increasingly required to fund themselves. For institutions like the Bolshoi Theater, however, the early 1920s actually proved to be somewhat of a reprieve. While it faced some of the same challenges that NEP brought with it, the severe shortage it had experienced during the Civil War was over by the end of 1921. Despite widespread enthusiasm for the project of building socialist and proletarian culture, there was still uncertainty as to the place of state theaters and other state cultural institutions in the new society.

However, out of the confusion, the structures that would inform the development of ballet at the Bolshoi Theater until at least 1928 – and some precedents certainly informing the direction of ballet over the much longer term – emerged. I argue that these structures were, for the most part, not built intentionally in the forms that they settled into by 1924, but arose as a result of the confluence of shifts in cultural, artistic and educational policy and discourse. In this way, the period from 1921-1924 was a critical period for the Soviet Bolshoi Theater, but not one that was intentionally constructive. While much of the 1920s were spent trying to solve the riddle of Soviet ballet, the questions were not even clear yet in 1921 and were only beginning to come into focus by 1924. What was the Bolshoi Theater's place in such an uncertain academic and cultural

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<sup>1</sup> The New Economic Policy was instituted at the end of the Civil War and reintroduced elements of privatization. Although this chapter does discuss NEP era educational and cultural policies and realities inside the Bolshoi Theater, it is not a discussion of NEP *per se*. For more on NEP see: Sheila Fitzpatrick ed. *Russia in the era of NEP* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). In Russian see, U. M. Goland, including *Diskussii ob ekonomicheskoi politike v gody denezhoi reform 1921-1924* (Moscow: Ekonomika, 2006) and *Krizisy, razrushivshie NEP*. (Moscow: MNIIPU, 1991).

climate? No one seemed to know for sure. Indeed, whether or not it was a truism that the show must go, it certainly did. Also, in spite of the financial trouble at the Bolshoi Theater throughout 1921, the ballet school under its supervision had reopened its doors to new students the year before.

The fact that new ballet dancers were once again being trained in classical technique meant that the necessary foundation for the long-term survival of the Bolshoi Theater was in place. Although the Bolshoi Theater had, at times, nearly closed its doors for financial reasons during the Civil War and had faced the specter of closure at the mercy of a Central Committee vote in 1919, with these hurdles cleared the main obstacle that lay in front of the Bolshoi Theater was the ability to maintain a professional company of ballet dancers. It bears repeating, as I have and will several more times throughout this text, that becoming a professional dancer, particularly a professional ballet dancer, requires a lifetime of training from an early age. This is just as true today as it was in the 1920s. The Ballet School that was set up with the explicit intent of training the next generation of dancers that would grace the stage at the Bolshoi Theater ensured both the survival of the institution and the survival of classical dance.

The training of new dancers was not merely an academic exercise. It was a cultural one as well. When it came to ballet in particular, the persistence of classical ballet education in the Soviet Union also was fundamentally important to the discourse of moving bodies. Ann Daly argues “in ballet, the female form has long been inscribed as a representation of difference: as a spectacle, she is the bearer and object of male desire.”<sup>2</sup> To Daly, ballet is, “inextricably rooted in the notion of ‘inborn’ or ‘natural’ gender differences that ‘have been an unabashed hallmark of classical ballet at every level: costuming, body image, movement vocabulary, training,

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<sup>2</sup> Ann Daly “Classical Ballet: A Discourse in Difference” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance* ed. Jane Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 111.

technique, narrative and especially the *pas de deux* structure.”<sup>3</sup> This fundamental aspect of ballet has persisted across time and space and in spite of changes to local differences in women’s lives, “its ideology has never really changed.”<sup>4</sup> According to Daly, the gender difference ballet reifies is hardly benign. The “primacy of difference is that which constitutes dominance” and it is with this short conceptual step that ballet can be understood to embody a particular, hierarchical, aristocratic value system.<sup>5</sup>

This was true following the revolution as well. In spite of revolutionary rhetoric speaking of gender equality and even policy changes that accompanied that rhetoric, ballet’s gendered character did not budge. This is particularly important when taken in conjunction with the Ballet School’s reopening. It was not just that classical technique would be carried on to a new, Soviet generation. Those assumptions about inherent gender differences that were firmly embedded in the very movement vocabulary, technique and training of ballet were being constantly transmitted and reproduced through training. In this way, the importance of the Ballet School’s reopening was not merely institutional or artistic, but kinetic. By producing gendered patterns of movement in the context of ballet training, the Ballet School continued ballet’s traditions of gendered movement and difference.

This becomes even more significant when understood using Tomie Hahn’s concept of sensational knowledge. In her study of embodying culture through Japanese dance, she invites us to consider that “a culture’s transmission processes prioritize practitioners’ attendance to certain sensoria (even particular qualities of sensory experience), and how the transmission of sensory

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 112.

knowledge can shape dancers' experiential orientation.”<sup>6</sup> In dance, this process of cultural transmission is particularly efficacious in educational contexts, where both teachers and students embody transmitted culture.<sup>7</sup> Hahn’s understanding of cultural transmission through dance that relies on sensory and experiential knowledge provides a framework to explain how ballet dancers in the early Soviet Union reified the aristocratic values of the pre-revolution era even as they began to intellectually struggle with ballet’s place under socialism. Therefore, when talking about ballet training, I am also talking about a dynamic embodiment of the values outlined by Daly and their transmission to a new generation of Soviet dancers.

It was also during this time period that the debate about the arts in the Soviet Union began to take off. In ballet this discourse about ballet and about moving bodies began to emerge by 1922. By the time of the revolution, Akim Volynsky had already long been an influential ballet critic in Russia. After the revolution he continued as a critic, offering his opinions and reviews of ballets in the art journal *Zhizn’ Iskusstva*. Volynsky was not a Communist and he did not seem particularly interested in the overt politicization of ballet. Instead, his work focused on critique of ballet that was very concerned with classical style and technical proficiency.<sup>8</sup> As the tone of *Zhizn’ Iskusstva* turned more political in 1924, Volynsky was ousted from his position as the ballet writer and replaced by Alexei Gvozdev. After this change, *Zhizn’ Iskusstva* became one of the premier publications for the ongoing and public debate over ballet. The journal did not have an undue amount of direct influence over the decision making at the Bolshoi Theater. However, as a public forum for the discussion of the arts, it is an important part of the

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<sup>6</sup> Tomie Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture Through Japanese Dance* (Middletown: Wesleyan, 2007), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>8</sup> In this chapter, I will focus on Volynsky’s publications as published *Zhizn’ Iskusstva* in 1923 and 1924. Additionally, a selection of his writings has been published in English under the title *Ballet’s Magic Kingdom: Selected Writings on Dance in Russia 1911-1925* ed. and trans. Stanley J. Rabinowitz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

(relatively) slow march towards socialism in ballet that ultimately had a great deal of *indirect* influence on the creation of ballets like *The Red Poppy* in 1927. It is worth discussing the change from Volynsky to Gvozdev as a way of getting at the shift in Soviet attitudes toward ballet from one that was understood itself to be largely apolitical to one that became explicitly political.<sup>9</sup>

The discourse of bodies, accessed through the Ballet School in this chapter, and the discourse about bodies, as it began to appear in *Zhizn' Iskusstva* speak to the aesthetic power of ballet in the larger cultural discourse of the early Soviet Union. In these first, timid steps taken to seriously discuss the aesthetic place for ballet in the Soviet Union, very little criticism was mounted against ballet technique itself. It was certainly not mounted from within the Ballet School, which in fact privileged classical dance above all else. However, neither was it mounted by Volynsky or even by Gvozdev in this period. Ballet's status as a bearer of high culture for the masses, as articulated by Lunacharsky and Malinovskaia, gave it ground on which to stand. But it was the fact that highly technical, virtuosic classical dance was favored even within that framework that truly served to reify ballet's cultural significance. In training dancers with that goal in mind and in discussing ballet with its technical performance in mind, artists and critics were demonstrating their sometimes unstated affinity for the form. Ballet's aesthetic power did not just influence the persistence of the form, but also shaped the Bolshoi Ballet's hierarchy, labor relations and, by extension, everyday life inside the Theater. Together, the endurance of classical technique and the move towards a socialist discourse about ballet conspired to create tension that would propel the Bolshoi Theater towards new work in the mid-1920s.

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<sup>9</sup> It needs to be mentioned that although Volynsky was not taking explicitly political positions in his articles and reviews, from the perspective of the Bolsheviks his articles very much *were* political because of their "bourgeois" if not outright aristocratic understanding of ballet. Where Lunacharsky was able to balance his role as a Bolshevik leader with a coherent defense of the arts that was rooted in desire to bring culture to the masses, Volynsky was unable to politically justify his writing.

## Narkompros, Lunacharsky and the Theaters

It is impossible to talk about education, culture and the arts without a discussion of Anatoly Lunacharsky. Thanks to Sheila Fitzpatrick, historians have long known Lunacharsky's story as head of the Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros), the educational and cultural department of the young Soviet government. For those less familiar with the Commissariat and its Commissar's narrative, it is worth laying out some of the basics of the relationship between Narkompros and artistic organizations in the early Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to overstate Lunacharsky's importance to the Bolshoi Theater in the early years of the Soviet Union. He provided a loud and influential voice in favor of preserving classical "high" arts like ballet and opera because he believed that even though they were imperial in origin, they still offered the potential to raise the culture of the working class. He had both a personal affinity for the arts and desire to work with artists that gave him credibility in the artistic community as well as a long record with the Bolsheviks, dating back to 1904.<sup>11</sup> His standing as a Bolshevik and his friendship with Lenin certainly increased Lunacharsky's influence in the cultural realm in the early years after the revolution. It also helped to shield him from attack when he openly supported traditional, conservative art forms like ballet and opera. Although he was far from immune to criticism, it did not, in the early 1920s, rise to the level of total rejection. Rather than dismantle these artistic institutions, Lunacharsky argued that their work should be made available to the working class. Nonetheless, Narkompros, and by extension Lunacharsky, often found itself at odds with the art world in the years after the revolution.<sup>12</sup>

Fitzpatrick pays particular attention to theater in her discussion of the arts, recognizing the

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<sup>10</sup> For some this will be well tread ground. However, throughout this section I will also be explaining the relevance of the organization, its policies and the contested nature of the arts in the early Soviet Union to the Bolshoi Ballet.

<sup>11</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 309.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-112.

complex relationship between the state and theater. Tension existed between state policies toward state theaters and private theaters, which state struggled to deal with. “Lunacharsky,” Fitzpatrick argues, “was not unsympathetic to the artistic revolutionaries, so long as their experiments were not conducted at the sacrifice of other artistic groups” which he believed “had a tradition worth preserving.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it was not just worth preserving, it was worth disseminating. On 15 October 1921, Malinovskaia, with the approval of Narkompros, instituted a new policy at the Bolshoi Theater that twenty-five percent of the seats in each row would be reserved specifically for workers and that the tickets would be available to workers at half price.<sup>14</sup> This was the earliest attempt by the Bolshoi Theater and Narkompros to actively attract workers to the Bolshoi Theater to see ballets. According to records of ticket sales, the practice appears to have been continued throughout the 1920s.<sup>15</sup> In 1923, tickets varied widely in price, with the most expensive being 400 rubles and the most inexpensive seats costing only 10 rubles, with many seats costing around 100 rubles.<sup>16</sup> In 1928 efforts to reach the masses would intensify further, when the Bolshoi went further than to attract workers into the theater and actually took the troupe into other venues, like workers’ clubs to present their art.<sup>17</sup>

A substantial number of seats were reserved for high-ranking government officials, for either their own personal use or distribution. Lunacharsky topped the list, with a striking eight free tickets per performance. All together about 100 seats were reserved for members of the bureaucracy, with many being reserved in the names of the bureaucratic entities themselves rather than in the names of a particular official.<sup>18</sup> This marked yet another point of continuity

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>14</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2 d. 177 l. 20. E.K. Malinovskaya “Postanovlenie.” 15 October 1921.

<sup>15</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1660 ll. 113-144a.

<sup>16</sup> RGALI f. 648 op 2. d. 255 l. 32. Ticket Prices, 1923 season.

<sup>17</sup> I discuss one notable example of this practice in Chapter 5, when the Bolshoi Theater actively sought out worker feedback on a ballet still in progress by presenting excerpts of it in a worker’s club.

<sup>18</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 334 l. 67.



between the pre- and post-revolutionary Bolshoi Theater. The Bolshoi Theater was a distinguished cultural institution and members of the elite attended not just because they loved ballet, but because the Bolshoi Theater's seasons were social and cultural events that had draw beyond the art itself. Although the Bolsheviks *did* try to get more members of the working class to the Bolshoi Theater and succeeded to a degree, the most regular viewers of the ballet (and opera) were not members of the working class but came out of the political elite.

This provides an opportunity to introduce more thoroughly the idea of what I call “aesthetic power” in several places throughout this study.<sup>19</sup> Ballet continued to resonate with many people within the state bureaucracy, Lunacharsky simply the most outspoken among them, throughout the 1920s and indeed, eventually, into the 1930s. I do not think that it was merely historical luck and the, depending on your view, happy accident that a supporter of the fine arts, Lunacharsky, ended up at the head of most influential state institution in the realm of culture. Aside from support from several members of the Bolshevik leadership, ballet manifested its aesthetic power in two ways. First, ballet continued to draw audiences to the theater and those audiences were made up of both elite and working class people. Second, within the art form itself, classical dance continued to hold sway. This can be traced back to the 1920 re-opening of the ballet school and fact that experts in classical dance continued to both set the agenda for the school and teach the classes related to ballet. There were very real challenges to ballet and its place under socialism. However, despite the heights to which the rhetoric soared, these two expressions of ballet's seemingly unbreakable influence carried on throughout the period. The actions of a single individual alone, even Lunacharsky, cannot explain the persistence of the

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<sup>19</sup> Particularly in Chapter 6.

form.<sup>20</sup> There can be no argument that Lunacharsky's role was not central, it clearly was.

However, I argue, attention has to be turned to the art form itself in order to explain ballet's resiliency.

Meanwhile, Lunacharsky tried to strike a balance between his personal respect for art forms like ballet and the desires of the artistic avant-garde who believed he was being soft toward forms that were holding back the development of the arts. For this reason, his conciliatory attitude towards more traditional, academic theaters was not universally accepted. Despite Lunacharsky's leadership on the issue, even Narkompros itself was divided on the place of the traditional theaters in the new Soviet world. Fitzpatrick reports: "to Kameneva [head of the Narkompros theater department in Moscow] and the theatrical left, this association of Lunacharsky and the old theatrical establishment was highly suspect."<sup>21</sup> This ideological divide within Narkompros was an important feature of the political landscape for the Bolshoi Theater in the early 1920s. Far from an atmosphere in which the ballet was fighting against the state to survive in clear, oppositional terms, the representatives of the state could not agree on a single course of action themselves. Lack of a clear direction in arts policy was yet another reason that the Bolshoi Theater was able to continue on in the realm of classical ballet. Decisions inside the theater ranging from the education of ballet students to the ballets to be performed during the first seasons of the 1920s were controlled by the theater's administration and distinguished artists. In spite of ideological differences such as that between Lunacharsky and Kameneva, practicality often proved to be a driving force.

During the Imperial era, theaters had deemed it worthwhile to cede some their autonomy for the stability provided by the state. Likewise, "it has been suggested that, because of economic

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<sup>20</sup>I hope that this section does that role justice, despite my argument that his influence has been somewhat overplayed.

<sup>21</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 140.

conditions of the time, municipalization was often favored by local theatrical companies and entrepreneurs.”<sup>22</sup> This attitude carried over into the Soviet period. In both cases it serves to remind us that in a conflict that is easy to characterize by ideological dichotomy between artistic independence and state control, practical considerations often prevailed on both sides. In fact, by the end of the Civil War ideological difference was as likely to exist within the state apparatus as between the artists and the state. As the state became more involved in cultural life, more Bolsheviks became part of the bureaucracy that managed it, thereby increasing the variety of opinion among policy-makers. Often, Lunacharsky was far more at odds with these new-comers to the cultural front than he was with artists themselves.<sup>23</sup> Ideology mattered, but it was not the beginning and end of theatrical life. Likewise, it helps to break down the barrier between “the artists” and “the state” itself. This was particularly true in the case of the Bolshoi Theater. As a state theater, its relationship with Narkompros was particularly complicated. When Lunacharsky placed E.K. Malinovskaia at the head of the Theater in 1918, he set the stage for an administration within the Bolshoi Theater that was very willing to work with the Commissariat, but that also had ties to the pre-revolutionary Bolshoi Theater. Thus, Malinovskaia can be seen as both an agent of the state, by virtue of her very material connection to Narkompros and as one that often worked with the Bolshoi’s best interests at the forefront of her mind.<sup>24</sup>

Private theaters did not disappear, but the pressures brought on by nationalization did encourage a restructuring of art administration. Lunacharsky attempted to reconcile the desires of both politicians and artists. He instituted a policy that largely increased state control over many existent theaters, and included regulations over private theaters, while allowing them to maintain a measure of autonomy. By not drastically offending the sensibilities of either side,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Read, *Culture and Power in Revolutionary Russia* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 162-163.

<sup>24</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 109.

Lunacharsky's plan was widely accepted.<sup>25</sup> Despite the fact that there continued to be arguments over ideology, here Lunacharsky demonstrated the necessity of political expediency in making art policy. Furthermore, it set the precedent of policy that could reconcile a measure of independence with state influence. Therefore, even explicitly state-run institutions like the Bolshoi Theater benefitted from an atmosphere of compromise in the arts. Indeed, long-time ballet master Alexander Gorsky continued to be the most influential artist in the ballet straight through the period of uncertainty.

Just after the revolution, Fitzpatrick tells us, "the arts were, of course, a secondary problem for Narkompros, which was in any case not trying to set up a government administration of culture but to establish contact and enter into discussion with the artistic world."<sup>26</sup> Narkompros found itself trying to navigate that world while being pulled, politically, in several different directions. It cannot be overstated that no one, neither Lunacharsky nor Kameneva nor Malinovskaia, knew exactly what the relationship between the artistic institutions and the state was "supposed" to be in the early 1920s. Different individuals had their opinions about how the arts should develop in the Soviet Union, some of which became expressed in the pages on *Zhizn' Iskusstva* starting in 1922.

Narkompros, of course, did not just interact with the State Academic Theaters, the Bolshoi chief among them, for reasons of art. The Bolshoi Theater's Ballet School was also an educational institution and thus fell under its jurisdiction. In 1920, Lunacharsky left his mark on the Bolshoi Theater by personally writing the Ballet School's new charter. Although even Narkompros itself was to undergo significant changes after the new charter was written, it left its mark on the theater by laying down the guiding principles of the Ballet School. In establishing

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 112.

the school as a place that was primarily motivated by teaching classical ballet technique and preparing the next generation of dancers for the Bolshoi Ballet, the Ballet School was to become the key site of classical ballet's preservation at the Bolshoi Theater and of the reproduction of ballet's discourse of bodies.

### **Educating a New Generation**

Among the most important developments of the early 1920s at the Bolshoi Theater was the reopening of the Ballet School as the Civil War was drawing to a close. The financial hardship that had constrained the theater in the past years was coming to an end and there was little chance that the Bolshoi Theater would, either through either explicitly political or economic circumstance, vanish as an institution. It would take the theater several years to start producing works that even it was willing to label "socialist," but the Bolshoi Theater was beginning to go back to work. The educational foundations that the Bolshoi Theater was laying beginning in 1920 through 1922 had the major consequence of establishing a framework that allowed for the continued teaching and dissemination of classical ballet technique to its students throughout the relatively turbulent 1920s and 30s. As the debate over the place of ballet in the Soviet Union ramped up in publications like *Zhizn' Iskusstva*, critics mainly took aim at the *ballets* as they appeared on the stage rather than attacking the underlying, fundamental technique that provided the foundation of the art form and ultimately, decades later, allowed it to flourish in the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, the Ballet School at the Bolshoi Theater also falls into the discussion of education more broadly speaking in the Soviet Union. The combination of art, culture and

technical expertise in ballet makes it a fascinating and nearly unique look into education and culture.<sup>27</sup>

Larry Holmes' seminal work *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse* charts the development of the school systems after 1921 in the Soviet Union. According to Holmes, NEP posed a serious economic problem for schools when, "the concern for a balanced budget ended all pretense of central funding of schools and the limited support that had followed."<sup>28</sup> This, however, applied mainly to the circumstance of primary education while government funding for "professional and technical training" continued to flow. Notably, Holmes explains, this represented a continuation of "the pre-revolutionary bias toward more prestigious and narrowly expedient forms of instruction."<sup>29</sup> Even despite its imperial heritage, the Bolshoi Theater no doubt remained a prestigious institution in the early 1920s, in part due to Anatoly Lunacharsky's continued defense of high arts as agents of culture that could be used by the Bolsheviks to elevate the cultural level of the masses. Although the economic consequences of the Civil War that necessitated NEP were understood to have caused "retreat" from the more aggressive economic policies of War Communism, practical and cultural education remained important aspects of the Bolsheviks long term plan to transform their country. Nonetheless, practical limitations prevented them from putting resources behind a complete transformation of the educational system under NEP.

Limited or no funding led many schools to close down, prevented enough teachers from being

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<sup>27</sup> One similar, if perhaps surprising, look into such a flashpoint between art, technique and tradition can be found in Andrew L. Jenks *Russia in a Box: Art and Identity in an Age of Revolution* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005). Jenks study examines a small cohort of artists in the village Palekh who engaged in a highly technical, traditional art form creating lacquered boxes, usually for the purposes of iconography. Jenks argues that the boxes created by these artists and their managed to persist through the Soviet period, in part due to their intricate design and the technical expertise necessary to create them. While such artists were not members of the artistic or cultural elite, the way that artists in ballet were, in nonetheless provides another striking example of the importance of technique and technical expertise in the realm of Soviet culture and its relation to pre-revolutionary tradition.

<sup>28</sup> Larry E. Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse: Reforming Education in Soviet Russia 1917-1931* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 27.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

trained, and finally even promoted the establishment of private schools to help fill the gaps left by the underequipped state.

Finding skilled and trained teachers also proved to be a difficult. When it came to implementing Narkompros's educational reforms in the 1920s, ballet's rather extreme technical nature meant that the pool of potential teachers for the school was very small to begin with and largely flowed from the Bolshoi Ballet itself. This was only compounded by the fact that by all appearances there was little public support for Narkompros's educational plan. "Regardless of social origins," Holmes explains, "teachers, like parents, favored the traditional approach" of teaching "fundamentals of literacy and numeracy and respect for authority."<sup>30</sup> While the ballet school *did* teach these fundamental classes as well, a more general equivalency is apparent. As much as parents of students going to "normal" schools cared about traditional educational fundamentals like literacy and math skills, the ballet school continued to provide the highest level of training possible in its traditional fundamentals – classical ballet technique. In the absence of clear directives about how and what to change, with personnel highly trained and schooled in classical dance, and with little official pressure to motivate change, there was in practice little reason to expect drastic changes in the Ballet School's historical curriculum. In the early 1920s, the Ballet School continued to do what it did best, train the next generation of ballet dancers for the Bolshoi Theater. It would continue to do so through the 1920s and 30s, even as reforms came in the late 1920s that pushed the school into teaching even more ideologically centered courses.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>31</sup> The Bolshoi Theater, ballet school included, underwent a "reorganization" in 1928 that had substantial impact on the ballet school curriculum, particularly with regards to classes on subjects related to Marxism. I discuss this in detail in chapter 5.

This stood in contrast to Narkompros's desire for the explicitly political education of children.<sup>32</sup> Complicating matters, however, was its nearly constant rethinking and reorganizing of the terms of political education throughout the 1920s. Holmes suggests that the initial rush of educational reforms caused "subjects to [lose] much of their significance in a rush to center instruction around the more relevant areas of labor, nature, and society."<sup>33</sup> In this way, education was, according to earliest directive in October 1918, to be reorganized along more Marxist lines that were to make education more personally fulfilling and politically expedient at the same time. One critical problem was that although there was "broad consensus" on the general direction of educational reforms there were not clear, agreed upon specifics. In absence of such specifics in 1918, the new directives were set up from the beginning to be inconsistent, mutable, and, in hindsight, paint a picture of the relative instability to come.

U. G. Salova traces in detail the many paths that political education took during the 1920s, painting a picture of educational policy in the early Soviet Union that is difficult to follow. It is not her study that is either poorly organized or written that makes the system difficult to parse, but rather the sheer number of times educational policies shifted. Salova counts numerous ways the political education as intended to be transmitted to students, including a variety of games that were designed to present ideas to young children.<sup>34</sup> Despite her detailed work, she also concludes that it is simply impossible to determine whether or not such radical educational aims and ideals even had an influence on the politics of children, or if it did, to what extent of those educational practices informed their politics.<sup>35</sup> Part of this is due to

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union: 1921-1934* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>33</sup> Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse*, 9.

<sup>34</sup> U. G. Salova, *Politicheskoe vospitanie detei v Sovetskoi Rossii v 1920-e gody* (Iaroslavl: Iaroslavl State University, 2001), 28.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.



methodological limitations, surely. However, it also speaks to the haphazard enforcement and evaluation of educational policies coming out of Narkompros during the time period. This, once again, provided the avenue necessary for the Ballet School to continue on with little external influence until 1928.

Nonetheless, education mattered. Despite the reality that educational reforms varied over place and time, meant different things to different people, and were often ignored by educators, particularly after the onset of NEP, at the end of the day education did matter and did influence people's lives. This was true in spite of the Narkompros's inability to fully impose its vision on the fledging Soviet education system. At the outset of Matthew Pauly's study of the intersection between language and education in Ukrainian schools, he states his study "presumes the intrinsic power of educational institutions."<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, he describes the schoolhouse not as a "the object of language planning, but as the agent of language change."<sup>37</sup> Despite the gulf between language instruction in Soviet Ukraine and ballet instruction in Soviet Moscow the point is nonetheless worth reiterating here. It is important because it shifts the focus from centralized planning – even when it was important – to the on the ground effects of the educational institution. When it came to the artistic training of the first generation of post-revolution ballet dancers, the Ballet School was an agent of change and also one of conservation. In shifting the focus to the Ballet School and its teachers as agents, rather than simply being acted upon, it is possible to more clearly see the impact it had on its students and on the direction of classical ballet in the early Soviet Union.

In other words, while Narkompros's meandering policies provide the historical background for centralized Soviet desires and goals for the educational system in the early years

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<sup>36</sup> Matthew Pauly, *Breaking the Tongue: Language, Education and Power in Soviet Ukraine, 1923-1934* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 15.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

after the revolution, it is a separate discussion from the influence that the education that *actually existed* in places like the Bolshoi Theater's Ballet School. When it came to the technical training of ballet dancers, the Bolshoi's Ballet School under Lunacharsky's new charter was just as equipped as ever to train proficient dancers. About the short and long term success of the Ballet School to train ballet dancers, there can be no doubt. When looking only at the level of educational policy and curricula, this rather simple point can get lost. While, as in Salova's case, it can be difficult to ascertain the historical efficacy of particular educational policies, it is possible to build a picture of the long term effectiveness of the school as a ballet school by looking at quality of dancers that continued to come out of the school during the 1920s and 30s and that maintained and even elevated the Theater's prestige.

As is likely apparent by now, the Bolshoi Theater's Ballet School stood apart due to being attached to a cultural institution like the Bolshoi Theater, having teachers who were already in place to teach a highly technical topic at its school, and the prestigious nature that the institution still had that carried over from the imperial era. It was not that the Bolshoi Theater was playing by different rules than other schools in the early 1920s, but rather it was, admittedly somewhat unintuitively, set up to take advantage of the unique circumstances produced by the revolution and then NEP. Holmes' analysis on this final point is, again, instructive. The case of the Bolshoi Theater's Ballet School is particularly interesting because it combines the tendency towards the policy of privileging prestige that Holmes identifies as crossing the revolutionary divide, with the fact that the Bolshoi Theater itself was an institution whose prestige arose in the pre-revolutionary era and crossed the revolutionary divide. Thus, the Ballet School was especially well positioned to thrive under NEP precisely because of forces and impulses that seemed to run counter to the revolution. As would emerge in ballets themselves, this educational

example speaks to the paradoxical, seemingly contradictory trajectory of classical ballet under socialism. At times, it was precisely ballet's highly conservative, highly technical nature that made the art form difficult to attack. In this early case, the Bolshoi Theater's prestige, flowing directly from its stature as an imperial institution, helped its school to thrive as an artistically conservative force. Conservative, in this case, in the sense that it put in place those educational and institutional mechanisms that led to the preservation and conservation of classical ballet at the technical level.

Narkompros's policies were aimed at changing education from the ground up, beginning with primary education. However, despite Narkompros's wide ranging edicts on the transformation of the educational curriculum, the most frequent response from both primary and secondary schools was simply to ignore it. Holmes describes the situation as a disaster for Narkompros.<sup>38</sup> Narkompros had undergone reorganization in late 1920 with the goal of helping to put an end to what were seen as widespread failures in both its educational and cultural policies. However, the problems proved more difficult to solve than simply shuffling around administrators. The Central Committee's goal for the Narkompros reorganization was the rationalization of its work. However, "the goal of rational administration, in a climate of political confusion and economic collapse, turn out to be a mirage."<sup>39</sup> The problems persisted through 1920 and 1921 as Narkompros attempted to chart a path for sensible education policy. In such dramatic failure to implement its program at the fundamental and critical primary and secondary levels, we find yet another avenue by which the Bolshoi Theater's Ballet School was able to avoid scrutiny. The highly technical and specific training of ballet dancers inside the walls of the

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<sup>38</sup> Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse*, 42.

<sup>39</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 209.

Bolshoi Theater was simply not important enough to register as worth the time and resources it would have taken to implement a more ideologically based program.

Much of this bears out the research of scholars of Soviet education. However, when it came to the Bolshoi Theater and more broadly speaking the fate of ballet in the Soviet Union it is impossible, I think, to overstate the importance of how the circumstances of the early 1920s conspired to allow the Ballet School to continue to focus on teaching classical ballet technique. Few doubt that the Soviet ballet schools, even in the early period, produced outstanding dancers with names like Igor Moiseev headlining the promising and strong generation of young dancers that emerged in the 1920s and 30s. However, in failing to look closely at the circumstances of their training, scholars have been merely taking for granted that these students received the education and training that allowed them to excel. By looking at the Ballet School in the context of other (attempted) educational reforms in the early 1920s, it is possible to see that the very reforms that Narkompros was attempting to implement helped the Bolshoi Theater's Ballet School to continue on as a relatively artistically conservative force, in the sense that the core of classical ballet technique remained essentially untouched.

Lunacharsky himself wrote the charter for the new ballet school in 1920. Given the importance of NEP in changing how funding was distributed for education, the fact that the charter was written the year before the outset of NEP helped to establish some fundamental aspects of the school that may not have been present had the charter been written just a year later. However, it also put into place some provisions, like free tuition for all, that were simply no longer tenable after the funding changes that accompanied NEP.<sup>40</sup> The charter itself is worth

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<sup>40</sup> RGALI f. 683 op. 1 d. 64. l. 4. Anatoly Lunacharsky. "Polozhenie o pervoi Gosudarstvennoi Moskovskoi Baletnoi Shkole." 1920.

examining in detail for the insight it gives into Lunacharsky's, and by extension Narkompros's, intentions and hopes for the school at the onset of the 1920s.

While the October Revolution and the ensuing Civil War had left the Bolshoi Ballet and the Ballet School in what amounted to a holding pattern, Narkompros moved to exert its influence over the Bolshoi Theater's Ballet School in 1920. The Bolshoi Theater itself remained in charge of running the day to day operations of the school and remained in control over the students, including the ability to accept or deny students in the school or move them to another school if their potential for a career in ballet seemed wanting. Lunacharsky himself penned the initial regulations for the school. Although circumstances changed dramatically after 1920, when funding considerations were not yet subject to the concerns of the New Economic Policy, this initial charter proved to be an important document because the Ballet School did not undergo further significant reorganization and change until 1928, meaning that an entire class of students underwent training under the precepts outlined in the original charter and seven more classes of students had at least some training under it. The school trained young children and also accepted full time students into a feeder program for the Bolshoi Ballet.

Lunacharsky established the ballet school with a clear and simple premise from the beginning. The school was to be a "secondary school with a special goal: to give artistic ballet education and training to the future workers in the area of ballet."<sup>41</sup> As his words suggest, dancers were to be recast as "workers" and their training was to be considered work training in much the same light training for other vocations in the Soviet Union was conducted, and specifically as artists. Although it may be tempting to ignore Lunacharsky's wording as mere political gesture, his identification of the students and therefore dancers at the Bolshoi Theater with workers foreshadowed the relationship that would develop between the dancers and the

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<sup>41</sup> RGALI f. 683 op. 2 d. 64 l. 4.

Bolshoi Theater and by extension the Ballet School's administration, which itself had substantial overlap with the Bolshoi Ballet's directors – most notably Tikhomirov.

Because of the desire to make the training accessible to all of the most talented young people, Lunacharsky also stipulated that studying at the in the ballet school should be free.<sup>42</sup> The goal was to make sure that talented children of workers and peasants would be able to train at the school without worrying about the cost. However, the goal was not to artificially inflate the population of the Bolshoi Ballet with members or children of the working class. Rather, the policy was aimed at broadening the pool from which to draw the best talent available. This goal was hampered significantly by financial cuts and, therefore, before long the school had to begin charging again. As a result, student tuition became subsidized based on family income. Although this did substantially cut down on cost for some students and their families, the Bolshoi Theater largely failed the goal of attracting more working class students, as evidenced by the fact that even by the late 1920s the vast majority of students were of white collar origin.<sup>43</sup> Regardless of class origin the school retained the right “to transfer a student to a suitable Unified Labor School” if he or she was not performing to a satisfactory level in “purely ballet subjects.”<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, a report by Alexander Gorsky in 1923 on the Ballet School's first two years, showed that the Ballet School exercised this right liberally. During the 1920-21 year, the Ballet School removed nineteen students from its ranks for “inability in ballet” and the following school year, 1922-23 it more than doubled the amount removed to forty-one.<sup>45</sup> So, while class background was a concern for the Ballet School, proficiency and the likelihood of achieving a

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<sup>42</sup> RGALI f. 683 op. 2 d. 64 l. 8.

<sup>43</sup> RGALI f. 683 op. 1 d. 64 l. 7. This issue is revisited again in Chapter 5, when I discuss changes to the ballet school that occurred as a result of the State's assessment and reorganization of the Bolshoi Theater.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>45</sup> RGALI f. 683 op. 1 d. 66 l. 3. Report by Alexander Gorsky, “O gosudarstvennoi baletnoi shkole pri GABTe”

level capable of performing as part of the Bolshoi Ballet troupe was the overriding goal of the school.

This again speaks to ballet's aesthetic power and influence. Classical ballet technique's primacy in the Ballet School after its re-opening was born of the assumption that for ballet to be ballet the classical aesthetic had to be maintained and perfected. Technical skill outweighed class background as a criterion for suitability for ballet work. Regardless of Lunacharsky's long term intentions, the school had students who were at various stages of completion when the transition took place and these students, almost none of whom came from the working class, would continue to dominate the Bolshoi Ballet during the 1920s as they graduated and (if they were deemed skilled enough) entered the ballet troupe themselves. In practice, the number who transitioned from school to stage varied dramatically year to year. To wit, at the end of the 1920-21 school year twenty-two people graduated from the school, seventeen of which entered into the Bolshoi Ballet as dancers. The following year only seven people graduated from the school, three of whom entered the troupe.<sup>46</sup>

Lunacharsky also set the basic structure of the program that would persist through the 1920s and into the 1930s. The nine-year program began with students between the ages of 8 and 10 and included both specialized education in ballet and general education in subjects like Russian Language, Literature, Mathematics and the sciences.<sup>47</sup> Absent at this time were courses explicitly on the topic of Marxism. It is also possible to see that Narkompros's desires for school curricula were largely ignored even in the Bolshoi's Ballet School. If there was one place that Narkompros should have been able to exert its influence (again, Lunacharsky himself wrote the charter!), it would have been a ballet school under the largest State Theater. However, in

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> RGALI f. 683 op. 1 d. 66 l. 4.

opposition to the directives, discussed earlier that called for a new educational paradigm that focused less on distinct academic subjects and more on general frameworks within which those subjects could be learned, the Bolshoi Theater's school divided class time into predictable subjects. Although students were required to take these general classes, preparation for a professional position in the Bolshoi troupe was the end game. Nonetheless, given the fact that a substantial number of students were removed from school on a yearly basis due to lack of ability in ballet, these general classes were an important part of the students' education. If they were moved to another school, or even graduated but failed to ascend into the Bolshoi Ballet itself, these classes would have represented the entirety of their scholastic preparation. Overall, the transition to the new organization of the Ballet School was relatively smooth. After the revolution the school had continued to teach its existing students, but had not admitted any new students between 1917 and 1920.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, the new charter and the reopening of admission to the Bolshoi Theater's Ballet School did breathe a new life into the school and offered a path for the training of a new generation of ballet dancers.

It also meant that the first students who completed the entire nine-year program from start to finish were not scheduled to graduate until 1929. Given the heated debate over ballet that ensued during the 1920s and the pace at which ideas were put forth and rejected, it was therefore not clear exactly what ballet would look like when the new students graduated. What was clear is that the dancers would be well trained in classical dance. The ballet curriculum outlined by Gorsky and Tikhomirov, who stood at the head of the ballet school, called for training in classical dance, miming, rhythm, character dance and other staples of classical ballet training.<sup>49</sup> As students progressed through the school they also began to learn subjects like sewing, for the

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<sup>48</sup> RGALI f. 683 op. 1 d. 66 l. 1.

<sup>49</sup> RGALI f. 683 op. 1 d. 66 l. 4.



purposes of creating and maintain costumes and ballet shoes and were introduced to the workings of the theater in preparation for a professional career.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, the outline for particular classes was not mandated in Lunacharsky's initial charter and this left the ability for the school, led by the Bolshoi Theater itself, to mold its program to the needs of the company.

Admission to the Ballet School was very difficult to obtain. The ideal student was eight years old, young enough to spend all nine years of instruction in the ballet school and come out the other end a seventeen-year old dancer ready to step into the Bolshoi Ballet. Her or she was in good health and was subject to a medical examination to determine their suitability for the ballet.<sup>51</sup> Lunacharsky's charter did not specify the specifics of the medical test, but the context suggests that the strength, fitness and general health (that is to say, lack of chronic illness or injury) were of paramount importance. Older students could enter the ballet school if they were prepared from another source of ballet training, but this was determined at the discretion of the Ballet School itself. Finally, the number of students was limited. In 1923, a total of 182 students across all nine classes attended the ballet school, which had risen from 127 in 1920 when the ballet school began admitting new students again.<sup>52</sup> The Ballet School was, therefore, accepting only about 25 new students per year including those students who were beginning at age eight and those who entered as older students. If more students were deemed acceptable to enter the school than space existed, school administrators arranged a special test (audition) in order to determine who the most qualified students were. Only the top students earned a spot at the school. The school administration, headed by Tikhomirov who was among the most artistically conservative artists at the Bolshoi, ultimately made the final decisions about who would be admitted. Tikhomirov's position at the head of the ballet school, then, also put him in a place of

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> RGALI f. 683 op. 1 d. 64 l. 4.

<sup>52</sup> RGALI f. 683 op. 1 d. 66 l. 3.

disproportionate power for determining the types of students. As someone who favored, above all else, a very traditional form of classical ballet, he had the ability to shape the school's study body to contain people he felt had the best chance to excel in that particular form.

Finally, the school was to organize regular public performances, again at the discretion of the administration, in order to "allow students to display their strength in ballet performances."<sup>53</sup> This allowed students to perform regularly, but also allowed for the school's teachers and administrators to evaluate their performance aptitude and readiness. At younger ages this was less important, but as training in theatrics, facial expression, and other performance qualities became a more central aspect of student training when the students neared the final two to three years of their training.<sup>54</sup>

### **Out with the Old, In with the Old.**

1922 was an important year for the Bolshoi Theater. Most importantly, by this time it was clear that the theater was safe from imminent closure. The days of the Bolshoi's administration worrying about how it would heat the building, let alone pay artists, had largely passed. This vital hurdle having been cleared, the Ballet still had all its work ahead of it. But even as the gears began turning in earnest in what would be more than a decade of attempts to answer the question of what socialist ballet should be, older works continued to grace the stage night after night. Still, this was always seen as, at best, a holding pattern that would eventually be shifted in a more clearly socialist direction. Of course, what that socialist direction was remained up for discussion. At this early stage, the fact that the discussion was beginning to take place in earnest marked a fundamental shift. In finally asking "*what* socialist ballet should be" the discourse about ballet implicitly included the notion that "socialist ballet should *be*." Despite these

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<sup>53</sup> RGALI f. 683 op. 2 d. 64 l. 4.

<sup>54</sup> RGALI f. 683 op. 1 d. 66 l. 4.

murmurs of a new direction, in 1922 things carried on mostly as they had in previous years. Dancers took classes, got injured, worked through them, and the troupe performed classical ballets throughout the season as they had the year before.

Gorsky's classes at the Ballet School were particularly popular in the early part of 1922. The classes lasted only several months, but contained about sixty dancers who regularly attended. At this time, Gorsky was still the premier voice for the ballet and choreographer for the Bolshoi Ballet and in Moscow. These dancers had the opportunity to work with Gorsky on a weekly basis and receive instruction in ballet technique.<sup>55</sup> Other classes continued as usual, and as one would expect, such a lifestyle led to frequent injuries that resulted in dancers missing time in classes and performances on a regular basis. Minor problems led to dancers missing only a day or two, while more serious injuries sometimes led to dancers missing weeks of time. Keeping track of such injuries and medical reasons for missed time was an important task for the Bolshoi administration as shown by their efforts to keep the information of who was missing time organized.<sup>56</sup> It also raised questions of labor discipline and what to do about a profession in which missing work was a normal part of the everyday operation of the institution.<sup>57</sup>

In September of 1922, 135 individual dancers participated in performances of ballets. However, there was significant variance in the number of performances by each dancer. The principal dancers, expectedly, appeared in nearly every performance during the month with the highest individual number of performances being twenty-four. Several dancers in the *corps de ballet* appeared in only four performances total during the same time period, although many

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<sup>55</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 215 ll. 1-3.

<sup>56</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 215 ll. 4-21

<sup>57</sup> For more on labor in the early Soviet Union, see William J. Chase, *Workers, Society and the Soviet State: Labor and Life in Moscow, 1918-1929* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

appeared in a majority of the month's shows.<sup>58</sup> This suggests that there were significant differences in the day-to-day experiences of dancers in the Bolshoi Ballet, even among those who had similar positions in the troupe. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the day-in and day-out work required to enter the ballet troupe and maintain one's level once there did not always pay off with regular performances.

Even as the Bolshoi looked forward to the future, the fact remained that it had many dancers, artists and other employees who had been hired before the revolution and continued to work. In 1922, in fact, most of the artists fell into this category. The Bolshoi also owed pensions to many workers who had retired before the revolution, and the Theater continued to pay their pensions as promised into the Soviet period. In the same year, the issue arose as to the Bolshoi's responsibility to its pre-revolutionary employees, in its new role as the State Academic Bolshoi Theater (GABT), including those who had retired prior to 1922. Individual cases, some dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were approved with little push back.<sup>59</sup>

## 1924

Into 1924 classical, pre-revolutionary ballets continued to dominate as the majority of the Bolshoi Ballet's performances. Throughout the season classic ballets were performed on stage with little indication or pretense of their being adapted for "socialist" purposes. The ballets were, of course, restaged for their performance at the Bolshoi, as all ballets must be when they are put on a stage after some time out of the repertory. Most commonly, Gorsky was in charge of these revivals and preparing the work to be put on the Bolshoi stage, aided by Tikhomirov. The ballets ranged from classics like *Swan Lake* and *Sleeping Beauty* with long histories in the nineteenth century to more recent pre-revolutionary ballets like Pepita's 1903 ballet *Magic Mirror*. Despite

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<sup>58</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2. d. 215 ll. 24-25.

<sup>59</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2. d. 215 ll. 74-96.

the ideological debates surrounding the ballet which had by this time emerged in public art discourse, week after week it was classical ballets which were performed at the Bolshoi.<sup>60</sup>

Although Kasian Goleizovsky was developing his more avant-garde work and even beginning to become appreciated, his work was not at this time part of the regularly scheduled performances for the Bolshoi Ballet's 1924 season.<sup>61</sup> Goleizovsky, who stood out as a choreographer who was willing take more experimental risks in ballet, did not rise to a level of substantial institutional influence at the Bolshoi Theater. Instead, Gorsky, with his long tenure as a steady force in Moscow's ballet world served as the guiding hand for the Bolshoi Ballet through 1924 and largely controlled what appeared on the stage there. This pre-revolutionary force continued the tradition of staging pre-revolutionary ballets.

However, Gorsky's role in restaging classical ballets should not indicate that he represented only a conservative force in the Bolshoi Ballet. As Elizabeth Souritz's work amply shows, Gorsky was a consistent and important force who helped to shape ballet as it developed in the 1920s. It must be stated that a strong affinity for classical ballet was not equivalent to a desire to see classical ballet stagnate. The process of reviving and restaging ballets inevitably leads to an evolution of those dances. Like biological evolution, this is not to suggest a kind historical progressivism, in which ballet improves over time. Rather, I argue that ballets inevitably change subtly to fit their historical moments. The influences of such changes vary. It can be changing artistic movements, political considerations, differences in the artists and dancers involved, and so forth. This is simply to say that while it is reasonable to conclude that

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<sup>60</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 374 ll. 8,12, 18, 31, 33, 47. (bi-weekly schedules)

<sup>61</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 374 l 64. Kasian Goleizovsky was an artist and choreographer with a choreographic vision for ballet that differed from both the nineteenth-century artists like Petipa and the early twentieth-century modernists like Fokine, Gorsky, and others. His work took inspiration from his interest in ethnography and interest in abstract form. Goleizovsky worked both at the Bolshoi Theater and elsewhere in Moscow during the 1920s. Nonetheless, his interest in abstraction eventually led to him being labeled a "formalist" and much of his work dismissed. Further discussion of Goleizovsky and his work can be found in chapters three and four.

pre-revolutionary ballets did represent a kind of conservatism, their presence in the repertory should not indicate that ballet at the Bolshoi Theater was artistically stagnant. Notably, Gorsky's work to bring classical ballets to the Bolshoi stage from 1922-24 helped to justify Lunarcharsky's support of the ballet as an art form and ensure the Theater's continued prominence despite the reservations of some political opponents who deemed the work to be unsuitable for a socialist state. Instead, the continued production of ballets, as well as their attraction, helped to keep the Bolshoi as a relevant artistic institution in the early Soviet Union by maintaining its reputation as an agent of high culture. The position of the Bolshoi Theater in the larger society was momentarily stable, even if not set in stone. Inside the Bolshoi Theater, the administration also worked to maintain stability.

In August 1924, in the waning days of the summer break and before the onset of the fall season, the Bolshoi Theater's administration laid down a new set of rules for members of the ballet troupe. The 1924 rules for the ballet troupe were designed to keep daily rehearsals and performances running as smoothly as possible. Notably, the rules continued to establish a clear hierarchy within the ballet troupe that started at the top with the manager of the troupe and descended through the ranks of assistants and helpers who took care of specific tasks and reported problems outside their purview to the head of ballet or the administrator of the theater depending on who was available at the time. The hierarchy was to be maintained at all times. Even the Ballet's leaders were not given the ability to change the casts for a given show without first consulting and seeking the approval of directorial office.<sup>62</sup> In other words, the specific duties of each helper, or head of a specific task was not to use their position for any other purpose. In the Bolshoi Ballet, whose leadership still remained largely untouched from before the revolution, this meant that power over the dancers, who despite their generally white-collar background

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<sup>62</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 334 l. 62.

represented a kind of “working class” of the ballet world, remained at the mercy of the same artists that held sway prior to the revolution.

At the bottom of the hierarchical ladder were, of course, the dancers themselves, who had little control over their working conditions, let alone the direction of the art form. For example, according to the 1924 rules, dancers were “required to obey all orders of the assistant director leading the rehearsal or performance unquestioningly.”<sup>63</sup> Although there was not an official distinction between dancers when it came to the bureaucratic hierarchy, there was an enormous distinction between principal dancers, members of the *corps de ballet*, and dancers who danced for the Bolshoi Ballet only part time.<sup>64</sup> Extreme differences existed in the influence and salary of principal dancers like Ekaterina Geltser, whose status as one of the greatest dancers of her time led to entire ballets being revived for the sake of her ability to perform them, and the rank and file dancers who scraped by and who hoped to prove themselves enough to advance up the proverbial ladder.

Despite this difference in stature and pay among performers, performance nights were the most strictly hierarchical aspect of work in the Bolshoi Ballet. During performances dancers who were not actively participating were not to be backstage, whether they be understudies or had been replaced in the performance. Those who were missing a performance due to illness were barred from coming to the theater at all.<sup>65</sup> Although these rules have make sense for the sake of running a performance, they also suggest that being a member of the ballet was not, by itself, enough to earn you a place at all the performances, even as a spectator. The strict hierarchy of

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> For example, Geltser’s salaries often were many times that of the more ordinary dancers in the ballet. RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d 1495 ll. 7-9 and RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1650 ll. 31-32. Both of these *dela* (1495 and 1650) contain extensive documentation of dancer and artist salaries from this period.

<sup>65</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 334 ll. 63.

the ballet troupe was maintained throughout all aspects of work at the Theater: classes, rehearsals, performances.

Even problems among dancers themselves were to be immediately appealed to a higher authority within the theater. Disagreements between the artists were to be adjudicated by the manager of the ballet or the director of the theater if necessary. In the day-to-day operation of the Bolshoi Theater, the administration was very concerned with maintaining a strict hierarchy and chain of command. Despite the rhetoric which demanded work that was more accessible to the workers, the equivalent workers in the Bolshoi itself were given relatively little power. The Bolshoi, no doubt in part due to its pre-revolutionary legacy, did not have the experimental non-hierarchical structure attempted by some musical and theatrical ensembles. This speaks to yet another theme that emerges in the study of the Bolshoi Ballet in the 1920s, and that will feature centrally in the following chapter. The size of the Bolshoi Theater, the quality of work demanded by its reputation and place as a cultural institution, and the internal logistical necessities that came with performing highly complex works helped to keep the Theater's hierarchical structure intact.

Furthermore, the requirements of being in the ballet troupe extended beyond the walls of the theater. All members were required to be home between six and seven in the evening and to have their exact address on record "in case of emergency rehearsal or performance changes."<sup>66</sup> From the point of the view of the artists, this was a somewhat limiting solution to the problem that unexpected events might mean they had to come to the theater at a moment's notice on performance night even if they had not been scheduled to perform. This imposition on dancers infringed on time that they would normally not be giving to the theater, and there is no indication that they were paid specifically for the time spent waiting to find out if they were needed. Even

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<sup>66</sup> RGALI f. 648 op 2 d. 334 ll. 62-63.



given the relatively poor phone infrastructure in Moscow during this time period, let alone the lack of modern day conveniences like mobile phones, it was nonetheless considered a necessary rule to ensure that dancers could be reached when they were needed. In normal cases, dancers were required to be at the theater only thirty minutes prior to the beginning of the performance and to be prepared for rehearsals fifteen minutes prior to their beginning.<sup>67</sup>

The dancers had, according to the rules of the theaters, some of the most stringent responsibilities, but were also the recipients of the least amount of freedom and rights within the organization, to mention nothing of their relatively paltry pay. Nonetheless, being a dancer at the Bolshoi did afford some measure of help in the Soviet system. For example, the requirement to be at home awaiting a phone call that might never come on performance nights provided dancers with a small amount of leverage: the ability to request access to a phone at their residence if one was not already available because their work demanded it. Such was the case for Nadezhda Alexandrovna Nikolaeva, an ordinary member of the troupe on whose behalf the Bolshoi Theater's administration wrote a request for the installation of a telephone in her apartment.<sup>68</sup> As an institution, the Bolshoi helped its dancers with things like travel, which was otherwise quite difficult to manage and arrange. Although the travel was generally related to their work in the company, it helped to establish the Bolshoi as a useful go-between in the lives of dancers between themselves and the central state. The Bolshoi Theater was, of course, a state institution in itself. But this afforded it the ability to stand on equal footing with other institutions on behalf of its dancers.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 334 l. 62.

<sup>68</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 1 d. 2203 l. 9.

<sup>69</sup> This kind of "patron-client" relationship between the Bolshoi Theater and its dancers in their relationship to the Soviet state is in line with the work of Shiela Fitzpatrick, among others, in their study of Stalinism. See, for example: Sheila Fitzpatrick *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Despite the rather stringent rules for the members of the ballet troupe employees, artists and others alike, operated under a collective agreement that was renegotiated once per year. The agreement contains few surprises. Employees who had worked at the Bolshoi Theater at least five-and-a-half months were granted up to one month of paid leave per year, during which time they would receive half their salary. During the summer break, that is to say during the time that the Bolshoi Theater's season was not actively running, and therefore, when there were no performances, employees received two-thirds of their usual monthly salary. Employees who continued to work at the Bolshoi Theater full time throughout the summer, of course, continued to receive their full salary throughout the warm months of the year.<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, the final point of the contract also stipulated that artists at the Bolshoi Theater were not permitted to perform "in other artistic enterprises without the prior written consent" of the director's office.<sup>71</sup> This meant that artists who were lucky enough to find themselves working for the Bolshoi Theater had little ability to produce their art in other venues. Finally, and perhaps most importantly secured the link between trained, skilled dancers and the Bolshoi Theater itself.

The dancers in the Bolshoi Theater did have rights as workers, including the right to negotiate collectively each year. However, as can be seen in the rules for the troupe, they frequently had to make considerably personal concessions and neither held much power in the day-to-day operations of the theater nor control over their working conditions. By the beginning of the yearly season in the fall of 1924, this relationship between the workers place within the institution. It was also by this time that a strong cohort of young dancers was beginning to emerge in the Bolshoi Theater. The rules for dancers and their day-to-day ramifications for life in the Theater are not just evidence of the persistence of the Bolshoi Theater's rigid hierarchy. The

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<sup>70</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 344 l. 87. "Kollektivnii Dogovor"

<sup>71</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 344 l. 88.

hierarchy very closely tracked the continuing supremacy of classical technique's aesthetic. The surest way to ascend the hierarchy was to demonstrate superior technical skill, defined by precisely that aesthetic. Although the dancers did not express any discontent with their situation as a group in 1924, by 1925 things would change.<sup>72</sup>

### **Riabtsev's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the Bolshoi**

Born in 1880, Vladimir Riabtsev first entered the Bolshoi Ballet as a member of the *corps de ballet* in 1898. Therefore, Riabtsev had been a mainstay in the Bolshoi Ballet since well before the revolution, having worked extensively with Alexander Gorsky and Mikhail Mordkin before the revolution. On 28 October 1923, his twenty-fifth anniversary in the Bolshoi, a small celebratory performance was performed in his honor. The celebration included several small scenes from his past leading roles, all in classical pre-revolutionary ballets. Riabtsev danced again at the celebration, in the leading roles of each of these short excerpts, with the rest of the ballet filling in the roles around him. The performance was a one-time Sunday evening event at the Bolshoi Theater that was more celebration than spectacle.<sup>73</sup> The unique nature of the event makes it difficult to draw far-reaching conclusions and therefore somewhat limits the usefulness of the celebration for the purposes of analyzing ballet. Nonetheless, it does highlight at least one important point about the relationship between pre- and post-revolutionary ballet. The past, art and artist, were to be celebrated.

Riabtsev's continued presence, alongside many of the other prominent figures in the post-revolutionary Bolshoi Ballet, was indicative of leading figures who were long-term members of the Bolshoi Theater and who had begun their careers well before the revolution. Riabtsev was no different in this case. Notably, his career began in the *corps de ballet* and he rose through the

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<sup>72</sup> As is discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>73</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 250 l. 15.

ranks to become one of the leading members of the ballet, a soloist, and then assistant director. Rising through the ranks in such a fashion was not unheard of, but speaks to Riabstev's skill, longevity and also to his being well-liked and respected at the Bolshoi Theater. His story brings to light two important aspects of the Bolshoi Theater in 1923. First, pre-revolutionary members of the ballet were not just tolerated, but also celebrated. Riabtsev was not quite in the highest tier of artist inside the Bolshoi Theater, despite having worked with those artists himself. However, longevity mattered and the revolution did not create a divide across which that longevity was either broken or forgotten. This extended outside the Bolshoi Theater. Riabtsev was not only honored within the Bolshoi Theater for his long and successful tenure as an artist within its walls. The same year he received honor as a Distinguished Artist of the RSFSR. Neither the Bolshoi Theater itself nor the state had any qualm with celebrating and honoring its pre-revolutionary past. Second, it shows how indebted Bolshoi Ballet remained in both artistic knowledge and technical proficiency to its pre-revolutionary past. It is worth again mentioning the importance of the Ballet School here. As long as ballet remained an art form in the Soviet Union – and it did – the ballet masters and teachers, who required a lifetime of training from a young age, were an absolutely necessary feature of the ballet world. The Soviet Union could not simply train a new generation of dancers that was entirely separate from the pre-revolutionary artists or that transcended their influence. Riabtsev himself believed in the importance of the ballet's pre-revolutionary legacy and Lunacharsky's similar feelings helped to shield the Bolshoi from criticism. The celebration went off as planned and without much further discussion, another relatively unspoken and quiet nod to the Bolshoi's imperial past.

### ***Zhizn' Iskusstva*, Akim Volynsky and Alexei Gvozdev**

In 1923 *Zhizn' Iskusstva* was a Petrograd-based journal that published articles on a wide variety of topics in the arts, not the least of which was ballet. The year prior, in 1922, it had transitioned from a brief daily publication that mainly focused on publishing the dates and times of upcoming events, theatrical schedules, and similar, to a much more in-depth, weekly, format that featured lengthy articles on all manner of the arts and featured a front page article from the editors that often took an explicitly political tone. While the publication had previously contained occasional lengthy articles on topics in the arts, the 1922 format shift marked a dramatic change in the type and amount of content associated with the journal. With the new format requiring regular articles, the prolific ballet writer Akim Volynsky became ballet columnist for the journal, where he wrote (almost) weekly articles until early 1924. Although the publication certainly did have more influence and readership in its home city, the articles published in the journal do form an important part of the overall discussion on ballet in the early 1920s. It is also notable for the fact that it published those weekly Volynsky articles. Although the publication, as a whole, was concerned with the future of the arts in the Soviet Union, Volynsky himself was very steeped in ballet's past. Volynsky's articles are often best analyzed in the context of the journal's front-page editorials, which help to provide more context about the politicized environment in which they were written.

Akim Volynsky had been a mainstay in Russian cultural criticism for over thirty years by the time of the Russian Revolution.<sup>74</sup> It is not an exaggeration to say that Volynsky was a more conservative, one might go as far as to say regressive, voice in ballet than existed anywhere within the academic theaters themselves. At the Bolshoi Theater, even Gorksy had come under

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<sup>74</sup> Stanley J. Rabinowitz. "Introduction: Akim Volynsky and His Writings in Dance" in Akim Volynsky *Ballet's Magic Kingdom: Selected Writings on Dance in Russia 1911-1925* ed. And trans. Stanley J. Rabinowitz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), xxxviii.

fire from Volynsky on several occasions after his choreography strayed from purely classical work into more modernist explorations in ballet. Because much of Volynsky's career as a ballet critic extends backwards in time well beyond the revolution, it is worth drawing a brief sketch of his pre-revolutionary beliefs on ballet in order to contextualize why his departure from the Soviet ballet world in 1924 marked an important shift. Volynsky, Stanley Rabinowitz explains, had a view of ballet based on "the critic's private mythology of ballet's magic kingdom, of dance as an art that occasionally seems to have been more imagined than observed."<sup>75</sup> For example, he explains that Volynsky understood art to be "mythopoeic, and that dance in particular contains and therefore must recapture what to were him its classical, mythical roots."<sup>76</sup> Therefore, to Volynsky even having a discussion of socialism, for or against, in the world of ballet was already ceding far too much ground. Indeed, prior to the revolution, Volynsky had already expressed his critical distaste for Fokine's work and other ballet that let too much of a modern influence creep into its choreography. Therefore, even prior to the revolution, Volynsky was already pushing back against the development of ballet away from what he saw as its classical origins. This discussion existed outside the political considerations that the revolution eventually brought to the debate. However, somewhat humorously, Rabinowitz argues that Volynsky was eventually removed as the ballet writer for *Zhizn' Iskusstva* not for his political beliefs, but because he became "so irritating."<sup>77</sup>

The first *Zhizn' Iskusstva* of the New Year, 1923, was published on the third of January. The front page boldly ran the headline "Old and New" as a way of bringing in the New Year. The article on the front page, a weekly series by the editors, wrote plainly of the previous year "with respect to our theaters it is impossible not to admit that the results of their annual activity,

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<sup>75</sup> Rabinowitz, "Introduction," xxxvii.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., xxxviii.

in terms of new developments and searches, was not particularly rich.”<sup>78</sup> The influence of NEP on the direction the theaters had taken during the previous year particularly stood out to the editors, who wrote “the majority of theaters, with the introduction of the principle of self-support, have surrendered their ideological positions to the explicitly bazar-like demands of the public, forgetting the main task of the theater – to lead the viewers, not submit to them.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, they were concerned that the financial limitations on theaters, resulting from the NEP policies that drastically reduced funding to schools and cultural institutions alike, had caused them to take less ideological stances in favor of staging performances that were more likely to bring in viewers, and therefore money.<sup>80</sup> As a result, they claimed that the “the old” had too big a place in the creative work of theaters, but ended the article on a positive note by stressing the potential for “new beginnings.”<sup>81</sup> Notably, their concerns did not apply only to ballet, but rather to the theaters more generally speaking and therefore targeted operatic and dramatic performances alongside ballet.

In the same issue, Volynsky’s article appeared beginning on the very next page, a stark contrast to the admonition from the editors. Let us take a moment to appreciate just how shocking Volynsky’s words might be when appearing directly after the just-discussed editorial. “I dream of a new ballet,” he wrote.<sup>82</sup> “I have already long been dreaming of a theme inspired by one unforgettable evening at Delos when, due to rough seas, I did not dare to return to the island of Mykonos and had to spend the night in the same shack where famous members of the French Archive Commission had huddled. Here Apollo was born. Here was the great nursery of the sun

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<sup>78</sup> The editors, “Staroe i novoe” *Zhizn’ Iskusstva*, 3 January 1923, 1.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Find further discussion of “popular” and “mass” art in Chapter 3.

<sup>81</sup> The editors, “Staroe i novoe,” 1.

<sup>82</sup> Here, context should indicate to the reader that Volynsky meant a new ballet in the sense of a new work, rather than a “new ballet” in these sense of a new direction for ballet writ-large.

god!”<sup>83</sup> It was in this kind of lofty, high minded, indeed mythological, tone that Volynsky wrote about ballet, and it was precisely this kind of writing that inspired Rabinowitz to describe Volynsky in the fashion that he did. This particular example captures Volynsky’s ideas about ballet, but it is also useful to historians because it gives a rather stark example of the way it was possible to write about ballet in a public, widely distributed medium like *Zhizn’ Iskusstva*. Much like in the case of teaching ballet itself, this was in part due to the fact that there were simply few people with the knowledge and desire to write weekly columns about ballet, political or not. In such an atmosphere it is actually easy to imagine Volynsky remaining the ballet writer for a publication like *Zhizn’ Iskusstva*. But it is, in any event, not Volynsky’s existence that needs explaining, rather what his words and writing style mean for the historical interpretation of ballet in the early Soviet Union.

Volynsky went on to write a three-page article outlining a ballet based on the birth of Apollo. The publication did not quite rise to the level of being a deliberate libretto for the ballet, but at times it does resemble one. The ballet shared the name of the article – The Birth of Apollo – and was set in ancient Greece. Several acts are described, interspersed with remarks about ballet more generally. I do not know exactly who had the final say about the layout for the first 1923 issue of *Zhizn’ Iskusstva*, or what the decision making process was for printing Volynsky’s article at the very front of the journal. Regardless, one has to stop for a moment and marvel at the dramatic and instantaneous shift in tone from explicitly political to wistful and Romantic. Such articles were commonly written by Volynsky and show the breadth of how ballet was understood still in 1923. At the same time that Lunacharsky was arguing over the direction of the arts in the Soviet Union with more radical groups, and the Bolshoi Theater’s Ballet School was settling into

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<sup>83</sup> Akim Volynsky, “Rozhdenie Apollona” *Zhizn’ Iskusstva*, 3 January 1923, 2.



the middle of its second year of existence under Soviet power, Volynsky was musing publically about the birth of Apollo.

Meanwhile, *Zhizn' Iskusstva*'s front-page editorials continued to muse about the political and economic situation in the country. Such articles continued throughout the summer, but rarely touched explicitly on the theaters. One such editorial appeared on September 23, when the editors once again turned to the issue of the state theaters in particular. The article compared the situation in the state theaters, particularly the state academic theaters, with the smaller, less prestigious theaters. When compared to the smaller theaters, "in the sense of self-sufficiency, academic theaters certainly have more options: they have first-class artists, the habits of the public, and a firmly-established artistic (although not always indisputable) reputation."<sup>84</sup> From a practical standpoint, the editors argued, the state academic theaters, like the Bolshoi Theater, had the best of both worlds. They had what little state support existed during these early years of NEP and they had the advantage of being institutions that were already well established and therefore had the means to help fund themselves, while less well established organizations and theaters were hit the hardest by NEP era policies. Their observation was, frankly, quite astute. In an atmosphere of economic uncertainty, as demonstrated earlier in this chapter, the academic theaters *did* have some advantages, even if those advantages often pushed them to eschew the risks associated with new works.

The editors also commended the academic theaters for the quality of their artists. Furthermore, the issue runs parallel to the education situation and suggests that the same issues elucidated by Holmes and Fitzpatrick are not only available to use in retrospect, but also weighed on the minds of contemporaries who tried to understand the new place of cultural and artistic institutions. Indeed, the editors of *Zhizn' Iskusstva* clearly understood that the academic theaters

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<sup>84</sup> The editors, "A Gosteatry?" *Zhizn' Iskusstva*, 23 September 1923, 1.

had a central role when it came the popular education of the masses. The “public habits” to which they referred were no doubt the fact that the Bolshoi Theater and other academic theaters were already generally understood to be the premiere destinations for the arts. This once again raises the issue of historical inertia and aesthetic power. Even as the Bolshoi Theater went out of its way to make itself more accessible to workers by setting aside seats at reduced prices, it was already understood that it had the easier time attracting audiences. Consequently, they also had additional emphasis on the responsibility of “leading” the viewer. Nonetheless, they do acknowledge the fact that academic theaters’ artistic reputation was in possible dispute. The editorial as a whole paints a picture of the unclear position of the state theaters in the artistic world of 1923. The Bolshoi Ballet was, it seems, both prestigious and underperforming.

As a result of this responsibility, state theaters were also open to a certain kind of criticism that smaller, less funded and amateur theaters did not face. The very same thing that allowed the Bolshoi Theater to be relatively stable in the face of political, cultural and economic uncertainty also opened it up to criticism. *Zhizn’ Iskusstva* ran a front page editorial on Christmas day, 1923, that began with a clear statement: “The repertoire of our academic theaters is tightly nested in stagnation and routine, in succession with the grim legacy of the previous regime, its dead stagnation and superstitious fear of anything new, bold and bright.”<sup>85</sup> It was not just the connection to the old that made them uncomfortable with the work of the academic theaters, but the evidence that other artists had embraced the task of creating revolutionary art. They went on, “we have already repeatedly mentioned that this phenomenon is doubly unacceptable in these turbulent, revolutionary times, during the building of a new life and the achievement of new revelations of art”<sup>86</sup> Now heading toward the end of 1923, nearly a full year after their New

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<sup>85</sup> The editors, “Akademicheskii sdvig.” *Zhizn’ Iskusstva*, 25 December 1923, 1.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Year's editorial calling for a new year of development in the theater world, it was clear that relatively little progress, at least as they defined it, had been made.

Therefore, voices, like Lunacharsky, who defended the academic theaters on the basis that they were institutions that could transmit culture to the masses, had also given critics of the pre-revolutionary forms ammunition with which to attack the theaters when they did not seem to be contributing to the revolutionary cause. If there was a minor drawback to ballet's aesthetic power in the early Soviet Union, it was that the status accompanying it led to high expectations for theaters like the Bolshoi. It was not that all critics of the academic theaters wanted them to be completely shut down. By 1923, the question of whether or not academic theaters, like the Bolshoi Theater, would be shut down had largely been put to rest. The theaters were here to stay. The question, now, was how did they fit into the revolutionary artistic and cultural world that was still being created. The editors of *Zhizn' Iskusstva* understood that the answer to the question lay in the ability of the academic theaters to produce a new work, suitable for the revolutionary times in which they lived. They clearly thought and believed it could happen. New works they "want[ed] to believe, will open a new era in the life and work of the academic theaters."<sup>87</sup> This kind of overt optimism continued on despite the fact that the academic theaters had shown very little sign of developing along the same lines of the smaller, more agile theaters.<sup>88</sup>

It also showed a kind of optimism for the future of these artistic institutions rather than an outright rejection of them for their pre-revolutionary art. The academic theaters were not just imperial relics that were worth keeping around as museums of imperial high culture, but institutions that could be shaped in the direction of the revolution. This was, I argue, perfectly indicative of the type of thought about the academic theaters in the early 1920s, and in ballet

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> This distinction between the "big" academic theaters and other "small" theaters is explored in the next chapter.

specifically. The question that was finally beginning to be raised was what socialist ballet would actually look like. Despite the optimism about the possibility shown in the *Zhizn' Iskusstva* editorials, it is also very clear that they had very little idea what shape a socialist ballet might take. At this stage, the *Zhizn' Iskusstva* editors were simply using clichéd terms like “new” and “bright” to describe the kind of art they wanted to see out of the Bolshoi Theater. This vague, uncertain, language with regard to the specifics of what a revolutionary ballet would look like remained a feature of the discourse surrounding ballet until the mid-1930s.

The recurring themes of technique and expertise should once again be raised here. The same way that the extreme technical training required by ballet limited the potential pool of ballet teachers, once the debate shifted to focus on ballet, a new problem arose for critics. Very few people existed who were proficient and well versed enough in the art form to mount a detailed and nuanced critique of the art form. Fewer still existed who wanted to directly engage with the question of how ballet should adapt to socialism. By the end of 1923, Akim Volynsky was nearing the end of his time as a writer for the *Zhizn' Iskusstva*, and the fact that he was liked neither by those pushing for an explicitly socialist or revolutionary ballet nor those within the academic theaters themselves meant that his voice was becoming increasingly marginalized.

Earlier in December 1923, Volynsky wrote an article asking “Where is Russian ballet?” The balance of power in the ballet world, he worried, was shifting away from Russia. What is remarkable is that Volynsky’s analysis of the situation looks prescient in hindsight. He was worried about many of the same things that have informed the way that ballet historians have thought about the early Soviet period. The perceived loss of talent to “the West” and ballet’s center of gravity shifting to America concerned Volynsky and also implicitly, and sometimes

explicitly, informed the analysis of several dance historians, including Mary Grace Swift.<sup>89</sup>

Nonetheless, Volynsky was still somewhat stuck between two worlds. On the one hand, he had historically been highly critical of The Ballets Russes for its avant-garde ballets that strayed from classical norms. On the other hand, Diaghilev's artists and those in Russia with similar taste were the ones that were, in fact, leaving Russia to dance in the West after the revolution. Volynsky recognized their talent and lamented their loss. He felt that it was necessary to take immediate action in order to assure that these dancers stayed in Russia and furthermore, to invite new ballet masters to Russia. "It is necessary" he wrote in his 11 December article, "to invite ballet masters to Petrograd, moreover, ballet masters not of Fokine's type, whose stilted, ignorant experiments long ago lost credit in Europe, but the purely classical, who have full knowledge of this field."<sup>90</sup>

Ignoring for a moment what I consider to be Volynsky's false claim, that Fokine was not respected in Europe, it is notable that Volynsky sees the necessity of going abroad to bring talent, Russian talent, to Russia. By the end of his article, his frustration was clear: "Where is Russian ballet?" he asked, "Petrograd or New York?"<sup>91</sup> Volynsky's very Petrograd-centered understanding of the Russian ballet world can be forgiven; it is where he lived and worked. His concern though, was not limited to Petrograd. He posited that with the forces of ballet settling somewhat West of his location, the ability for ballet to continue on as the art form that he imagined it to be would be significantly hampered. Here, his analysis departs from today's dance historians, who largely agree that while the early Soviet ballet might not have produced very many memorable ballets, it certainly produced very many memorable ballet dancers.<sup>92</sup>

Historians, of course, have the benefit of hindsight, and therefore, being able to see that in fact

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<sup>89</sup> See especially chapter three of Mary Grace Swift, *The Art of the Dance in the USSR* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 53-92.

<sup>90</sup> Akim Volynsky, "Gde byt' russkomu baletu?" *Zhizn' Iskusstva* 11 December 1923, 11.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (Random House: New York, 2010), 394.

many accomplished ballet dancers came out of the early Soviet Union. Nonetheless, Volynsky underestimated the power of Soviet ballet schools, like the one at the Bolshoi Theater, to continue the training of the next generation of ballet dancers. It is, again, notable just how different Volynsky's 1923 priorities and concerns for ballet were from the prevailing opinions of his time. Far from a concern about whether or not ballet could be reconciled with socialism, or even whether or not the academic theaters could take a more central role in educating the masses through their art, Volynsky was extremely concerned with the ability of ballet to continue to reach back into and indeed recreate a mythological past. An attentive reader may have noticed that the editors of *Zhizn' Iskusstva* had a rather different understanding of what was going on inside the academic theaters. Just as they lamented the continuation of the academic theaters' "grim legacy" of the past, Akim Volynsky believed that very legacy was slipping away. And so we have yet another reminder that the situation was very unclear, even to those making pronouncements about the art form's future.

Volynsky was singular. In the end his words resonated neither with his editors nor with the artists inside the walls of the Bolshoi Theater. His idiosyncratic notions of ballet proved to be his downfall, at least as a contributing writer to *Zhizn' Iskusstva*. In 1924 the young and fiery critic Alexei Gvozdev took over for Volynsky. With the change in personnel, the journal's ballet articles began to sound much more like their front-page editorials. Gvozdev was one of the few, soon to be joined by Sollertinsky, who had both the knowledge and the desire to bring a more political element to the public discourse on ballet. However, it must be stated that Gvozdev's more political lens did not equate to vapid or meaningless critique. He understood ballet and wrote thoughtful, provoking articles on the topic of how ballet might change in the coming years. For example, Gvozdev wrote the forward for Meyerhold's book *October Theater (Teatralnii*

*Oktiabr'*) in which he outlined the direction of the future of theater as being an art form of “mass group play” rather than the individualism of the old theater.<sup>93</sup> He was particularly interested in the use of miming in theater, as a way of promoting the group aspects of performance.<sup>94</sup> Gvozdev was a theater critic first, and his interest in theater informed his understanding of ballet. This impulse foreshadows the eventual shift towards *drambalet* – the answer in ballet to an anti-formalism that emphasized the role of drama in the ballet - but, in 1924, anti-formalism was not yet part of the discourse and we should not read too far into the similar language. We can see the beginnings of the kinds of ideas that eventually came to the forefront in the ballet world a decade later, but these ideas were not yet clearly articulated. Indeed, as will become apparent, Gvozdev was far from advocating for the ascendancy of ballet’s purely dramatic elements in 1924.

Throughout the rest of the 1920s, Gvozdev would be one of the loudest public voices that called for the reform of ballet. In 1924, he served to help shift the discussion on ballet at a critical moment – the death of Alexander Gorsky. Gorsky’s death represented a changing of the guard in the Bolshoi Theater, even though Tikhomirov was himself somewhat of a more conservative force than Gorsky had been. However, in a Soviet Union where the public discourse on ballet was being shifted explicitly towards socialism, even Tikhomirov would be inclined to consider infusing socialism into his ballets at the Bolshoi Theater. Gvozdev was interested in the path forward for ballet in the Soviet Union, but he was far from wanting dismantling it. In fact, his words often implicitly supported much of the work of existing artists within the academic theater.

*Zhizn' Iskusstva* published Gvozdev’s first article in its 25 March 1924 issue. The topic did not stand out as especially political, in light of Volynsky’s parting. It had the relatively

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<sup>93</sup> I. I. Shneiderman. “Aleksei Aleksandrovich Gvozdev” in A.A Gvozdev, *Teatralnaia Kritika*, ed. N. A. Tarshis (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1987), 6-7.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

unassuming title “Impressionism and Ballet” and was far from a screed against impressionism or ballet, as one might expect given the emerging importance of the dramatic. Instead, Gvozdev argued that impressionism might be a way forward for ballet. This was, it must be said, hardly a radical idea even within the ballet world. It was, however, a dramatic shift from Volynsky, who regarded impressionism as a development in ballet to be placed alongside Fokine’s “ignorant experiments.” Impressionism was well within the realm of the kind of work already being done inside the academic theaters. In his maiden article, Gvozdev wrote “the impressionistic interpretation of music can serve as an excellent school, and reveal the path to modern dynamism.”<sup>95</sup> He was interested, then, in the ability of music to provide the background for what would be impressionistic dance. Furthermore, he even invokes romantic ballets as a positive example that can be built upon. He adds that “the lyrical part of *Firebird* is done successfully” and specifically mentions “aid of a strong tradition,” such as the “romantic flights” of *Giselle*.<sup>96</sup> Two things stand out in Gvozdev’s first article in *Zhizn’ Iskusstva*. First of all, Gvozdev was looking to the future of ballet. Despite invoking *Giselle*, he was interested in ways the past, and therefore ballet’s existing strengths, could be used to push the art form in a new direction. It was not that ballet in the Soviet Union simply needed to embrace lyricism. Instead, ballet should look to lyricism as a way to “reveal the path” to a ballet more suitable for the revolutionary period. Second, despite his interest in theater and theatrical elements in ballet, it is very clear that the discussion was not, at this point in time, moving entirely in the direction of dramatic ballet. Instead, the year 1924 is marked by what can be called the first deliberate attempts to truly grapple with the issues surrounding ballet as an art form and how they fit into the new world. Here, Gvozdev is quite willing to believe that this kind of impressionistic quality could be used

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<sup>95</sup> A. Gvozdev, “Impressionizm i balet” *Zhizn’ Iskusstva*, 25 March 1924, 7.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.



to great effect in the right circumstances. Whereas Volynsky had repeatedly seen crisis in Russia's ballet world when he felt it was turning away from its past, Gvozdev saw hope for development looking to the future.

### Conclusion

At the end of the 1924 season the Bolshoi Theater was still performing practically the same repertory that it had prior to the revolution. Murmurings of a move towards socialist ballet had begun, but the specifics of such a form were as of yet entirely immaterial. Alexei Gvozdev's writings in *Zhizn' Iskusstva* helped shift the Soviet discussion of ballet toward a more political and future-oriented direction. In doing so, he did not always beat the drum for a radical reform of ballet, nor did he even call for more explicitly socialist narratives. He was, however, quite concerned with how ballet might progress and develop in the new world in which he was living. He was not alone. The front page editorials in 1924 increasingly took aim at shifting the arts in more socialist, proletarian directions. Notably, specifics were often absent. Yet, the question "how?" was being asked seriously for the first time, even in imperial art forms like the ballet. Several such editorials even directly addressed the problem of the academic theaters. By the end of 1924, *Zhizn' Iskusstva* ran very much the same article they had the year before, condemning the old and expressing hope for the new. Their final words of the year: "To a Happy New Year of hard work on the cultural front."<sup>97</sup>

Alexander Gorsky's death in 1924 meant that the Bolshoi Theater was necessarily put into yet another transitory moment. Gorsky's classical pedigree and willingness to engage with new ideas had given him a steady hand in navigating the climate of the early Soviet Union. Although Gorsky, unlike Malinovskaia, did not play an important role in the Bolshoi Theater's

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<sup>97</sup> The editors, "Novii God Kul'turnoi rabotoi" *Zhizn' Iskusstva* 30 December 1924, 5.

administration, he nonetheless played an enormous role in the selection of classical ballets that had consistently appeared on the Bolshoi Theater's stage between 1917-1924. After his death, Vasily Tikhomirov took over as the most influential choreographer at the Bolshoi Theater. Tikhomirov was a long time dancer and choreographer at the Bolshoi Theater and was by all measures a sensible and qualified choice to replace Gorsky. While the two shared much in common choreographically, Tikhomirov proved to be slightly more conservative in his views about ballet. In combination with the discourse surrounding ballet, which argued that it needed to more consciously move itself toward reconciliation with socialism, this set up an interesting dichotomy going into 1925. Tikhomirov was not entirely opposed to the project of bringing socialism to ballet, he simply believed that it was well within the ability of classical dance to do justice to the new historical moment. Also director of the Ballet School, this left Tikhomirov in a place of great influence as an agent of classical ballet's aesthetic influence, which only amplified the effects of classical ballet's aesthetic power inside the Bolshoi Theater. Therefore, it was under the oversight of this unlikely source, Tikhomirov, that the Bolshoi Ballet was ushered into the era of "socialist" ballet. Socialist ballet came to the Bolshoi Theater's stage by way of an equally unlikely source: Romanticism.

### CHAPTER 3: *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People*: Searching for Socialism in Romantic Ballet on the “Big” Stage.

*Scene 1 – This scene is dominated by the masses, the poor lumpenproletariat. It is, so to say, a carnival of poverty, although many, being disguised, appear as something quite different from what they really are.*<sup>1</sup>

- From Mikhail Galperin's libretto for *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People*

The mid-1920s marked the Bolshoi Theater's most significant attempt to date to reconcile the historically aristocratic ballet and the new socialist era. The holding pattern of the early 1920s was beginning to give way to more genuine and forceful attempts to reimagine the art of ballet in socialist terms. As discussed in the previous chapter, changes in the public discourse and debate surrounding the ballet, punctuated by the Gvozdev's replacement of the prolific Volynsky as the ballet writer for *Zhizn' Iskusstva*, marked a shift from treating ballet merely as a relic of the past, even if one worth preserving, to understanding that it too should be an agent for future change in the Soviet Union. Still, the Bolshoi Theater seemed unable to mount the necessary will, expertise and resources to produce original, revolutionary ballets until the middle of the decade. As an organization steeped in its historical artistic technique and heritage, it turned to a common practice among ballet theaters – the revival. By choosing to revive an existing ballet and modify it to fit its present goals, the Bolshoi Theater was making a statement that, at least as far as it was concerned in 1925, classical ballet was not going anywhere. Rather than a revolution in the art form, the artists at the Bolshoi Theater believed that ballet could be molded to fit the new historical reality of socialism. That decision being made, all the work was still ahead of the Bolshoi Ballet in 1925. After some deliberation, Tikhomirov settled on a revival of the ballet *La Esmeralda*, a ballet that had long been a staple in Russia. However, this revival was

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<sup>1</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1763 l. 80. M. Galperin. “*Esmeralda, Doch' Naroda*.” Libretto. 1925. Galperin was a Soviet poet who occasionally worked with the Bolshoi Theater.

to be different than the revivals of other Romantic ballets at the Bolshoi Theater that had been produced and performed in the years since the revolution. Unlike those previous revivals, which were generally reproductions that were deliberately close to their historical forebears, this reproduction was from the beginning designed to infuse socialism into the narrative and symbolism of the ballet and to serve as a stepping-stone to original, Soviet ballets that would be created in the future.

In a way, the Bolshoi Theater was still doing what it knew, a revival of a classic headlined by a famous prima ballerina – Ekaterina Geltser – in the leading role. It was a well-known ballet, if not the most famous of the Romantic ballets, being performed by professional dancers, led by perhaps the most famous among the Bolshoi's principal dancers in the mid-1920s on the country's biggest stage. While this elite troupe set out on the path of turning a classic into something socialist, hundreds and thousands of Russians were already participating in the arts on a much smaller, local and experimental scale. The many "small" stages of the amateur theater in Moscow and throughout the Soviet Union could hardly be more different from the expensive, gaudy and professional Bolshoi Theater. Nonetheless, setting the 1925 revival of *La Esmeralda* against the diametrically opposed amateur theater helps to give perspective on the Bolshoi Ballet's place in the broader attempts to produce socialist art in the mid-1920s Soviet Union. As the smaller scale theaters, sometimes not even formal theaters at all, often sought to create new works representative of the revolution and life in the early Soviet Union that broke with the past, the Bolshoi was continuing to put out work with roots in the nineteenth century. This was not lost on critics, nor on the up and coming generation of artists in the Bolshoi itself, who began to resent the influence of the Bolshoi's old guard in ballet.

It is striking that a Romantic ballet would be labeled, in one Soviet ballet dancer-turned-historian's words, "the first socialist ballet."<sup>2</sup> Although the harshest criticism of romanticism was still several years in the future, romanticism stood clearly at odds with Soviet ideology and Soviet art even in 1925. Romantic ballet literally embodied many of the traditional values that the Revolution had hoped to overturn. Yet Romanticism was deeply engrained in the Russian ballet world both before and after the revolution. This chapter uses the reproduction and performance of *La Esmeralda* to understand the relationship between Romanticism and the ballet of the mid-1920s as it existed in the Bolshoi Theater. Furthermore, it helps to place and explain the presence of this highly conservative influence in the arts even during what is usually labeled the most, exciting, experimental and even utopian era of revolutionary arts in the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, after Tikhomirov took over as the director of the Ballet in 1924, the divisions between the leadership and principal dancers on the one hand, and the rank and file members of the troupe on the other only intensified. Such divisions were endemic to the Bolshoi Theater, but took on a new meaning in the mid-1920s as the Theater's work began to take on a more social character. The nature of the hierarchy at the Bolshoi Theater was not due only to its historical roots, but also due to its size and role as a state academic theater. Therefore, analysis of *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People*, also opens up an avenue for discussing the relationship between the "big" and "small" theaters in the 1920s Soviet Union.

Tomie Hahn argues that under the regime of an industrial economy "material bodies were imprinted by the sweated character of industrial labor and the cramped conditions of urban

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<sup>2</sup> Olga Martinova, *Ekaterina Gel'tser* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1965), 88.

<sup>3</sup> For more on utopianism and experimentalism see, Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). There is further discussion of utopianism and experimentalism in chapter 4.

living”<sup>4</sup> These were not merely static characteristics of bodies in an industrial economy, but acted to form a movement vocabulary of the working class. “Making a limited range of motions, and laboring at top speed with few breaks during ten-hour workdays,” Hahn continues, “workers... were routinized and pushed to the limits of their endurance.”<sup>5</sup> Although Hahn writes about American social dance, her observation is also applicable in the Soviet context. Industrialization contained within it a regime for physical movement that could hardly have been more different than ballet in movement *quality*. Ballet called for “concealment of the body’s efforts, in partnering as well as solo dancing.”<sup>6</sup> In dancing the part of the proletariat in *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People*, then, the Bolshoi’s *corps de ballet*, and Geltser herself, faced an aesthetic conundrum. The restricting imprint of industrialization, outlined by Hahn, contrasted with the light, airy and graceful Romantic movement vocabulary that informed *Esmeralda*’s aesthetic.

*La Esmeralda* was first conceived of and created in the early 1840s and was first performed in London in 1844, choreographed by Jules Perrot, a French ballet dancer and choreographer.<sup>7</sup> *La Esmeralda*’s Russian pedigree comes via the 1849 reproduction at the Imperial Bolshoi Kammeny Theater and the subsequent and perhaps most famous revival of the ballet by Marius Petipa for the Imperial Ballet at the Mariinsky Theater in 1886.<sup>8</sup> In many ways it is had all the elements that we now associate with Romantic ballets. The story was very loosely based on Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* that had been published just over a decade prior to the London premier. In the original production, the lead character Esmeralda saves Pierre

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Tomko, *Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity and Social Divides in American Dance 1890-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>7</sup> Jules Perrot is well known for his contributions to Romantic choreography. For more on Perrot and his work see: I.F. Guest, *Jules Perrot: Master of the Romantic Ballet* (Princeton: Princeton Book Company, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> The Imperial Bolshoi Kammeny Theater was the home of the Imperial Ballet in St. Petersburg until, coincidentally, 1886.

Gringoire from execution by agreeing to marry him. Although the marriage saves his life, it is not born of love. Instead, Esmeralda loves Pheobus. The drama of the ballet results from this tension between the characters and their relationships. The ballet is full of such tropes that frequently appeared in Romantic ballets: unrequited love, sacrifice, betrayal, obsession, tragedy, and other equally uplifting themes. This chapter is, however, not about the original ballet, but the Bolshoi Ballet's 1925 revival. It is necessary first to begin with a discussion of the libretto to establish the ways that Galperin sought to merge the two historical moments.

There are two aspects in particular that stand out in Galperin's 1925 libretto. First, *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* emphasized the role of the masses much more substantially than previous versions of the ballet. The first words of the libretto and by extension the first scene of the ballet focus entirely on the masses, with Esmeralda only coming on stage towards the end of this first sequence.<sup>9</sup> The second, less noted, aspect of the libretto is the character of Esmeralda herself. The libretto explains her character at the onset of her first dance: "the characteristic internal image of Esmeralda is a daughter of poverty and without rights. Yet, her young heart will not become loveless, will not lie, and sometimes is even expanded by the joy of life."<sup>10</sup> Both of these descriptions appear at the very beginning of the libretto and establish the two most critical aspects of the ballet, the presence of the masses, who are largely absent from other historical version of the ballet, and the spirited figure of Esmeralda, who remains from previous iterations of the ballet but is now projected against the crowds. In this case, Galperin's libretto literally set the stage for the collision between socialism and Romanticism on the Bolshoi's stage.

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<sup>9</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1763 ll. 80-82.

<sup>10</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1763 l. 81.

On the surface, one can see the sense in setting up this dichotomy between the impoverished crowd and the heroine with a tireless spirit in the libretto. Together, they allow these two statements in the libretto to set up the critical tension that appears throughout the ballet. The tension is manifested in three ways: contradictions between the individual and the crowd, the mass and the popular, and finally the personal and the collective. These tensions arise because the ballet was a reproduction of a Romantic ballet with explicitly socialist intention. However, Galperin also understood that the dynamic between the crowd and Esmeralda could be used to influence the choreographic, not just narrative, relationship between two on the stage. For example, in one scene typical of Romantic ballets, the dancers take part in a Spanish national dance. At first, Esmeralda is “timid and uncertain” but is brought fully into the dance through the encouragement of the crowd of dancers that accompany her on stage.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Esmeralda remains the central character in the story, and Ekaterina Geltser, who danced the part, was ultimately free to show off her exceptional technique and skill on stage. At the same time, the masses are given additional agency and importance by helping Esmeralda become strong and free in the face of her timidity.

Although this certainly made sense in a socialist context, it was not, in fact, a new feature of Romantic ballets. Since the beginnings of Romantic ballet in the first half of the nineteenth century, “the pull between a central woman (supported by a large and sympathetic *corps de ballet*) and her love, between the demands of the community and the secret desires of the individual, would structure ballet for over a century to come.”<sup>12</sup> Tension between the individual and the masses was not, then, a contrivance of the “first socialist ballet,” but rather a long standing aspect of ballets stretching back nearly a century by the time *Esmeralda, Daughter of*

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<sup>11</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1763 ll. 84-85.

<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (New York: Random House, 2010), 171.



*the People* made its way to the Bolshoi Theater. Nonetheless, it should also be clear that the *meaning* of that conflict between individual desire and community was drastically different in the early Soviet Union than it was in nineteenth-century France or even Russia. Given that many features of the Romantic ballet became the very focus of criticism leveled at the work created in the mid-1920s, it is notable that this feature of Romantic ballet actually aligned with the very feature of *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* that earned it the title of the first socialist ballet.

This similarity between the Romantic tradition in ballet and socialist narrative is largely coincidental and should not be taken as an argument that Romanticism was the obvious or only historical place that Tikhomirov could have found inspiration and justification for reviving a ballet for Geltser. Even considering the similarity, contradictions between the socialist and the Romantic are still quite apparent even in Galperin's libretto. Despite the very real emphasis on the people, as well as shifting the focus to the crowd's oppression and impoverishment, other Romantic elements still dominated much of the ballet even in Galperin's consciously socialist original conception. The adagio, featuring Esmeralda and Gregoire, is written into the libretto as a "theme of love and jealousy" – a subject central to Romantic ballets. Although the group is mentioned in the adagio, it is nonetheless a dance that focuses on the individual emotions of the characters.<sup>13</sup> Here, the group is strictly a sideshow to the duet between the principal dancers. The ballet also contains a scene of an aristocratic ball featuring a "number of classical dance styles." However, Galperin writes in a narrative reason for the divertissement that does not "violate the integrity of the plot."<sup>14</sup> With this concession, it is Galperin was already considering the central importance of the narrative and its place in the structure of the ballet.

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<sup>13</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1763 l. 86.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Although at this stage of the development of the Soviet ballet Romanticism remained a strong influence, by the end of the 1920s one of the chief complaints about ballets would be that the dance was often structurally divorced from the narrative. In short, a scene containing mainly narrative elements would be followed by dance that had less narrative importance. This was not seen as a problematic element of ballets to the Romantics. However, concern for this disconnect became expressed as anti-formalism that derided such displays of form as bourgeois.<sup>15</sup> Although such criticism did not appear in precisely such terms in 1925, it is striking that Galperin already had on his mind the necessity of justifying the “divertissement” by calling attention to the its narrative justification. Not only did he anticipate and head-off potential criticism, it also created a blueprint that made the first socialist ballet appealing to an audience focused on theatrics, at least on paper.

It is necessary at this point to at least briefly outline the history and importance of the Romantic tradition in ballet.<sup>16</sup> The Romantic tradition in ballet originated in the 1830s and 40s in France and it is difficult to overstate the historical importance of Romantic ballet in the overall development of ballet that continues to influence ballet. Jennifer Homans goes as far as to argue “the French Romantics *invented* ballet as we know it today: they broke the hold on dance of words, pantomime, and the story ballet and completely shifted the axis of the art.”<sup>17</sup> The prototypical Romantic ballets – *La Sylphide* and *Giselle* – played a historically important role for setting the standards for ballet in the post-Romantic period. The echoes of the Romantic period can certainly be heard even in modern ballet troupes like the New York City Ballet, but they

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<sup>15</sup> For more discussion of anti-formalism and the debate over ballet, see Christina Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), Chapter 2. Anti-formalism will also be discussed in further detail in the second half of this dissertation (Chapters 4, 5 and 6).

<sup>16</sup> For those who are well versed in the history of ballet, some of the following discussion of Romanticism will seem straightforward. I have included it here for the sake of providing more historical context for those who are unfamiliar with this history because much of my discussion on the relationship between Romanticism and the ballet of the mid 1920s at the Bolshoi relies on a connecting these two eras.

<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (New York: Random House, 2010), 170.

were even more strongly felt in the early Soviet Union. French and Russian ballet had been intimately linked since the mid-nineteenth century. The revolution did little to sever or weaken this link.

The Romantic era in ballet also saw the ballerina herself become “a creature apart, an embodiment of beauty, desire, and otherness.”<sup>18</sup> The central place of the Romanticism at the Bolshoi Theater in 1925 was also due to the heights to which Ekaterina Geltser, who will be a recurring character in the next two chapters, had risen in the Soviet ballet world during the 1920s. This legacy of the ballerina as a singular figure in Romantic ballets, not so in all styles, was on display not only in the choice of *La Esmeralda*, but also in the Geltser’s continued principal role at the Bolshoi. This too, can be seen as a legacy of the Romantic period, which saw the advent and spread of dancing *en pointe*. This in turn led to what Lynn Garafola calls a “period of unprecedented growth and unimagined virtuosity” in female technique.<sup>19</sup> The Romantic emphasis on female technical prowess also helped to reinforce the power of the most highly trained and experienced dancers in the Bolshoi, setting the stage for a disgruntled group of young dancers who felt disenfranchised within the theater.

Garafola contrasts the legacy of the Romantic ballerina with the “radical” early twentieth figures in the work of Sergei Diaghilev, who “sought to invest her attributes in a new, androgynous breed of male star.”<sup>20</sup> The image of the ballerina is one of the most enduring legacies of Romantic ballet and Geltser’s prominence at the Bolshoi is emblematic of Romanticism’s likewise enduring influence on the early Soviet ballet. Yet, this places the emphasis squarely on the principal dancer and deflects attention further away from the dancers in

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<sup>18</sup> Lynn Garafola, “Introduction” in *Rethinking the Sylph: New Perspectives on Romantic Ballet* ed. Lynn Garafola, (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 2.

the periphery. This choreographic tension between the principal dancers and the *corps de ballet* is not unique to specifically *Romantic* ballet, but it was a strong narrative and symbolic element in Romantic ballets. Still, even as this new direction emerged it did not make “the art any less classical or formal; if anything [it] deepened ballet’s attention to line and symmetry, striving for simplicity and perfection.”<sup>21</sup> It was precisely these elements of Romantic ballets that would come to be dismissed, with the word “Romantic” itself becoming a pejorative term inside the Bolshoi Theater itself by the 1930s.<sup>22</sup> This revival of Romantic ballets in the 1920s highlighted the countervailing forces pulling ballet at once into the past and into the future. It also calls attention to the fact that even eight years after the revolution no one had a very good idea of what that future of ballet would look like.

That early Soviet explorations in socialist ballet tended towards the Romantic tradition when years earlier ballet companies like the Ballets Russes had already been moving in new, more avant-garde, directions is, I suspect, part of the cause for the relative disinterest in early Soviet ballet among dance historians mentioned in the introduction to this work. With avant-garde, even radical ballets like *Rite of Spring* already a decade in the past, another reproduction of a Romantic ballet like *La Esmeralda* hardly seems like a notable moment in the history of ballet. Scholars already agree that Romanticism played and continues to play an important role in the way ballet is understood and performed, and the importance of the Romantic tradition in shaping the first “socialist ballet” only reinforces its central position in the history of ballet. It also suggests another point of continuity between the Imperial Russian artistic tradition and ballet in the early Soviet Union. This is, by itself, a rather banal observation. However, in the

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<sup>21</sup> Homans, *Apollo’s Angels*, 171.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the “Dispute over the path of ballet” in the Bolshoi Theater in 1932, during which Romanticism is used several times a way of dismissing a ballet out of hand. RGALI f. 648 op 2 d. 842 ll. 1-59. A full discussion of this lengthy dispute can be found in Chapter 6.

larger context of the arts in the Soviet Union, it was not at all a given that this “big” state funded theater should be creating a very direct link to the mid-nineteenth century with Romantic ballet revivals.

In more recent times, scholars have become uneasy about the Romantic ballet and the values it transmits.<sup>23</sup> Scholars have certainly sought a more nuanced view of Romantic ballet, neither entirely adoring nor condemning. Indeed, these concerns are not so different from those expressed by Communist critics during the 1920s. Neither the concerns of 1920s Soviet Communists nor those of present scholars are unfounded. A relative simple analysis of such work does reveal precisely their concerns. More interesting is the apparent contradiction that allowed for the recognition of the problematic themes and structures within Romantic ballets like *La Esmeralda* and while seeming to be still inexorably drawn to them. Dance scholar Jody Bruner has attempted to resolve this contradiction, or at least ease its tension. She describes the problem facing audiences of Romantic ballets presently, one that she has herself grappled with herself, succinctly: “Any pleasure I feel is tinged with guilt, and any judgment I make is weakened by the rapture I experience at the most powerful choreographic moments.”<sup>24</sup> This puts a relatively fine point on precisely the difficulty facing both ballet artists and audiences in the early Soviet Union. Reviving *La Esmeralda* brought this difficulty to the forefront and also paved the way for this very contradiction to become the main point of contention over the direction of ballet all the way into the early 1930s.

The ballet had its roots in French literature and French romantic ballet, but also had a strong history of performance in Russia stemming from the aforementioned Petipa revival in

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example: Evan Alderson, “Ballet as Ideology: Giselle, Act 2” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*. ed Jane C. Desmond (Duke University Press: Durham, 1997)

<sup>24</sup> Jody Bruner, “Redeeming Giselle: Making a Case for the Ballet We Love to Hate” in *Rethinking the Sylph: New Perspectives on Romantic Ballet*. ed. Lynn Garafola (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 107.

1886 at the Mariinsky Theater. Therefore, the ballet was not a stretch for the Bolshoi Ballet to revive in 1925 when the Bolshoi's administration contracted Galperin to write a new libretto for the ballet that more closely reflected the values of the Soviet Union. Vasiliy Tikhomirov shouldered the task of taking Galperin's new libretto and Petipa's influential 1886 choreography and creating something suitable for the Bolshoi Theater. This was not the last time that *La Esmeralda* would be revived in the Soviet Union, but this first effort brings light to the difficulty the Bolshoi faced when trying to reimagine its classics.<sup>25</sup>

Tikhomirov's 1925 revival of *Esmeralda* is not well known in the canon of modern ballet, but neither is it entirely unknown to scholars. Elizabeth Souritz devotes several pages in *Soviet Choreographers in the 1920s* to discussing the work and to Tikhomirov's role in its choreography in particular. She notes that Tikhomirov embraced the task of "bring[ing] out the theme of the people to emphasize social themes."<sup>26</sup> At the same time, Tikhomirov had himself danced in a revival of Petipa's *La Esmeralda* and believed strongly in the strength of classical dance. He also chose to work on the ballet for its suitability to Geltser – a favorite among ballet-goers. Souritz's makes note of Tikhomirov's influence in the ballets transformation from *La Esmeralda* to *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* and his mark was certainly left on the choreography. However, that subtitle appeared on the ballet in Galperin's libretto, suggesting that Tikhomirov was building upon Galperin's story elements. Souritz's focus on the choreographer again causes her to overestimate the influence of just one individual in her final analysis of the ballet.

Although Tikhomirov cannot be understood *only* as a conservative force in the creation and restaging of *Esmeralda* at the Bolshoi in 1925, the changes to the ballet's purely Romantic

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<sup>25</sup> *Esmeralda* was revived again at the Kirov Theater in 1935.

<sup>26</sup> Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers*, 225.

elements in order to emphasize “the people” are better understood as a theater – a whole system – straining to solve the question of socialist ballet. At the same time, the melodrama that is so well known in Romantic ballet continued to feature prominently even in such ballets as *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* that were, in 1925, on the front lines of attempts to reconcile classical art with the socialist present. Souritz rightly points out that “melodrama is democratic in its own way, for it can be grasped by the most unsophisticated viewer.”<sup>27</sup> Interested since the revolution in bringing a working-class audience to the Theater as the Bolshoi’s administration was, melodrama offered a somewhat counter-intuitive, from a socialist perspective, way to engage a *popular* audience.

Denise Youngblood explores a similar phenomenon in early Soviet film that can be instructive in analyzing the importance of melodrama in early Soviet ballet. Youngblood defines “popular” as “the commercial culture of the urban classes” and argues that popular film’s “primary appeal with audiences may be attributed to their conformity to conventional visual styles and narrative structures. Didactic or aesthetic elements were always secondary to the plot and characterization.”<sup>28</sup> Insofar as film was popular, it was so in accordance with the appeal of its story and characters. Films like *Little Red Devils* (1923) and *Cross and Mauser* (1925) captured the imagination of popular audiences and stand out historiographically because, as Youngblood points out, historians have spent relatively little time examining them. Instead, historians have disproportionately (present writer included) studied the work of avant-garde artists like Eisenstein, whose work stands out as important not just to the history of the Soviet

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 227-228.

<sup>28</sup> Denise Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 6.

Union, but history of film more broadly speaking.<sup>29</sup> This has one important difference to the historiography of ballet, which has given relatively little attention to the early Soviet ballet in part because of the perception that it had relatively little importance to the overall development of ballet in the twentieth century.<sup>30</sup>

Film was a far different form in the early Soviet Union than ballet. Lenin famously called film the most important art form in the Soviet Union and its technological nature and ability to capture “reality” seemed to naturally fit with a Soviet ideology that focused on technological development and emphasized the scientific nature of Marxist revolutionary thought.<sup>31</sup> Ballet, by comparison, was an eighteenth and nineteenth century art form known for its Romanticism. In one crucial sense, however, ballet and film are very similar. They both require a substantial amount of technical know-how and training. While film arose out of theater, film direction and editing were new artistic roles that were unattainable by the average member of the “popular” audience due the difficulty in accessing equipment like movie cameras and obtaining the skill to use them.<sup>32</sup> Filmmakers in the early Soviet Union, Eisenstein no doubt the most famous among them, produced films that turned out to have enormous influence on the development of

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<sup>29</sup> The literature on Eisenstein is vast. A brief list includes: David Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), Ian Christie and Richard Taylor eds. *Eisenstein Rediscovered*, (London: Routledge, 1993), James Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema, and History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), Al Lavalley and Barry P. Scherr, *Eisenstein at 100: A Reconsideration* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), Joan Neuberger, “Sergei Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible* as History,” *Journal of Modern History*, 86 (June 2014) 1-40. Such literature is present in scholarship on film, history and the arts in general.

<sup>30</sup> This perception is, notably, not entirely untrue. When looking at the broad history of ballet, the 1920s in the Soviet Union do seem to be a relatively insignificant period. This is evident in the Jennifer Homans’ recent work *Apollo’s Angels*, which devotes only a single, very short chapter to the early Soviet ballet. In the context of her work, this is not necessarily the wrong choice, but it does illustrate the point that for those interested specifically in the history of ballet and not in the history of the Soviet Union the early Soviet ballet does not stand out.

<sup>31</sup> Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov felt particularly strongly about this aspect of film. For English translations of some of his famous writings see: Annette Michelson ed. *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* trans. Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>32</sup> Notably, this is not an inherent property of film, but rather a historically contingent one. In the 1920s movie cameras were large, heavy, expensive, rare and complicated. This is a far cry from the present day when a large portion of the population carries cameras in their pocket that allow for high quality video and often even contain editing software that simplifies the basic editing process to the point where very little experience is required at all. The similarity between film and ballet in this context is a historical similarity.



filmmaking. Yet, his films that ultimately had the most resonance among the populace were films like *Alexander Nevsky* that minimized his more radical aesthetic ideas in favor of simple narrative presentation and strong characterization, in accordance with Youngblood's analysis.<sup>33</sup> This similarity between melodrama in ballet and film raises an important point. In art forms that did not allow for the relatively straightforward popular participation, narrative and characterization played a disproportionately important role in the popularity of the work. In this respect, the Bolshoi Theater's stage was much more silver screen than it was worker's club stage. This is notably untrue for "mass" arts in the Soviet Union, like the "smaller" forms of theater that inspired and allowed for considerably more public participation in not just the consumption, but the creation of art.

### **Theater, Big and Small**

Although the Bolshoi Theater's decision to meld Romanticism with socialism met with modest success, it was a somewhat hollow victory in the face of a society that was by now producing lively revolutionary work in realms like amateur theater. Aside from the obvious – professionalism, training, etc., – the scale of the Bolshoi Theater, from the size of the building itself, to the extravagance and expense of the productions and the force of historical inertia made the theater a drastically different artistic environment than the smaller forms usually associated with amateur theater. The scale and that environment allowed Romanticism, with its emphasis on the ethereal, technical prowess and "bourgeois themes" to thrive in the mid-1920s.

Given the importance the Bolsheviks placed on the arts as a way of raising the cultural sophistication of the working class and their desire to reshape society, one would expect for the revolution to be a significant breaking point for public participation in theater. The previously

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<sup>33</sup> See: Douglas Priest, "Editing the Past: How Eisenstein and Vertov used Montage to Create Soviet History" Master's Thesis. State University of New York College at Brockport, 2009.

mentioned *School for Citizens* by Murray Frame and Lynn Mally's *Revolutionary Acts* afford an opportunity compare theater in the pre- and post-revolutionary eras. Frame and Mally both address the development of non-state theater productions and the increasing role of the state in making policy to influence the course of artistic development. Frame argues that in the second half of the nineteenth century tension existed in theater between the growth of independent theaters and the monopoly of the Imperial Theater. The resolution of this tension gives insight into the way in which the Imperial government understood its role in the arts. Mally demonstrates that after the revolution amateur theater productions became increasingly common phenomena in which "cultural activists believed...a sense of common purpose and common identity" could be built.<sup>34</sup> This too, ultimately led to tension with the state. After the revolution, theater followed a trajectory with regards to its relationship with its audience similar to that of the end of the nineteenth century, suggesting continuity between the two eras.

"The spread of theaters after 1882," Frame explains, "as well as the associational activity of theatre people, was observed warily by the government."<sup>35</sup> The state understood the power of the theater as an institution capable of shaping civil society, or act as a distraction from political issues. The reaction was not to shut down the theater companies but rather to regulate and influence them. By inserting itself into the realm of theater the Russian government also opened itself up to use by the theater organizations. As often happens when states attempt to extend their control, the theater was able to leverage its position to its advantage. According to Frame, "[the Russian Theater Society] actively sought [the government's] support and welcomed the (usually

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<sup>34</sup> Lynn Mally, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the Soviet State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>35</sup> Murray Frame, *School for Citizens: Theatre and Civil Society in Imperial Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 7.

nominal) involvement of senior government and court figures in its business.”<sup>36</sup> Its justification was mainly financial, in effect trading a measure of autonomy for government funding. The mutually beneficial relationship between theater and government did not last.

Frame’s examination of Russian theater ends after 1905 when, he argues, the theater took on both artistic and political changes that again caused a tenuous relationship with the state to reemerge. According to Frame this tension arose from increasingly political expression in theater, which the state regarded as “potentially seditious.”<sup>37</sup> This explicitly political turn drew the ire of the government, but Frame regards it as secondary. “As the government fretted about censorship and demonstrations,” Frame concludes, “it became evident that a quieter but more fundamental theatrical revolution had occurred.”<sup>38</sup> Namely, the long relationship between the theater and the state and the eventual ending of complete state control had lent legitimacy to the theater as a profession. Finally, the seeds of revolutionary theater had already been sown. After 1905 the decades long negotiations between theater and state had evolved to the point that “the professional aspirations of theatre people had developed to the point where they were articulated in the same breath as demands for wider civic freedoms.”<sup>39</sup> The same mentality could be seen after the revolution. Frame’s argument that the pre-revolutionary theater of the late nineteenth century was a hotbed of developments in the realm of civil society further establishes the “big stage” as having historical importance when it came to politics and society. Of course, the relationship between state and theater changed after the revolution. Furthermore, the emphasis on the relationship between the state and the working class, as opposed to the state and civil society represents perhaps the most fundamental change between the theater of Frame’s analysis and

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

theaters like the Bolshoi in the 1920s. Nonetheless, the theater remained an important part of what one could call public life, and thus the political importance of the “big theater” can be seen as a continuation of theatrical practices that were articulated by 1905 and that began in the nineteenth century.

Lynn Mally’s discussion of “small forms” in amateur theater serves as an interesting and instructive foil to the large scale, highly professionalized and entrenched form of the Bolshoi Theater. As with the art created at the Bolshoi, there was far from consensus on the role of the “small forms” of amateur theater. According to Mally, “there were heated debates surrounding the eventual direction of amateur theater,” that included the question of whether or not the “forms were an end in themselves” or “point[ed] to the development of new kinds of ‘big’ theater.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, this comparison is not merely one of analytic value. If the “small forms” of revolutionary Soviet theater offered evidence of genuine revolutionary enthusiasm and experimentation among amateur artists in the post-revolution era, they also stood as an example that more traditional forms of theater could look to for inspiration. The contrast between the high culture of theaters like the Bolshoi and emerging, popular and often spontaneous revolutionary culture of the “small” theater was also a question of interest to the Soviet state. The Communist Party had effectively supported the small forms of the amateur theater since 1923 and by 1925, when *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* was performed at the Bolshoi Theater, a very lively avant-garde movement in the “small” theater had already emerged that featured such prominent artists as Meyerhold and his “laboratory” for club theater. As an example of its popular

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<sup>40</sup> Lynn Mally, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the Soviet State 1917-1938* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2000), 49.

character, in that same year his laboratory had contributed to the theatrical instruction of “more than forty different Moscow clubs.”<sup>41</sup>

Despite its also precarious status within the Soviet Union, then, the amateur theater was making a real impact on the arts in the country, particularly in the capitals. The revolutionary character and avant-garde forms such as living newspapers stand in stark contrast to the traditional melodramas, popular as they might have been, that were being performed night in and night out by the Bolshoi Ballet. Thus, the small forms of the amateur theater were different not merely in their works of art, but also very different in the way that they engaged with the revolution and with the people. Amateur theater was first and foremost participatory. There was very little barrier to entry for those who wanted to take part in amateur theater and it allowed for everyday people to take part in revolutionary art.

This too, of course, posed problems for the Soviet state. The amateur theater movement in the mid-1920s was lively and it was precisely this feature that also concerned the state. Although the late 1920s would see a more severe crackdown on some avant-garde theater organizations and a reigning in of others, in 1925 theater groups were by comparison free to experiment with revolutionary forms and topics over which the state often exercised relatively little direct control. That is not to say the “small forms” lacked oversight. Mally concludes that they were “guided and directed” by the state to ensure ideological “correctness”, but had at their core an impulse towards “self-expression” that contrasts with the tighter controls that would come later by end of the 1920s and the 1930s.<sup>42</sup> The desire of the state to encourage arts that would inspire belief and participation in socialism drove its desire to regulate, and the many, varied examples of the amateur theater proved difficult and time consuming to regulate.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 80.

The Bolshoi Theater was, by comparison, a much more manageable venue housing a much more manageable troupe. The Bolshoi Ballet had set before it the task of engaging the Soviet population with socialist works of art - whatever that meant, no one seemed to have an answer - while maintaining the professionalism associated with the “big” theater. The goal was to combine the output of revolutionary, socialist work of the amateur theater with the authoritative position and professionalism of the Bolshoi. Another way of describing the tension between these two forms can be taken from Louise McReynolds, who draws the distinction between *mass culture* and *popular culture*. Mass culture, she argues is culture *for the masses*, whereas popular culture is culture *by the masses*.<sup>43</sup> Although labeling the two in this fashion can be slightly confusing, the distinction between culture for the people and culture by the people is an important one when it comes to understanding culture in the Soviet Union in the mid-1920s. The lines between the two were by no means clear, but the “big theater” was a more manageable outlet for McReynolds’ mass culture due to the (then) historical precedent for state involvement in theaters, the Bolshoi included, and their importance in the development of civil society in the late imperial era. In other words, Russians were accustomed to the big theater as an outlet of mass culture, even as the specifics of that mass culture changed.

In this conception of mass and popular culture, film becomes a critical historical *and* analytical link between the two. McReynolds goes as far as to argue that the commercial (mass) culture that emerged at the end of the Imperial era “culminated in the birth of the movie industry.”<sup>44</sup> As a medium of artistic expression, film was inaccessible to most of the population due to the technical and financial constraints, but quickly became an enormously popular art form to consume in part because of the preponderance of movies with light, digestible and

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<sup>43</sup> Louise McReynolds, *Russia at Play: Leisure Activities at the End of the Tsarist Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

engaging stories. If melodrama itself was enough to draw the population to the theater, then the “proletarianization” of the main character Esmeralda as the “daughter of the people” did little to make the *form* of the ballet more socialist, popular or accessible. As previously noted, the ballet was in part chosen for revival because Tikhomirov felt that the lead part of Esmeralda would allow Geltser to show her virtuosic ability as a classical dancer. However, in light of McReynolds’ distinction, one can more easily see how this reconceptualization of Esmeralda as “daughter of the people” could be seen as moving ballet towards an outlet of Communist mass culture.

*Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* was, then, pulling the Bolshoi Ballet in three directions. Ideological pressure nudged the ballet into the realm of socialism by including the masses more substantially in the narrative. Yet, ballet was chosen in part because of its melodramatic qualities that might have made it appealing to the masses, which was also a demand on the Bolshoi Ballet already by the mid-1920s. This highlights, once more, the contradiction that emerged in ballet, as with the other arts, from the conflation of “socialist” and “popular” art. Complicating the matter further at the level of the Bolshoi Ballet itself, the ballet was chosen because it offered an opportunity to showcase the classical technique of one of the Bolshoi’s principal dancers, who had herself been a mainstay of the prerevolutionary Bolshoi Ballet. Geltser herself was not, at least officially, seen as a counter-revolutionary or conservative force in the Soviet Union despite being a *de facto* representative of ballet’s old guard. The same year that she starred as Esmeralda in the ballet’s revival she received the award for People’s Artists of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR).

Galperin’s attempt to shift focus in the libretto from the lead characters to the crowd was ultimately reflected in Tikhomirov’s 1925 choreography. The character of Esmeralda dances

most strikingly in the third act. Through much of the earlier work, Petipa's choreography was shifted to match Gal'perin's libretto. This created a tension for Tikhomirov. The ballet had been chosen for revival for the sake of showcasing Geltser's skill. At the same time, the libretto created for the revival pushed Tikhomirov in the direction of muting her role in some scenes. A necessary consequence of this change was that the *corps de ballet* also had a more prominent role in the 1925 revival, particularly in the first two acts. These changes do modify the pacing and overall arc of the ballet. The story is changed, and the result is that there is less emphasis on Geltser herself and her performance of her meticulously practiced classical technique. Thus, the Bolshoi was not content with ballets that simply engaged the audience with personal melodrama. Melodrama was an important tool for entertaining audiences and making ballet popular, an unequivocally important task for the Bolshoi Theater if it was to take seriously the task of bringing culture to a mass audience. However, in doing so it also reinforced reproduced elements of Romanticism that were decidedly un-Soviet.

### **Esmeralda and the Pay dispute**

By 1928, the reproduction of *La Esmeralda* had been a part of the Bolshoi repertoire for three years. The success of *The Red Poppy* the previous year in 1927 and the impressive honorarium for its creators called into question the relationship between newly produced ballets and reproductions.<sup>45</sup> The dispute began early in January, when Tikhomirov did not receive his expected payment and sent a letter off to the Director of the Bolshoi, Burdukov, stating that the Bolshoi Theater should follow the law and honor his contract. In fact, he flatly stated that he would escalate the situation by bringing it to the courts if the Theater did not comply with his

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<sup>45</sup> See Chapter 4.



request.<sup>46</sup> Several months later he sent a very similar letter directly to Lunacharsky requesting his help in solving the problem. Reinhold Gliere, the composer who rewrote and reworked the music for *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People*, was also displeased with the fee he received for his work on the project. He expressed his displeasure to the Bolshoi and ultimately sent a letter to his union imploring them to help his situation. “If the [Bolshoi Theater] management believes it overpays for the work on the ballet *Esmeralda*, it should not be forgotten that at the same time it pays the fee for *The Red Poppy* which is only 3 scenes.”<sup>47</sup> The five scene *Esmeralda* deserved at least the same rate of pay, by his reasoning. The same situation had befallen the librettist Galperin, though he did not protest in the same fashion.<sup>48</sup>

At its heart, the dispute was about whether or not a reworking of an existing ballet fell under the same rules as creating a new ballet from scratch. A two-person commission was convened by the Bolshoi Theater’s administration in late 1928 to assess the amount of work put into the restaging of *Esmeralda*. It identified some minor changes to the libretto, but ultimately concluded that overall the changes were minimal, but substantive. Its tone remained neutral when noting four changes in the libretto that made it unique from its 1866 predecessor and do not openly refute the authors’ claim that the 1925 libretto was “an independent work.”<sup>49</sup> There is no doubt that changes were made to the libretto to account for socialist ideology. The Romantic *La Esmeralda* had become *Esmeralda, Doch’ Naroda*. The libretto focused more on the people, connected the story directly to the French Revolution at its conclusion and added in several points critical of the church and clergy.

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<sup>46</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1763 l. 101.

<sup>47</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1763 l. 53.

<sup>48</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1763 l. 53.

<sup>49</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1763 l. 90.

The dispute was eventually adjudicated in favor of the artists. The court ruled that they should receive pay according to the same agreements and laws which govern the pay of new works when it came to music. The librettists, however, were awarded only half of their normal pay. In the case of a five act ballet, this was 1% of the income from performances of the ballet. This shows that the artists did have the clout to challenge unfair practices from the Bolshoi Theater. Furthermore, it brings attention to issues of what was and was not considered “new” work. In reviving *La Esmeralda* as *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People*, was the Bolshoi Ballet creating new work or merely updating an existing work? How much difference between an old ballet and a new ballet was required for a ballet to be considered new? In deciding the case in favor of the artists, the court established, at least on a legal level, that reviving old ballets and updating them for socialist times was of equal value to creating entirely new, original work. It is clear from the libretto itself that Galperin too struggled to balance the old and new in writing the new libretto. While clearly inspired by the need for a new, socialist ballet, and updating the theme to have a more social character, he was also interested in staying true to the original. To this end, he wrote that was necessary to emphasize the “strict and somber tone of Old Paris, against which the content of Hugo’s novel is set.”<sup>50</sup> *Esmeralda* remains the main character and the story follows a similar arc, but the emphasis is placed on the way her character highlights the problems of the poor and of the city.

It is also important to remember that this dispute was entirely over the amount of changes in the libretto by Galperin, additions by Tikhomirov and the music by Gliere. The discussion contained no explicit mention of the way the choreography did or did not change in the 1925 version, let alone a discussion of classical ballet technique. There *are* several passages in the libretto that clearly articulate a choreographic vision for a particular section or scene, but

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<sup>50</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d.1763 ll. 64-71 and 79.

they were of less importance to the Bolshoi Theater's case that the libretto was not enough "new" than the thematic and narrative changes. The aforementioned emphasis throughout the ballet on group dances rather than solos was the most obvious and largest difference between the two, but apparently made only a small impression. However, in the Bolshoi Theater administration's defense, the 1925 libretto is shorter than the 1866 original by several pages and could be seen as a relatively quick reworking of its general storyline to be more amenable to Soviet politics.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps the administration was interested in saving money by paying Galperin and the others less for their work on the ballet. Its motivation is simply unclear from the archival material available. However, even if we were to assume a more cynical motive, the dispute speaks to a real discussion about how socialist ballet was to be understood and evaluated.

### **A Call for Change in Leadership**

Tikhomirov's attempts to include more of "the crowd" in parts of *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People's* choreography, informed by Galperin's libretto contrasted with the Geltser's still prominent role and mirrored an organizational tension that emerged in the same year the dance premiered. Just as *Esmeralda* was mired in artistic tension between the crowd and the individual, so too did Tikhomirov's insistence on elevating Gelster due to her stature as the greatest technical dancer at the Bolshoi cause a rift in the company itself. Combined with the constant beat of the proverbial drum in favor of classical dance, a generational divide began to emerge among the dancers. It was time, the young dancers argued, for the Bolshoi Ballet to leave behind conservative forces like Tikhomirov in favor of listening to the voices of the younger generation, who was more suited to the necessarily revolutionary direction of the theater. Their demands were, ultimately, centered on three related issues. First, they believed that the youth were not

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<sup>51</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1763 ll. 64-71 and 75-78.

properly represented inside the leadership of the Bolshoi Theater due to the prevalence of older, usually pre-revolutionary artists at the top of the organization. Second, they believed that the troupe itself was losing discipline due to poor leadership. Finally, they felt that the troupe's art would not move forward into the new era under current leadership. Notably, their demands were littered with language that was designed to be politically appealing. When describing their own plight, for example, they claimed that the leadership had no concern for the "working conditions of the masses." Furthermore, they felt that they had the right to appeal because the Bolshoi Theater's administration represented the outlet for the distribution of their work and that they therefore deserved more substantial say in the makeup of its leadership.<sup>52</sup>

At the end of the 1924-25 season in May, a group of forty-six dancers gathered to discuss the makeup of the Bolshoi Theater's leadership. The dancers were concerned about the prevalence of opinions within that office that disregarded newer members of the ballet, privileged the older, more established dancers, and therefore represent the opinions and makeup the troupe as a whole. First among the administrative members that they blamed for this problem was Tikhomirov, who they called "absolutely indifferent to the youth and the work of the masses." They were also concerned by Tikhomirov's influence within the Ballet at large. Although, they considered the inclusion of another dancer, I.V. Smoltov, in the administration to be amenable in principle, they lamented the fact that he was operating entirely "under the influence of Tikhomirov."<sup>53</sup> They in fact praised his role in the classical tradition, but criticized his inability, according to them, to combine his technical mastery and expertise with an expression of revolutionary enthusiasm. Similarly, they felt that Zhukov's long tenure as a member of the administration had made him lose his discipline and lowered the quality of his

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<sup>52</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 90 l. 150. "Protokol zasedaniia gruppy artistov baleta" Meeting Minutes. 29 May 1925.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

work to the detriment of the ballet troupe as a whole, and to the newer members especially. They requested, remarkably, that both Tikhomirov and Zhukov be removed from the leadership positions immediately.<sup>54</sup>

Their disgruntled attitude was not aimed at all those who had been with the troupe for a long time. Riabtsev, who had been with the troupe since 1898 and who was considered to care deeply about all those in the troupe, was recommended for addition to the leadership. The young artists were particularly impressed with what they described as his consistent stance on the importance of developing and promoting young talent. Riabtsev stands out in this case because of his very long service in the Bolshoi Ballet. Although he was certainly a member of the same old guard as Tikhomirov, he showed the ability to adapt to the times and importantly in this case, to the wishes of the younger dancers with whom for whatever reason he connected. Finally, they recommended the director's helper De Lazari as well, citing six years of service in that role as evidence of qualification. Notably, De Lazari was present at the meeting that produced the document.<sup>55</sup> Together, they argued, these changes to the Theater's leadership would far better serve the wishes of the young dancers in the ballet troupe.

This is yet another hallmark case that highlights the interesting differences between old and new. The Bolshoi's structure had changed relatively little in practice, since the revolution. The Ballet remained highly hierarchical, as it had been since before the revolution. However, by 1925 the dancers – most of who were born around the turn of the century themselves and had come of age with the revolution – felt that the directors' responsibilities were not ultimately to the Theater, or more abstractly to the art itself, but to the dancers themselves. In this way the dispute was not merely artistic, but generational as well. The two are clearly linked – these

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

young dancers thought of themselves as at least nominally revolutionary in their artistic aims. Such generational difference, the ascendancy of the technically gifted and experienced performers and artists, was not new in the very hierarchical ballet world. However, the ability for the dancers to express their generational struggle to the Theater's leadership was a notable step that showed that even as Romantic ballet still graced the stage at the Bolshoi, the slow gears of change were beginning to turn inside the Theater itself.

The meeting and the declarations that came out of it represent an important way in which the dancers were beginning to view themselves in light of labor and ideology in the Soviet Union. They were happy to acknowledge the administration's role within the Theater and Ballet, but members of it should not be "stuck in the power of routine" that prevented them from properly discharging their duties. Despite the imperial legacy, which continued to influence the ballet and the struggle to find its place in the Soviet Union, the artists themselves found it possible to assert their perceived rights as workers.

It can also not be ignored that despite that the dancers felt empowered to petition the leadership of the Bolshoi Theater, they got very little, and only after sustained effort. Riabstev did rise to a more leadership-oriented role in the ballet, but it was hardly a stretch for someone of his experience and stature to receive such a promotion. His conciliatory tone, combined with his undeniable talent as a (by now aging) dancer made him an ideal peacemaker as a concession to the increasing discontent among the youth in the ballet. Because this was, at its base, a very generational conflict, Riabstev can be seen as a figure that helped to bridge the generational divide. This no doubt helped Riabstev years later during the reorganization of the Bolshoi Theater, after which he remained an important and influential member inside the theater.<sup>56</sup> In the meantime, Tikhomirov not only kept his position as one of the most influential leaders of the Ballet, but

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<sup>56</sup> See Chapter 5.

would go on to choreograph *The Red Poppy* in the following two years, a ballet that would come to be described as the first Soviet ballet, but that also contained many of the same Romantic structural and choreographic elements as *Esmeralda*. That Tikhomirov's position was secure in 1925 suggests that technical understanding and artistic experience in classical ballet remained not just a, but *the*, important qualification for leading the ballet.

The dancers, as one might imagine, were not happy with the results of their petition. After meeting with the directors, and being all but entirely shut down in their requests, they wrote a scathing follow-up letter to the administrators. Their second appeal gives the opportunity to directly compare the feelings of the dancers writ large about their place within the Bolshoi, specifically in comparison to their superiors. The culprits, not having been removed from their positions of power, were again named as enemies of the rank and file dancers. This time their attack even more forcefully invoked the language of generation to condemn Tikhomirov and other long-standing members of the Ballet's leadership.<sup>57</sup> Their demands did not change in their second attempt to influence the administration, but their frustration showed in both their elevated rhetoric and harsh language. Furthermore, the second letter contained far more politically charged language. While the first petition spoke in the language of workers, the words took an almost formulaic quality. Now, they accused the administration not just of privileging the older generation of established artists, but of being outright anti-democratic.<sup>58</sup>

Their appeal to democracy was a shift from the artists' demands for representatives in the administration of the Theater to an appeal to democratic principles that not only should their demands be met, but that they had the right to a say in the leadership of their workplace. Unlike before, when the dancers were mainly concerned about the actions of their "representatives" in

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<sup>57</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 90 l. 174. "Pis'mo" Letter from dancers to Bolshoi Administration. June 1925.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

the director's office (who they felt were not truly representative of the ballet troupe), now they were concerned that their voices were not being heard directly. Before, Riabstev had earned their praise simply through his general good treatment towards members of the ballet and empathetic words. Although he was an ally of sorts, that was no longer sufficient for the dancers to consider him a representative of their will in the Bolshoi. This was more of an outright challenge to theater hierarchy than even their first demands. The generational language increased alongside the political. The strength and direct nature of the criticism is noteworthy: "Under (Tikomirov) the art council was made of Zhukov, two Smoltsovs, Bulgakov, Sidorov, Riabstev, Petro and *not one representative from the troupe*. This convinces us further of the need to fight against the forces which are doomed to extinction and seek to artificially prolong their existence at the expense of the young and upcoming."<sup>59</sup>

Eliabeth Souritz writes about this series of events in *Soviet Choreographers in the 1920s*.<sup>60</sup> I do not contest Souritz's account of the narrative of the events; we agree on the facts and in fact rely on many of the same sources. Our analyses, however, tack in different directions. Souritz sees the "revolt" as coming out of the division between the conservative Tikhomirov and the more avant-garde Kasian Goleizovsky, even going as far as to including her account of the events in her chapter on Goleizovsky. However, in light of this discussion on 1925's *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People*, these events take on a considerably different meaning. Rather than being a bubbling up of what one might call factional discontent arising from a dispute between two choreographers with different visions for Soviet ballet, the call for change in the Bolshoi's leadership can be seen as a generational expression of discontent that stemmed from an implicit understanding that the workers, in this case the dancers, had a right to a more significant say in

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. Emphasis Mine.

<sup>60</sup> See Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers*, 199.



their working conditions and leaders. Instead of being a side effect, explosive as it may have been, of two well established choreographers, this can rather be seen as a deliberate and self-motivated choice by the dancers themselves, in what was one of the relatively few times that such a direct attempt at exerting influence over the conditions of their labor was attempted. This was not merely, I argue, an artistic battle over the direction of ballet that was cut along generational lines, but a more fundamental contestation of power at the Bolshoi Theater that at least threatened to overturn the very entrenched hierarchy at the Bolshoi Theater. Although the Bolshoi Theater was a *state* theater, the hierarchy reached far into the past beyond the revolution.

That strict hierarchy was (and as an aside, remains to this day in most ballet companies) a feature of classical ballet that was carried over the revolutionary divide by the Bolshoi Theater. Although their revolt was ultimately unsuccessful in making a fundamental change to personnel in the administration, let alone the structure of the organization itself to adopt more democratic operations, this represented an important moment when the ballet dancers used newly available revolutionary language to try effect change *as workers*. If there was a connection between the “big” and “small” theaters in the mid-1920s, it can be seen through the actions of the dancers themselves, who tried to assert themselves and their rights. It also further illustrates the way that the “big” theater proved far easier to manage for the Soviet government. As previously discussed, small theater represented a challenge to government oversight because it was diffuse, disorganized and spontaneous, if often genuinely motivated by revolutionary belief and enthusiasm. The dancers at the Bolshoi Theater had to fight a much more uphill battle that, as they themselves realized, depended on the institution for the creation and dissemination of their work. That they ultimately failed to achieve the changes they wanted does not undermine the rather revolutionary action that was taken. It was revolutionary in three ways. First, it challenged

their superiors as a way defending, in their own words, their working conditions. Second, it relied on decidedly Soviet language in their appeal. However, it was also revolutionary because it challenged a structure that was in fact far more than just politically entrenched, but historically entrenched as well.

As a short coda to escalating tensions of 1925, it should be stated that the relationship between the dancers at the Bolshoi Theater and the administration was not *only* hostile. The Bolshoi Theater also had to contend with issues that arose from without, and at times this served to help its artists. As it had in the previous years, the Theater continued to look out for its artists, at least insofar as it related to their ability to continue working at the theater. In the early months of 1925, for example, the Bolshoi Theater sent about a dozen individual requests to Narkomvoenmor (Peoples' Commissariat for Military and Naval Affairs) for the deferment of military service on behalf of its dancers so that they would not be taken in the midst of the season. The notes were invariably of a terse format, simply stating the name of the artist and their importance to the ongoing performances in the ballet (or opera, depending on the case).<sup>61</sup> But by the middle of the year the Bolshoi and other organizations in Moscow had sent so many such requests that Narkomvoenmor had to address the issue by sending out a letter to the Committee of Trade Unions revamping the request process for deferments.

The resulting correspondence established that in the future requests should be sent in list form with all the applicable workers included. The Bolshoi's first list contained just seven requests for deferment across the entire organization, four of which were ballet dancers. The most notable among them Igor Moiseev.<sup>62</sup> Before long, however, the Bolshoi was submitting far longer lists with the intention of keeping its cast intact through the 1925-26 season. By early

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<sup>61</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 303 ll. 6,7,8, 10-22

<sup>62</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 303 ll. 6,7,8, 31.

1926 the Theater sent lists with 78 and 53 artists and other vital personnel in consecutive months. Neither list encountered any problems.<sup>63</sup> Working at the Bolshoi had become a way of getting military service deferred. Of course, artists and other workers deemed necessary to the Bolshoi's work had the best chance of being included on such lists.

Narkomvoenmor's desire to streamline the process for dealing with applications for military deferment ultimately led to the ease of organizations like the Bolshoi to applying for and having approved their requests. What had been single requests over the course of weeks and months became a single codified way for making large-scale requests. Still, the numbers of ballet dancers who ultimately received reprieves from military service were relatively small. Although many across the entire Bolshoi Theater were granted deferment, within the ballet those in the *corps de ballet* could not count on being granted the same kind of treatment. Dancers like Moiseev could count on being spared military service while they continued to play important parts in the Bolshoi Theater productions week after week. However, the requests of others were far more precarious. The Bolshoi Theater had a much easier time replacing a member of the *corps de ballet* than a soloist, and this worked against the average member because their perceived value to the institution was lower. This reinforces the notion that although some were able to utilize their position at the Bolshoi to help them in other areas, these privileges were not always available. Even when the Bolshoi Theater went out of its way for its artists, it did so in a way that had the potential to stoke the flames of unrest within it.

### **Riabstev on the Past, Present, and Future**

At the same time that Galperin was writing his new libretto, the administration and artists at the Bolshoi internally continued the discussion about the future of their art form. Ballet, much

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<sup>63</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 303 ll. 49-53.

like the Soviet state itself, was in the midst of a process that was, the Communists hoped, leading towards socialism. In 1925, with the New Economic Policy still humming along and Stalin's transformative economic and cultural policies were still several years in the future, it was much easier for the artists at the Bolshoi Theater to imagine their form in a state of exploratory transition. During that transition the past could be a valuable resource in reaching the future.<sup>64</sup> In other words, it was not yet an immediate necessity to find *the* answer. It was simply necessary to continue working on the question in the hopes that each attempt would lead the Bolshoi, and ballet more generally, towards an acceptable socialist form – whatever that would be.

Writing in 1925, Riabstev wrote a short statement on the topic of ballet's relationship to the past, and how that relationship would help to shape its future. In part his statement was in response to the social unrest inside the Bolshoi Theater that had been drawn along generational lines, but his statement also provides us with a valuable example of the “middle ground” in artistic thought in the 1920s. Although there were loud voices that called for more radical reconfigurations, Riabstev's middle ground actually most closely reflected the artistic reality of the Bolshoi Theater at the time he was writing. The path forward was by no means clear and required not a singular vision, but the collaborative work of talented artists. Therefore, this was, to his mind, a project that required the input and opinions of all professional artists. He opened his statement accordingly, by stating that every artist “has the right to, and should, give their opinion on their art.”<sup>65</sup> Riabstev's statement is notable for two reasons. First, he immediately established that ballet should be thought of in the same context as other arts. Ballet had a specific historical context, but it was not a special kind of art played by a different set of rules. Furthermore, professionals in ballet were equivalent to professionals in other arts. Therefore,

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<sup>64</sup> A complete discussion of these changes and their relationship to ballet can be found in chapter 5.

<sup>65</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 279 l. 136.

despite their training in ballet's historically aristocratic form, choreographers and dancers had, according to Riabstev, a vital role in shaping its future. Second, by arguing that artists in general should be at the forefront of artistic development and standards in the Soviet Union, he was arguing that building the future of the arts was an open question that should be answered through a public discourse of experts.

As one such expert, Riabstev weighed in on the hotly contested relationship between classical ballet and the direction for the future of socialist ballet. He felt that despite its aristocratic origins, classical ballet was a “necessary, unshakable foundation on which to build new forms.”<sup>66</sup> *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* provided evidence, such as it was, of precisely this. That is perhaps the most notable part of this statement. Although Riabstev was merely expressing his opinion, it turned out, again, to most closely track the reality of the Bolshoi Ballet and accurately predicted the future as well. The following decade of discussion, dispute and attempts to create a truly socialist form for ballet remained based on classical technique and never seriously changed in form. The notable rejection of formalism and rise of *drambalet* in the 1930s could be seen as a counter example, but even that clearly had its roots in classical ballet but was instead simply trying not to show it too clearly.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, in both the short and long term, classical dance remained the most significant and central element of Soviet ballet. As was discussed in the previous chapter, much of this is owed to the fact that the Ballet School, which continued to teach classical dance uninterrupted throughout the period, created a young generation that may have been more fully steeped in Soviet political thought but were still trained in classical dance.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> The term *drambalet* – or dramatic ballet – refers to a genre of ballet that emerged in the 1930s that emphasized the dramatic elements of ballet and shunned the kind of Romantic divertissements that appeared in even “socialist” ballets like *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* as a response to anti-formalist rhetoric and the advent of socialist realism.

Furthermore, he was clearly interested in the necessity of talented artists as the main impetus for moving ballet forward. Mentioning both the choreographers Goleizovsky and Gorsky by name, he argued that artistic talent was the key characteristic for the development of ballet and that the Bolshoi should arrange to allow the talented artists to do their work in order to work towards a new ballet. In fact, this follows directly from his previous statement. The perceived talent of both Gorsky and Goleizovsky came from their training in classical ballet and their ability to apply that vocabulary to the stage in interesting ways. Although Gorsky had tended more towards the classical ballet, albeit with a flair for the new as evidenced by his affinity for Isadora Duncan's movement styles, and Goleizovsky was pushing in directions that are in hindsight closer to the contemporary ballet of Balanchine, both were undoubtedly talented and accomplished artists. Both can be described as having created experiments in ballet, but they were just that: experiments in *ballet*. Their ability to understand, apply and adapt that movement vocabulary came from their years of preparation and study of classical ballet technique and choreography. Both understood that a strong basis in technique was necessary regardless of the specific form the ballet took on the stage.

Riabtsev even directly mentioned Gorsky's time mingling with the dreaded "Duncanism" and the ideological protest that followed. However, he points out quickly that Gorsky's work was appreciated both by the dancers and by the masses. To put a fine point on it, Gorsky "understood the masses, and the masses understood Gorsky."<sup>68</sup> This comment indicates several things about Riabstev's mindset towards ballet in 1925. First, popularity was considered to be an important gauge for the success of new, socialist, ballet. The importance of popularity and its relationship to mass work is not merely a useful analytical distinction made by scholars like McReynolds and Youngblood. It was also a common thread through the 1920s, under the presumption that

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<sup>68</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 279 l. 136.

socialist art should be amenable to the masses, and it was hardly limited to the realm of dance. It must be further noted that Riabstev was not referring merely to the post-revolutionary period here, but rather any time since 1900 as well, during which time Gorsky's work prominently featured on the stage at the Bolshoi Theater. Despite his flirtations with "Dunancism," Gorsky famously restaged versions of *Don Quixote*, *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker* as well (among many others). Secondly, it *does* show that Riabstev understood that a blending of classical ballet and modern dance forms was a *possible* direction for the future of ballet. Ultimately, such a direction occurred elsewhere, particularly in the United States, rather than in the Soviet Union.<sup>69</sup> Above all, he understood the future of ballet to be part of an ongoing process, and ongoing struggle.

"I think that ballet" Riabstev declared "is full of opportunities and richness." He thought the conditions had been created for "the achievement of something new." It would not be easy. Perhaps it would take "one error, ten, a hundred, but if after the one hundred and first attempt results are obtained, it will be a new flowering of our art and a new era in ballet."<sup>70</sup> He understood that the immediate goal should not be then to discover and implement a socialist form for ballet, but rather to create the conditions in which the Bolshoi Ballet could continue to work, create, and experiment with the understanding that the struggle ahead would lead to impressive results in the long term as long as the ballet was allowed to grow and eventually "flower." Given this understanding of change, a ballet should be judged on whether or not it has helped to create the conditions for further works and "progress" in the art. In this sense, Riabstev again took the middle ground in the generational debate. He neither echoed the harsh tones of the

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<sup>69</sup> Here I am using the term "modern dance forms" instead of "Duncanism" a second time. Duncan's role in shaping the beginnings of modern dance has been for a long time well established and although Riabstev did not use the term "modern dance" itself, I suspect here it will be more evocative to readers familiar with twentieth-century dance than "Duncanism" which does not come across quite the same way in English as it did in Russia in the 1920s.

<sup>70</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 279 l. 136.

youth who insisted that Tikhormirov was holding back the art form nor insisted that the future of Soviet ballet lay in Romanticism. In the context of the contentious generational divide of 1925, Riabstev's words provided a path to the future that neither rejected the past nor fully embraced it.

Here again the artists, like Riabstev, of the early Soviet Union ran into the problem of how to define success. He understood well that there were no easy answers to the question. He seemed both willing to be patient and to praise those who had their gazes toward the future of ballet. Of the younger generation that had just been so harshly dismissed by the Bolshoi's administration he remarked if "a group of artists is taking a step towards social work— it deserves welcoming"<sup>71</sup> These final words of his letter were his clearest defense of the youth in the ballet, after having taken the time to sketch out his general opinions about the relationship between the old and the new in ballet. Notably absent from Riabstev's letter is very much explicitly political language. Although he mentions "the masses" once in regard to Gorksy's work and the creation of "social" works in ballet, he does not paint the controversy as a political, but rather as an artistic one. In fact, it was both, but it points out a critically important feature of ballet in the mid-1920s. Contention was just as likely to arise from internal disagreement among artists as it was to arise from the navigation of state politics. In other words, he understood that attempts toward creating a socialist ballet would not be easily implemented regardless of their origin because of the differing opinions, egos and competition between artists. New works might be disregarded just as easily by socialists as by those in favor of classical ballet. But it is not the work itself that Riabstev seems interested in judging, but rather whether or not it can be said to be a "step towards social work." In 1925, the first attempts at this were still only beginning to happen. *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* represented the "first socialist ballet," but came at a time when the very ballet troupe that had performed it was agitating internally about the rights of

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Here, "social work" could be translated as "work of a social character."



the balletic “working class.” Through 1924 week after week at the Bolshoi Theater the same old repertoire of classical ballets had been performed. By 1925, Goleizovsky’s work was becoming more well known, but was also questioned for being too much of a departure from the classics and being too radical for the working class to understand or appreciate.

Therefore, aside from the controversy surrounding the youths’ outburst, Riabtsev’s letter comes out of this context when “socialist” work in the ballet was still in its infancy at the Soviet Bolshoi Ballet. As an artist, he took the goal of advancing his art form seriously. In 1925, what that meant in the context of a Bolshoi Ballet under the direction of Tikhomirov and the new political environment was still very much undefined and his words reflect this reality. Riabtsev’s voice would be heard through the 1920s and early 1930s on this matter, but this earliest public statement from him about the future of the Bolshoi Ballet articulates clearly several important facets of the debate that occurred internally at the Bolshoi Theater that would continue to influence the direction of the art performed there through 1920s and into the 1930s. It also captures the general attitude toward ballet in the mid-1920s. In truth, no one knew exactly what the relationship between the old and new ballet was or was supposed to be. Even more deliberately political voices, like those in *Zhizn’ Iskusstva* that were discussed in the previous chapter, made few strident and sweeping claims. But among the artists that had the most influence on the day-to-day development of the art form there was little they could do but build on what they already knew, one way or another.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the furor that arose among the younger generation of dancers at the Bolshoi, 1925 ended with the institution, and the art form, in much the same place that it had been when it started. The dancers had little, if any, more influence than they had before. *Esmeralda, Daughter*

*of the People* was the first real effort by the Bolshoi Ballet to create a definitively socialist work, but was a Romantic ballet through and through. Nonetheless, in creating it the Bolshoi Ballet left for us a fascinating example of the collision between socialism and Romanticism, between old and new, in the early Soviet Union. The two were perhaps not so incompatible as it would appear at first glance. It had already been clear from the work performed at the Bolshoi Theater in the time between the revolution and the premier of *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* that ballet remained a prestigious art and an at least culturally viable art form. Those ballets, however, were not created with the intention of infusing socialism into classical dance. Even when socialism did come to the Bolshoi Theater, it contained many of the same artistic elements as the ballets that had come before it.

The persistent influence of Romanticism at the Bolshoi Theater as the theater transitioned from the first “socialist” ballet to the first “Soviet” ballet is also remarkable. *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* was not alone when it came to Romantic performance at the Bolshoi Theater during the 1925 season. This chapter has highlighted the revival of *La Esmeralda* and the persistent influence of its Romantic origins on its socialist incarnation. However, alongside the new production, the Ballet continued to perform other classical work, as it did throughout the 1920s. In this way, it was not Romanticism itself that was novel in the revival of *Esmeralda*, but rather that Romanticism was such a central element of a ballet that was written from the beginning to be socialist. It was in this respect that *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People*, can be considered the “first socialist” ballet, regardless of the fact that *La Esmeralda*’s Romantic elements were still clearly evident and in fact played a role in Tikhomirov’s decision to revive the ballet in the first place. Likewise, the relationship between the crowd – the *corps de ballet* – and the individual – *Esmeralda* – arose from *both* the desire to increase the emphasis of socialist

themes within the ballet and the persistence of those elements arising from the Romantic conventions of the original dance. Romantic ballet was, in the particular climate of 1925 that sought to bring socialism to the Bolshoi Theater in a form that could reach the working class, a strangely appropriate form for the “big” stage. The small forms of the amateur theater *were* more amenable to the kind of experimentation that is often associated with revolutionary enthusiasm in the early Soviet Union. Nonetheless, *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* is evidence that art did not need to break entirely with the past to be considered socialist. In fact, given the importance of melodrama to reaching a wide audience, demonstrated by Youngblood’s research, Romanticism can be understood as a key element that made it socialist. Tikhomirov’s motivation was far more concerned with the ballet’s opportunity to show off Geltser’s talent as Esmeralda. Yet, regardless of this motivation the other elements of the ballet remain instructive to us when looking at the ballet and its place in Soviet history. It also provides an apt backdrop for the social unrest among dancers inside the Bolshoi Theater that highlighted the hierarchical nature of the Bolshoi Ballet and the reality that the internal hierarchy of the Bolshoi Theater persisted. In the end, *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* was meant to be a stop along the way to entirely new and original works at the Bolshoi Theater that could satisfy the political and cultural demands of their time. The first such break-out work came from the same duo of Tikhomirov and Geltser; it was the first new work since the revolution to successfully ride the line between popular and mass ballet.

## CHAPTER 4: Revolutionary Directions: Imperialism, Gender and *The Red Poppy*

*"I know that by nine, the curtain time for The Red Poppy, you'll all go. How can this be? Why is it so? You criticized it, wanted to sweep up and throw away everything in the Bolshoi Theater, but you yourselves are going..."*<sup>1</sup>

-Mikhail Kalinin at the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the all-Union Komsomol.

Joann Kealiinohomoku's 1968 article "An Anthropologist looks at ballet as a form of ethnic dance" invites us to "think how culturally revealing it is to see the stylized Western customs enacted on the stage, such as the mannerisms from the age of chivalry, courting, weddings, christenings, burial and mourning customs. Think how our world view is revealed in the oft recurring themes of unrequited love, sorcery, self-sacrifice through long suffering, mistaken identity and misunderstandings which have tragic consequences."<sup>2</sup> The work, at least partly tongue in cheek, was written to mount a critique of the study of ballet and the assumption that the form contained an unassailable universality and therefore lay outside the normal bounds of an anthropological study. Nearly fifty years later, scholars in the fields of anthropology and dance studies, who are willing to treat ballet with the same critical eye as other art forms, have certainly met her challenge. Nonetheless, her work still resonates as I write these words today. First, they serve to remind us of that particular, hierarchical, gendered and European history, out of which came ballet in the twentieth century both in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. Second, it reminds us that ballet has, by now, appeared and continued to be performed in a variety of historical and cultural contexts that often bear only passing resemblance, if any, to the history from whence it came. So how can we think about ballet when it, in part or in whole, leaves its European heritage behind and enters a new realm? To be sure, the Bolsheviks were asking

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Kalinin, *Izbrannye Proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1960), 235-36. quoted in Elizabeth Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers in the 1920s* ed. Sally Banes, trans. Lynn Visson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 252.

<sup>2</sup> Joann Kealiinohomoku, "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance," in *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader* ed. Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 40.

themselves the same question still in 1927, when *The Red Poppy* was choreographed and performed at the Bolshoi Theater.

Russia was, of course, at the heart of the historical development of ballet. It was the home of Petipa, Fokine and, before he left for Western Europe with his Ballets Russes, Diaghilev. The Soviet Union, with Russia at its center, was nonetheless culturally and politically unfamiliar, if not outright foreign ground for classical ballet. This does not mean, as I hope has been established in the previous chapter, that ballet in the early Soviet Union was cut off from its past, but rather that artists in ballet were dealing with wholly new questions about their art form. Ballet had received harsh criticism both from external groups like the Komsomol and internally from the younger members of the ballet who resented the continued influence of artists like Geltser and Tikhomirov.<sup>3</sup> For all of ballet's resiliency as an art form in the face of criticism and uncertainty, it was still not totally clear to contemporaries what form the art should take in the Soviet Union. Finally, as the Communists tried to build a distinct, socialist culture, the ongoing presence of ballet was a decidedly non-socialist element. *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* had put those contradictions on display just two years prior. It had proven to be neither stunning success nor abject failure, in the end leaving the Bolshoi Theater in much the same place it had been. Thus, artists in ballet were left trying once again to find a formula for socialist ballet in one of the theaters most important to its own historical development and performance. I characterize the Soviet Union as a "foreign" place for ballet for analytical purposes. Ballet can be seen, as Kealiinohomoku suggested, as a form of ethnic dance. In this light, *The Red Poppy* becomes not just another Bolshoi Theater attempt at Soviet ballet, but also a window into questions of

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Riabstev in particular, see the previous chapter. See also: Elizabeth's Sourtiz's account of the "revolt" of the youth in the ballet.

foreignness and what kinds of traditional European values could still be expressed in the Soviet Union.

Therefore, ballet was “foreign” and yet it was still quite at home in 1920s Moscow, just a short walk to Red Square and the Kremlin. This contradiction lay at the heart of the difficulty experienced by the Bolshoi Ballet in creating revolutionary ballets and at the heart of a present day cultural and historical analysis of that work.<sup>4</sup> Understanding this contradiction and its ramifications, I argue, is paramount to understanding *The Red Poppy*’s meaning and significance. When it came to that ballet, the sole surviving revolutionary ballet from the Bolshoi Theater, the relationship between ballet and Soviet culture was complicated even further. The ballet was set in China, with a strong Soviet presence in the narrative. In short, we have a work of art that comes out of an imperial, European tradition, being choreographed and performed in a Soviet, ostensibly socialist theater, set in colonized China. Sorting through these overlapping cultural contexts, then, is of first importance when it comes to understanding *The Red Poppy* and its place in the history of the Soviet ballet. In order to analyze this tangled web of meaning, it is also helpful to introduce several other works.

Olga Martinova, a one-time dancer at the Bolshoi and biographer of Ekaterina Geltser casually remarked that *The Red Poppy* was the “first Soviet ballet.”<sup>5</sup> It is remarkable that, given the relatively lively discussion, experimentation and even attempted “Sovietization” of existing ballets, even in 1965, when there had been nearly forty years’ time for reflection, it was a matter of fact to label this particular ballet the first of its kind. It is more remarkable still that according to this definition the Bolshoi Theater spent a full decade to produce just a *single* Soviet ballet. Even if it was the first, it certainly did not arise entirely out of the blue. The ballet was the

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<sup>4</sup> By “revolutionary ballets” in this context I mean “ballets with a socialist, revolutionary theme.”

<sup>5</sup> Olga Martinova, *Ekaterina Gel’tser* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1965), 88.

culmination of the work done at the Bolshoi in the ten years between the October Revolution and its premier. In either case, of all the ballets discussed in this dissertation, *The Red Poppy* has without a doubt received the most attention from scholars. What then, do we gain from another analysis of this long known ballet? First, as with all the discussion of particular ballets here it is vital that we understand *The Red Poppy* in its particular historical context. Understood as part of the evolution and development of Soviet ballet and culture during the 1920s, *The Red Poppy* is not just the “first Soviet ballet” but part of an ongoing process for the search of socialist ballet in general. Despite its relative success, both critically and historically, when compared to other ballets created and performed at the Bolshoi Ballet during the early Soviet period, the ballet is also rife with contradictions that clearly elucidate the major concerns associated with the Bolshoi’s work in this time period. It is an examination of these contradictions – arising from a combination of story, theme and choreography that primarily concerns this analysis. In particular, contradictions arise when the ballet is analyzed for its depiction of gender, imperialism and revolution. Rather than being entirely separate modes of analysis, the three are instead taken together. In other words, the ballet must be analyzed in relation to the Soviet cultural project, more broadly speaking.

By 1927 much of the revolutionary experimentalism that characterized the arts in the Soviet Union in the early and mid-1920s was becoming less politically acceptable. Although the beginning of the “Cultural Revolution” was still a year away when *The Red Poppy* premiered, the work seems to foreshadow several of its developments.<sup>6</sup> The logic by which certain works and artists were deemed bourgeois and decadent while others were celebrated was not always

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<sup>6</sup> See the next chapter for a full discussion of the Bolshoi Theater’s place in the “Cultural Revolution.”

clear nor was it consistently applied, as other scholars have pointed out.<sup>7</sup> Although ballet did not undergo quite the same level of experimentation in the Soviet Union that it did in Western Europe, there still had been some experimentation in form in the Soviet Union. The most striking experimental figure in Moscow's ballet world was Kasian Goleizovsky, who by 1927 was beginning to become a pariah at the Bolshoi Theater.<sup>8</sup> Part of this can be seen as due to the general cultural shifts associated with Stalinism in the late 1920s, however, much of it also arose due to Goleizovsky's persnickety personality and ongoing personal disputes with the Bolshoi Theater. This is not to diminish the importance of political influence on the arts, but rather to argue that a reductionist analysis that focuses entirely on political conflict can ignore the individual elements in play. Indeed, even as Goleizovsky himself began to be pushed out of the Bolshoi, his work continued to be performed, as evidenced by the Bolshoi Theater including his *Iosif Prekrasnyi* in the 1927 program.<sup>9</sup> Goleizovsky's work provides further important context for this chapter, in part because of his affinity for the field of ethnography and his propensity to include folk dance in his ballets. His work, therefore, becomes a comparative example that can further highlight the imperial aspects of ballet as it appeared in *The Red Poppy*.

Much ink has been spilled on the question of empire in the Soviet context.<sup>10</sup> When I argue that *The Red Poppy* projected imperial values, this is not meant to be an argument for or against the idea of the Soviet Union was an empire. Although this broader discussion of empire

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of revolutionary enthusiasm and experimentation in general see Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> For more on this see this chapter's "Experimental Intermission."

<sup>9</sup> RGALI F. 648. Op. 2 d. 545 p. 30 "v repertuare baleta na sezon 1927/1928 gg." List of ballets. 8 August 1927.

<sup>10</sup> The literature on Soviet Empire is extensive. For work on empire see: Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), Adeeb Khalid, "The Soviet Union as an Imperial Formation: A View from Central Asia" in *Imperial Formations* ed. Ann Stoler, Carol McGranahan and Peter Perdue (Santa Fe: School of Advanced Research Press, 2007), 123-151. For work on nation and nationalism within the Soviet Union see: Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, *A State of Nations*



is outside the realm of my argument, Mark Beissinger's statement that historians should not agonize over the question of the Soviet Union was an empire or not, but rather seek to "explain why 'the world's first post-imperial state' was vulnerable to framing as Empire."<sup>11</sup> To use the concept in a slightly different manner – I ask why and how Soviet ballets such as *The Red Poppy* are vulnerable to being framed as imperialist. Therefore, I am interested in the ways that imperialist and particularly Russian chauvinist attitudes that existed in the pre-revolutionary ballet were reproduced even in the context of Soviet ballet. Imperialist values and Russian chauvinism were expressed in both the structure and choreography of *The Red Poppy* as well as in the technique associated with Chinese "character dance." To use Beissinger's concept of "family resemblance," it is possible to see a similarity in the values and attitudes being transmitted in pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary ballets. Even when ballets were created with explicit revolutionary intent, ballet technique continued to push the ballets in the direction of traditionalism. It is not surprising that traditions would reign in reproductions of classical and romantic ballets, even when revived by a Soviet theater. It is, however, not obvious that these undesirable traits would be so easily carried over into revolutionary ballets. If the Soviet Union had a "family resemblance" to other empires, then revolutionary ballets had a family resemblance to the nineteenth-century – imperial - classics. This was not just a feature of the Soviet ballet.

Nearly thirty years later, another revolution did come to China. This provides us with another example of a revolutionary culture in which the emergence of socialist ballet can be analyzed. One of the most popular ballets in China strikes a similar revolutionary theme. *The Red Detachment of Women* came to the stage 1963 and depicts a group of revolutionary women fighting against the lingering counter-revolutionary forces of China's old guard. Like *The Red*

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<sup>11</sup> Mark R. Beissinger, "Soviet Empire as 'Family Resemblance'" *Slavic Review* Vol. 65 No. 2 (Summer 2006), 302.

*Poppy*, *The Red Detachment of Women* sought to bring revolutionary values to a pre-revolutionary art form. However, the history of ballet in Russia is far different from that in China. Even after the revolution in China, ballet was in its relative infancy in the country. Lacking the cultural canon of classical and romantic ballets, *The Red Detachment of Women* was freer to break the mold of classical structure, even if the dance itself was still heavily steeped in the classical technique. This difference contributed to the ballet's ability to establish itself as an early part of the Chinese ballet and finally as one of the Eight Model Works. Unlike the Soviet revolutionary ballets like *The Red Poppy*, which seemed to succeed when they were set outside of the Soviet Union, *The Red Detachment of Women* was set at home in China.<sup>12</sup> The ballet features a group of women revolutionaries who are working to track down and in fact eventually kill an abusive, tyrannical landlord. Similar contradictions between classical ballet and the professed values of the Communist Chinese state still emerged in the choreography, but the country's very different relationship to the history of ballet led the contradictions to appear in a somewhat different light.

It is necessary, at this point in time to address a perhaps obvious question that may have arisen in the reader's mind – what does a Chinese ballet from 1963 have to do with the history of early Soviet ballet at all? The choice to include a foreign ballet here likely stands out even further in this study because I have made a point to focus on understanding the early Soviet ballet on its own terms throughout. The discussion of *The Red Detachment of Women* in this chapter exists not to make an argument about a direct link between the Soviet Union in 1927 and the People's Republic of China in 1963, nor as way of claiming that *The Red Poppy* “should

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<sup>12</sup> The other surviving revolutionary ballet to come out of the Soviet Union, this time out of Leningrad, was *Flames of Paris*, which depicted the French Revolution. For more on *Flames of Paris* see Elizabeth Sourtiz, *Soviet Choreographers in the 1920s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 162, 322, Christina Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press, 2012), 52-54, and Natalya Chernova's “Balet 1930-40-kh” in *Sovietskii Baletnii Teatr*. ed. Vera Krasovskaya (Moscow: Iskusstvo), 1976.

have” portrayed China differently. Rather, it can be used as an analytic lens through which we can gain further insight into the nature of Soviet ballet in the late 1920s. Specifically, in creating a “Soviet” ballet set in China, the Bolshoi Ballet continued a long tradition in ballet of exoticizing eastern cultures. Issues of chauvinism, imperialism and gender abound in *The Red Poppy*, both on the level of the narrative and in the choreography. It can be instructive, then, to see what kind of ballet – the very same form in a similarly revolutionary context – was created in China in order to put my analysis of *The Red Poppy* in clearer relief. Furthermore, as a revolutionary, Communist state, 1960s China had a great deal in common with the Soviet Union that makes the analysis of ballet within that culture even more relevant than comparing the development of ballet as an art form outside of the Soviet Union, for example in Western Europe, in the 1920s.<sup>13</sup> As we will see, the entirely Chinese setting, the leading role of women and revolutionary narrative of *The Red Detachment of Women* did not serve to overturn the aforementioned themes that existed in ballets like *The Red Poppy*, but in fact unwittingly reproduced many of them. In understanding these underlying similarities and, where present, differences, the source of *The Red Poppy*’s contradictions become clear. But before turning to analysis it is necessary to give an overview of the two works and their historical contexts.

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<sup>13</sup> In particular, I am referring to the fact that the Soviet Union and the PRC were dealing with the difficulty in negotiating a particular, non-socialist past with a socialist present and future. In this way, ballet being performed in each of the two early post-revolutionary contexts had to navigate similar questions about what their role in the new society was, and how pre-revolutionary art could exist in a post-revolution world. I am not arguing that the 1920s Soviet Union and the 1960s PRC were similar in more broad ways, nor do I want to engage in such a comparative history here. Instead, they both provide somewhat unique examples of post-socialist revolution cultural environments in which ballet was being performed. Despite the fact that the early Soviet ballet had many connections to developing European and even American ballet worlds in the 1920s, my argument is that they faced fundamentally different questions that make them poor examples for comparative analysis.

## Act I – The Red Poppy Rejected

*The Red Poppy* underwent significant revision from its original libretto, derived from Galperin's book *The Daughter of the Port*. The original libretto, dated 24 May 1926, called for a Russian hero named Krasnov who rallied the workers and a French heroine Jeanne who acted as an intermediary between the revolutionaries and the foreign capitalists. These two Europeans were at the center of the ballet's narrative in its original, never performed, version. Before long, as Elizabeth Souritz recounts, the libretto underwent substantial revisions.<sup>14</sup> Although the original libretto was never used as the basis for a ballet, analyzing *The Red Poppy's* more than year-long path from rejected 1926 libretto to production and ultimately performance at the Bolshoi Theater in 1927 is instructive in helping to identify the features of new ballets that the Bolshoi was most concerned about during that time period. Therefore, I will look at both the 1926 libretto in detail *and* the ballet as it was performed when it premiered in 1927. Because the 1926 libretto never became a ballet, here it can only be used as a window into the proposed narrative and basic structure of the ballet, including some notes on the dances that were to be performed. An analysis of the movement in this particular case is impossible because there simply was none in practice. Nonetheless, the process that led from the original libretto in early 1926 to *The Red Poppy* as it appeared on stage at the Bolshoi Theater shows that the debates over ballet were not merely intellectual. Indeed, many of the features that will strike the reader as obviously problematic in the face of an attempt to create "Soviet ballet" were removed or changed in the final version at the behest of Tikhomirov, who was chiefly responsible for the ballet's choreography. Nonetheless, these changes were largely *thematic* changes to the

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<sup>14</sup> Sourtiz, *Soviet Choreographers*, 232.

narrative. The choreography in the staged version, as Souritz also notes, stood out as “traditional even in comparison with the art of the pre-October period.”<sup>15</sup>

The mention of pre-revolution ballets here is of critical importance. This observation, as has been shown by the examples discussed so far, is correct. With few exceptions, early Soviet ballets were often more conservative and traditional in form than the ballets created by Russians in the decade leading up to the Revolution. Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes stands out as an avant-garde ballet company that pushed the art form to its then limits in the early twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> It is also this fact that has led some scholars to look down on the early Soviet period as backward or uninteresting. The Bolshoi was not yet the international phenomenon that it would become in the years after World War II, nor was it creating new works that rivaled *Rite of Spring* as avant-garde art. At this moment it is worth taking a moment to again reiterate the importance of *not* analyzing ballets like *The Red Poppy* in comparison to such troupes or such works. The comparative framework *can* be useful. Here, I have chosen to use *The Red Detachment of Women* because the environment in which it was created – Communist China – was actually more similar to the Soviet environment than those in which more avant-garde ballets had been and were continuing to be created.

Returning to the 1926 libretto, *The Red Poppy* was first imagined in five scenes. The first scene served to set up the central conflict in the ballet between the wealthy foreign capitalists and the Kuomintang. It was set in the “Diplomats Club” where the foreigners were to be drinking, smoking and apparently planning further control over the Chinese dock workers. Lord Vulday, the ballets main villain, led their group and begins to dance, impressing the crowd and soon the

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<sup>15</sup> Souritz, 241.

<sup>16</sup> For more on the *Ballets Russes*, see Lynn Garafola’s excellent *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes* (Boston: Decapo Press, 1998), which examines the troupe from perspective of art and economics. For more on Diaghilev himself see, Sjeng Scheijen’s exhaustive biography *Diaghilev: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

club with his impressive performance. At this point, Jeanne Vernier the heroine to be, hungry for the attention of the rich businessmen, enters and dances for them. Thus begins Jeanne's character arc, who was to go from a hapless servant of the capitalists to friend of the revolution. Members of the Kuomintang watch, aghast with "expressions of contempt" for the bourgeois show of wealth and excess.<sup>17</sup> The Kuomintang themselves featured prominently in the original libretto.

1926 and 1927 were pivotal years for Bolshevik foreign policy in China, and in particular with regard to the Comintern's relationship with the Kuomintang. Chiang Kai-Shek's rise to power in 1926 and his subsequent crackdown on communists complicated the Soviet position. Earlier the same year, the Soviet government, by way of the Comintern, had been trying to exert control over the Kuomintang. According to Alexander Pantsov "the implementation of the Comintern resolutions, which were directed at communizing the [Kuomintang], turned on the almost transparent attempt of Soviet advisors and Chinese Communists to seize control of the apparatus of the [Kuomintang] Central Executive Committee and the Nationalist government."<sup>18</sup> The Soviet government was at first forced to take a more conciliatory position and even as late as early 1927 there was "continued flirting with the rightists" in China.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, Soviet aims for communism in China lay with the Kuomintang and Soviet officials hoped that the party could be pushed leftward from within.<sup>20</sup> The violent massacre and oppression of communists in Shanghai by Chiang Kai-Shek's forces beginning on 12 April 1927 changed the situation again. By the end of the summer, the Kuomintang had expunged the remaining communists from the party and before long the conflict had escalated to civil war in China. *The Red Poppy's* original libretto was timely in 1926 when it featured not merely Chinese communists, but Kuomintang

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<sup>17</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 470 ll. 26-33. *Krasniy Mak* Libretto. 1926.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander Pantsov, *The Bolsheviks and the Chinese Revolution 1919-1927* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 90.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

revolutionaries in particular, just as Soviet policy was concerned with promoting a communist character in the Kuomintang. By the time *The Red Poppy* premiered in June 1927, nestled between the events of April and August, the situation had shifted dramatically. Ultimately, however, it was not until September 1927 that Soviet foreign policy gave up entirely on the Kuomintang and officially shifted to embrace the now entirely distinct Chinese Communist Party as the bearers of revolution.<sup>21</sup>

The second scene was set on the docks, where Chinese dock workers are going about their difficult manual labor loading and unloading ships. It was in this scene that we were to have met Krasnov. Krasnov was to have begun dancing in front of the Chinese workers in order to inspire them and show them an optimistic outlook on life that was possible if only they could remove their foreign oppressors. The Russian was not to directly collude in organizing their revolt, but rather to have provided an example of the kind of life they could have if only they could remove their oppressors. Here, Krasnov was clearly to stand in for the Soviet Union, whose socialist way of life, many still thought, might inspire world revolution.<sup>22</sup> This was, of course, a topic of fierce debate and was one of the key rifts between Stalin and Trotsky. The idea of “Socialism in One Country” had already been put forth in the Soviet Union several years prior, and it is interesting to see the influence of an international conception of the revolution here. Although the idea was far from uncontroversial, it is worth remembering that the Soviet Union’s official stance toward revolution and the rest of the world was still relatively malleable in the late 1920s.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, it appeared here in *The Red Poppy*’s original libretto.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 136-137, 155.

<sup>22</sup> It was only in 1924 that Stalin put forth the theory of “socialism in one country” and in 1926-1927 it still seemed very possible for others, China included, to join the revolution.

<sup>23</sup> See Chapter 3, “Clash of Worlds: The Comintern, British Hong Kong, and Chinese Nationalism, 1921-1929” in Michael B. Share, *Where Empires Collided: Russian and Soviet Relations with Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macao* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007) and Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: a history of international communism from Lenin to Stalin* (London: MacMillan, 1996).

In the third scene, the action was to move away from the groups and focuses on two of the main characters Nin-Hao, one of the Kuomintang, and Jeanne. Nin-Hao is preoccupied with thoughts of her despite the many other girls available to him, and soon Jeanne herself enters and begins to dance to his delight. As she enters, she brings a large bundle of red poppies. As a European, her dance appeared exotic to his sensibilities, but by the end of the act it is clear they have formed a relationship, and Jeanne's love affair with him trumps her desire to impress the foreign businessmen. While neither of these two characters appeared in the final version of *The Red Poppy*, this scene is of particular importance because it, in fact, mirrored quite closely the controversial second act of the staged version of *The Red Poppy*. Here the revolution is subsumed by the personal and our main female character has a transformative moment during which she becomes devoted to a revolutionary cause. This transformation, like that in final version, comes out of personal revelation rather than a "scientific" approach to revolution that critics sorely desired from balletic narratives. In fact, it relies heavily on the tropes of Romantic ballets to portray the raising of revolutionary consciousness.

Scenes four and five return the action to the tavern again, but now things have changed. Nin-Hao hands out red poppies to the entering patrons as a sign of their plan to rise up against the foreign capitalists. The Russian, Krasnov, enters during this and is "warmly welcomed" by the Chinese workers. Ultimately, it is Jeanne who makes the decisive move and rejects her former obsession. In the libretto, she instead embraces the workers. Krasnov approves of her decision openly and publicly sides with the Chinese. Much of the dancing in this final scene, in which the capitalists are rejected and driven out of China was to be done with miming<sup>24</sup> in order that the movement could be as literal as possible in this decisive, revolutionary, moment. As the

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<sup>24</sup> In classical ballet, miming consists of gestures used to convey meaning. Common examples include both hands being held to the dancers' heart to convey love or a hand to his or her ear to convey hearing.



action finally comes to a close, a banner drops from the rafters reading “Hands off China” to drive the point home.<sup>25</sup>

Though this libretto for the *The Red Poppy* was ultimately rejected, it tells an interesting story that gives insight into the political motivation of the work, as well as the artistic direction. Politically, the storyline follows a predictable pattern. Oppressed workers are inspired to rise up against their decadent, abusive bosses. The symbolism was straightforward. The character Jeanne acts as the bridge between the capitalists and the workers and by the end has transformed from courtesan to revolutionary, wearing a red flower in her hair in the final scene. The poppy, of course, also represents the imperialistic nature of the opium industry in China, as alluded to in the libretto by the smoking of opium in the second scene. The flower itself is, then transformed from the tool of foreign oppression in the middle of the ballet to the symbol of proletarian resistance by the end.

The unsubtly named Krasnov is the only Russian who appears in the libretto and acts an inspiration to the Chinese workers. His first interaction with the Chinese workers appears in the second scene when he begins to dance. The laborers are immediately impressed by his show and soon begin to emulate his movement, crudely at first and then quickly catching on themselves.<sup>26</sup> In this story, Krasnov teaches the Chinese dock-workers to become revolutionary, indicating that the source of their class consciousness is not, ultimately, their condition but rather Krasnov’s inspiration. Although Nin-Hao, a man, represents the Kuomintang as a main character in the libretto, he is overshadowed by Jeanne and Krasnov, particularly in the final, decisive scenes, during which the most important political point is made. Consequentially, the libretto’s narrative

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<sup>25</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 470 l. 33.

<sup>26</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2 d. 470 l. 26

is explicitly anti-imperialist, but in fact appears to contain imperialistic impulses when analyzed more closely.

If we consider Jeanne's transformation and Krasnov inspiration as a sort of revolutionary vanguard, then they are not entirely outside the bounds of Soviet ideology. However, their central place in the conclusion suggests that their roles were not just formative, but decisive. The Chinese proletariat is by comparison an active but slightly detached participant who had to be helped along by the Europeans. Even then, Jeanne's transformation comes as a feature of her intense emotional attachment to Nin-Hao. As the only female main character in the libretto, the fact that she is driven chiefly by emotion also suggests a very traditional approach to gender in this libretto – another feature that carried over into the final version of the libretto a year later. Among the foreign characters, Jeanne becomes closely associated with the Chinese revolutionaries, who become more closely associated with the feminine as a result of her actions and dancing in the final scene.

The Russian Krasnov, by comparison, is a model for the proletariat, suggesting that the Soviet Union is a model for other socialist revolutions and workers. He is strong, masculine and ultimately a leader in the revolution. Nonetheless, drawing the line between a *socialist* and *Russian* speaks to the ideological discussion in the Soviet Union at the time. His strong, inspirational dance in the first scene was to invoke a masculinity that was associated squarely with the Soviet Union. This is all the more potent a factor when reading the libretto because Krasnov's Russianness is not critical to the narrative. Although he appears in three of the five acts, his main role as inspiration could have easily been a Chinese character with little change. Associating the lead male dancer with Russianness also says something about the art form. Removed from the narrow context of the libretto, Krasnov was also written as the main character

of a ballet written in the Soviet Union during the late 1920s. Krasnov's central place in the narrative ultimately kept the focus on Russia, rather than China. Notably, Krasnov's character was cut entirely from *The Red Poppy*. His character was subsumed into the presence of a Soviet naval ship at the port, providing for the presence of a group of Russian, Soviet sailors that both provide a strong Russian element in the narrative and which appear in a now-famous dance in the third and final act of the ballet.<sup>27</sup>

Moving from the libretto's narrative elements to its choreographic notes, it is not until the final act that miming is explicitly mentioned. When the revolutionary plan is finally sprung, the libretto calls for mimed motions that explain the ideas being presented, class struggle, the rejection of foreign rule and the victory of the proletariat. Galperin clearly expressed concern that the ballet's chief ideological point be made as clearly as possible and was not convinced that classical ballet could portray them clearly. This was an astute observation by the librettist, who apparently understood the demand for ballet to portray revolutionary themes in a way that was clear and understandable to a working audience. The banner clearly stating "Hands off China" even makes the point completely literal. The distrust of ballet vocabulary to communicate specifically socialist ideals (as distinct from more general ideas such as a character being a villain or hero) speaks to the ongoing difficulty in finding a place for ballet even a decade after the revolution itself. Although the libretto was rejected, the elements from this final scene bear striking resemblance to elements of *drambalet*, the form that would become the *de facto* accepted socialist-realist form for ballet years later. Therefore, this libretto is important because many of its elements were carried over into the final version of *The Red Poppy* and because it appears to have been just slightly out of sync with the development of ballet in the Soviet Union.

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<sup>27</sup> When renovations on the Bolshoi Theater were completed in 2011, the Bolshoi Ballet performed this dance at the gala celebrating the reopening of the theater, alongside excerpts from other famous ballets.

It is not unreasonable to think that had this libretto been put forward at the Bolshoi Theater five or ten years later that it would have been accepted without question.

### **Act II – *The Red Poppy* Performed**

The original libretto for *The Red Poppy* was rejected for a number of reasons, but perhaps the most influential was not related to the libretto itself but rather the relative success of *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* just a year before. Although *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* had not been labeled a “Soviet” ballet, it was nonetheless well received in a great part due to the team of Gelster and Tikhomirov, who at once represented the old guard at the Bolshoi and combined to push the influence of classical ballet in the performances at the Bolshoi Theater in the mid-1920s. Although the dramatic elements of the rejected libretto actually did align with call for more thematic and narratively driven ballets, *The Red Poppy* that was performed ultimately reproduced classical structures for the purpose of again showcasing Ekaterina Geltser’s performance. Gone from the ballet were Nin-Hao, Jeanne, and Krasnov and in their place are the characters Tao-Khao, Li-Chan-Fou, and an unnamed Soviet captain.<sup>28</sup> The ballet is again set at the docks, where workers are being abused and overworked. The Soviet captain wins the affection of Tai-Khao through his desire to help these Chinese laborers, much to the ire of Li-Chan-Fou, who becomes jealous. The key moments of transformation in the female lead come this time during the controversial second act, a highly symbolic dream sequence during which Tao-Khao learns to embrace revolution. The third and final act again uses traditional ballet tropes, when Tao-Khao is killed.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> In some scholarship, the character Tao-Khao is rendered as Tao-Hao. I have used the transliteration for the character’s name as it appears in the final libretto.

<sup>29</sup> The accepted libretto for *The Red Poppy* came from librettist Mikhail Kurilko, who ultimately received the credit and pay for the work. Galperin’s original work on the rejected libretto did not earn him any credit for the final version, despite its clear influence on the later. RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1763 ll. 58-59.

*The Red Poppy* is one of the few ballets created during the 1920s that premiered to resounding success – at least measured in ticket sales – and continues to be a part of the Russian ballet’s extended repertoire even today. Despite the fact that new ballets were, ideally, to portray the new socialist way of life in the Soviet Union, *The Red Poppy*’s success stems at least partially from its setting outside of the socialist state. Furthermore, its appeal to revolution that overthrew corrupt leaders in China and installed a popular Communist government spoke to an uncontroversial and easily accepted politics. The Soviet Union was to be an example capable of inspiring other revolutions. In the 1920s Soviet Union it was possible to imagine just such a revolution coming to China. The Communist Party in China had formed in 1921 and, like most world Communist Parties after 1919 and the creation of the Communist International, had contact with the Soviet Union. The basic narrative of the ballet, then, was not just politically sensible, but timely as well.

Yet, in spite the revolutionary nature of the story in *The Red Poppy*, the structure of that story and the ballet itself was very much rooted in nineteenth-century Romantic ballets. Conflict is generated as much from the relationships between the characters – “small r” romantic relationships included – as from ballet’s the revolutionary politics and setting. The gendered nature of the conflict and the ballet itself is part and parcel to the ballets of the nineteenth century and is not substantially subverted by *The Red Poppy*. Meanwhile, several scenes exist merely to advance the love-interest plot. Furthermore, Tao-Khao’s character serves to feminize China, similar to the fashion in which Jeanne had in the original libretto. Like Jeanne’s character, Tao-Khao is emotionally driven and is ultimately moved to join the revolutionary cause through a transformative dream she has that is the subject of the second act of the ballet. While *The Red Poppy* can be considered an at least moderately successful revolutionary ballet, insofar as

creating a new, original ballet around the topic of socialism and revolution meant a basic standard of success in its historical moment, it also reified the traditional, aristocratic and even imperialistic values that the new socialist ballet was deliberately trying to avoid.

In setting itself in China, *The Red Poppy* followed a tradition in ballet of works like *La Bayadere*, set in what were to Europeans exotic, foreign places.<sup>30</sup> Even as modern dance, deliberately setting itself apart from ballet, emerged in the early twentieth century, this trend continued. As dance scholar Jane Desmond astutely pointed out, “any investigation of gender in dance must be linked to concurrent analysis of other markers of cultural otherness.”<sup>31</sup> Desmond’s analysis is not of classical ballet, but rather Ruth St. Denis’s 1906 dance “Radha.” She argues in that case that the dance “presents a hyperbolization of categories of otherness, mapping markers of race, orientalism and sexuality onto the white, middle-class, female body.”<sup>32</sup> A very similar process occurred in *The Red Poppy*, which not only produced markers of race, orientalism and sexuality, but also did so on Soviet female bodies.<sup>33</sup> This trend in dance did not arise in the early twentieth century either in the United States or in the Soviet Union. It was a feature of classical ballet throughout the nineteenth century that continued to be expressed in dance in the twentieth century.

At the Bolshoi Theater, classes in “character dance” (*kharakternyi tanets*) continued to be taught at the Ballet School throughout the 1920s. In 1925, the Ballet School curriculum in character dance called for extensive training in various styles of dance from folk dances to

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<sup>30</sup> *La Bayadere* was a ballet by the famous Marius Petipa that was first performed at the Mariinsky Theater in 1877. It contains many of the hallmarks of romantic ballets and bears some striking resemblances to *The Red Poppy* including its emphasis on the exotic and the death of the main character.

<sup>31</sup> Jane Desmond, “Dancing out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism in Ruth St. Denis’s ‘Radha’ of 1906,” *Signs* Vol 17. No. 1 (Autumn, 1991), 29.

<sup>32</sup> Desmond, 30-31.

<sup>33</sup> Of course, the American cultural context of the early twentieth century and the Soviet Union are not by any means equivalent. Scholars have linked dances like Radha to a general obsession with “the exotic” in early twentieth century American culture. See: Elizabeth Kendall, *Where She Danced: The Birth of American Art Dance* (Knopf, 1979) and Christina L. Schlundt “Into the Mystic with Miss Ruth” *Dance Perspectives*, Vol. 46 (Summer, 1971).

waltzes, all of which came together under the same heading of “character dance.” Students were to learn Spanish, Hungarian, Russian, Mazurka and last but not least “Eastern” character dances.<sup>34</sup> At the same time students began learning the “characteristic gestures” of “various nationalities.”<sup>35</sup> Although the European nationalities were mentioned explicitly, all “Eastern” character dance, under which the typified movements of the corps de ballet in *The Red Poppy* fell, came under the same undifferentiated category. At the Bolshoi Theater, then, the kind of orientalism that Desmond mentions was not just a reflection of a broader culture or even a quirk of the *The Red Poppy*’s particular choreography, but rather a fundamental feature of the technique that was being taught at the Bolshoi’s Ballet School. It is not an exaggeration to say that the dancers appearing on the stage at the Bolshoi Theater by the mid- and late-twenties had been schooled for years in precisely the kind of movement that acted as a characterization of various cultures.<sup>36</sup>

Returning to Joann Kealiinohomoku’s exhortation to consider ballet a form of ethnic dance, this suggests that so long as ballet technique continued to be taught with an eye towards characterization of other national dances, it was also an ethnic dance that contained within it a kind of chauvinism that trivialized other cultures by reducing them to caricatures. Kealiinohomoku was writing for an audience of Western anthropologists and scholars of dance, but is not a coincidence that that her call resonates here as well. “Another significant obstacle to the identification of Western dancers with non-Western dance forms,” she writes, “be they primitive or ‘ethnologic’ in the sense that Sorell uses the term as ‘the art expression of a race’ which is ‘executed for the enjoyment and edification of the audience’ is the double myth that

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<sup>34</sup> RGALI f. 648 op.2 d. 410 l. 31. “Programma po kharakternym tantsam.” Ballet school curriculum. 1925.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, Tikhomirov himself continued to teach at the ballet school. In 1927 roughly twenty percent of his total salary came from his work inside the ballet school. (RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1738 ll. 5-6. “Tikhomirov.” Salary records. 1927-1928)

dance grew out of some spontaneous mob action and then became frozen.”<sup>37</sup> In this sense national character dances became a kind of stand in for any number of stereotypes of a group of people, including the idea that the group itself can be reduced to a relatively small set of characteristic movements. The very place of “Eastern” dance within the canon of character dance suggests that it was considered to be somewhat below that national dances of other, presumably less exotic, European cultures. These were not unique features of the Soviet ballet, but features that it carried with it from the nineteenth century. In light of Desmond’s analysis of St. Denis, it is not surprising that these attitudes were reproduced in *The Red Poppy*, particularly among women characters.

And so we come to Ekaterina Geltser’s role as Tao-Khao in *The Red Poppy*. The role combined a gendered and imperialist conception of China and Chinese culture that lay at the heart of *The Red Poppy*’s exotic notion of “the East.” “Latent Orientalism,” Edward Said argued, “also encouraged a peculiarly (not to say invidiously) male conception of the world.”<sup>38</sup> The intersection between gendered and imperialist attitudes was on full display in *The Red Poppy*. The controversial second act put this on display perhaps more than any other aspect of the ballet. Souritz argues that Tikhomirov and Geltser, continuing their collaboration from *Esmeralda*, *Daughter of the People* “tried to prove that through he canonical forms of the nineteenth-century ballet spectacle one can depict even revolution in China.”<sup>39</sup> Tao-Khao, danced by Geltser and supported by a large ensemble, becomes a symbol for revolutionary transformation after meeting the Russian sailors at the port. Sourtiz realized that in *The Red Poppy*, “exoticism [was]

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<sup>37</sup> Kealiinohomoku, 35. Here Kealiinohomoku is referring to Walter Sorrell, *The Dance Through the Ages* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1967).

<sup>38</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 207.

<sup>39</sup> Souritz, 241.



emphasized in every possible way.”<sup>40</sup> It is not surprising then, that the critical moments of transformation in came during a Geltser solo that put her on full display in the gaze of the audience. Arising with the preeminence of the ballerina in Romantic dance, such solos subjected the ballerina to the dual gaze of both other male dancers and the audience.<sup>41</sup> In the moment most important to the ballet’s message Geltser represents China by herself, on display for a mainly Western-oriented audience.

It should be noted that the act *does* subvert some expectations that are generally associated with orientalist attitudes. For example, Tao-Khao’s self-transformation into a revolutionary does run perpendicular to Said’s argument that “the very possibility of development, transformation, human movement – in the deepest sense of the word – is denied the Orient and the Oriental.”<sup>42</sup> This only demonstrates the co-existence of sometimes-contradictory ideas in *The Red Poppy* and the confusing ways that the imperial art form was merged with Soviet ideas. These were not inherently Soviet ideas about gender and the East. As Said showed, these attitudes were entirely common in Europe. Here, however, they took a distinctly Soviet form. Douglas Northrop outlines a similar attitude that placed women at the forefront of Soviet interactions with Asia in his study of the importance of the veil as a symbol around which national and imperial anxieties played out. It is perhaps not coincidental that “women’s liberation was selected as the crucial strategy to find Bolshevik allies among the indigenous peoples of Central Asia,” and that the first implementation of this strategy took place in 1927, the same year that *The Red Poppy* premiered at the Bolshoi Theater.<sup>43</sup> The idea that

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<sup>40</sup> Souritz, 243.

<sup>41</sup> Rosemary Roberts, “Performing Gender in Maoist Ballet: Mutual Subversions of Genre and Ideology in *The Red Detachment of Women*,” *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*. No. 16 (March, 2008), par. 26-28.

<sup>42</sup> Said, 208.

<sup>43</sup> Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender & Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 12.

Muslim women served as a kind of “surrogate proletariat” in Central Asia is not unique to Northrop and has existed at least since the 1970s with Gregory Massell’s work.<sup>44</sup> This suggests that the classical structure and dance in *The Red Poppy* found expression at this moment in Soviet history was not just a pre-revolutionary holdover due to the conservative influence of artists like Geltser and Tikhomirov, but that this kinds of ideas were doing real work in defining Soviet relationships with “the East.”

Critic Viktor Iving remarked in his review of the ballet, published in *Izvestia* on 22 June 1927, “the role of Tao-Khao is a new major victory for Geltser.”<sup>45</sup> The praise for Geltser here reveals the tension between the desire for new directions in ballet and the adulation still given to virtuosic performance of classical ballet. Although Iving admitted that the second act of the ballet – perhaps Geltser’s most “classical” moments in the ballet – did not match the rest of the work and seemed somewhat out of place, he could still not help but devote nearly a third of his short review to her performance.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, this was somewhat typical of the reviews *The Red Poppy* received.<sup>47</sup> Yet, one critic some more dismayed by the set than the dancing. Famous Soviet poet Sergei Gorodetsky remarked of the second act: “one does not want to look at living flowers! In 1927! In Moscow! In the first revolutionary ballet!”<sup>48</sup> Although there was not consensus on *The Red Poppy*’s success as a revolutionary ballet, the second act stood out as particularly classical and Geltser’s performance only bolstered her already atmospheric reputation as a dancer. Whether or not the ballet was successful as a revolutionary ballet, a

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<sup>44</sup> See: Gregory J. Massel, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919-1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

<sup>45</sup> Viktor Iving. “Teatr-Muzika-Kino: Krasniy Mak” *Izvestia*, 22 June 1927.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> For a more complete discussion of *The Red Poppy*’s reception, see Souritz, 250.

<sup>48</sup> S. Gorodetsky, “Pobeda Klassiki” *Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov*, 21-27 June 1927 No. 25 p. 5 quoted in Elizabeth Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers in the 1920s* ed. and trans. Sally Banes (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 243.

question that Souritz dwells on, a more interesting direction for inquiry is how the apparent contradictions in the dance came to be and what they mean.

In the Soviet Union, the aesthetic desire to retain classical features contradicted the push to see scenes of everyday life under socialism. Tikhomirov and Geltser had worked together on *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* and in many ways *The Red Poppy* was their previous project with a coat of shiny red paint. This point was not lost on many critics who alternatively felt the “red paint” was sufficient cause to celebrate the birth of Soviet ballet or were disappointed that an ostensibly revolutionary ballet was so similar to the ballets that had come before it. Regardless, *The Red Poppy* did one thing that no other ballet produced and performed by the Bolshoi Theater had since the revolution. It produced controversy. And the controversy generated buzz. Therefore, this contradiction was one of the sources of *The Red Poppy*’s initial success. Souritz further recounts “requests for group tickets poured in from all sides. The remaining tickets were literally battled for. Red Poppy perfume and soap, candy and cookies appeared for sale; a café of the same name opened.”<sup>49</sup> Such petty commercialization of “the first Soviet ballet’s” popularity is ironic enough in its own right, and speaks to the sensation that *The Red Poppy* was in the year after its premier. Yet when Yuri Faier, noted composer at the Bolshoi Theater, reminisced in his memoirs about the search for new ballet after the revolution, he remarked casually that Tikhomirov and Geltser’s work on *The Red Poppy* was based “in a pre-revolutionary era” (*v dorevoliutsionnom vremeni*).<sup>50</sup> Such a cool memory of the work after the fact seems to stand in stark contradiction to the hot-tempered popular and critical response. It is tempting to dwell on this particular contradiction due to its sensational nature, even in its historical moment. However, focusing mainly this particular contradiction as the critics did in

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<sup>49</sup> Souritz, 250-251.

<sup>50</sup> Yuri Faier, *O sebe, o muzyke, o baleti* (Vsesoiuznoe izdatel'stvo sovetskii kompozitor: Moscow, 1970), 227.

1927 is to overemphasize what is really only a surface-level analysis of the work and its meaning and significance.

### **An Experimental Intermission**

The Bolshoi Theater was no doubt defined through the 1920s by its “big” and conservative ballets, even when it came to those depicting the revolution like *The Red Poppy*. Yet, the Bolshoi was not entirely without participation in experimental art on smaller stages. Despite the fact that the theater itself remained a venue for classical ballet and opera, the institution did show signs of engaging with a more avant-garde, if not popular, movement in ballet. As part of its ongoing attempt to foster revolutionary ballet, the Bolshoi Theater established a small offshoot theater for the creation and production of new work. This Experimental Theater, as it was called, was meant to offer an opportunity to explore directions in ballet that were not yet sufficiently developed to appear on stage at the Bolshoi Theater. Even the existence of such a theater is noteworthy. The immediate meaning is twofold and reflected the ongoing struggle in ballet. It at once signifies that the Bolshoi took seriously the task of creating new, revolutionary ballets and the fact that the Bolshoi was only willing to show certain works on its main stage – and those works were tied to a history of conservative, classical ballet. The Experimental Theater demonstrates, again, the tensions facing the Bolshoi Theater in the 1920s. It was driven both by a need to pursue some kind of “progress” – no matter how ill-defined and loosely evaluated – and the need to preserve its status as a purveyor of high culture, again no matter how ill-defined and loosely evaluated. Goleizovsky is, in this case, the exception that

proves the rule.<sup>51</sup> One of his works was one of the very few that made the leap from the Experimental Theater to the main, academic stage at the Bolshoi.

In 1928, the Bolshoi decided to restage Kasian Goleizovsky's 1925 ballet *Iosif Prekrasnii*.<sup>52</sup> However, Goleizovsky himself was not invited to be a part of the production. His resulting outrage at the Bolshoi's actions gives some indication not only of the "generational" conflict that was emerging at the end of the 1920s, but also the gulf between the tendency to search for new directions in ballet through experiment or through more traditional means. His first demand, of course, was that the Theater simply not go forward with the reproduction, calling its decision to do so without his involvement or be guilty of an act of "theatrical HOOLIGANISM."<sup>53</sup> The point, perhaps made a bit too dramatically, nonetheless gives some insight into the idea of artistic or intellectual property. The Bolshoi was silent in response. Goleizovsky's appeal, despite his status as a respected choreographer only years early, fell on deaf ears. The dance, insofar as the Bolshoi was concerned, was its property, that is to say public property.

Goleizovsky's initial appeal being rebuffed, he sent a second message weeks later. He stated, again, his desire that the ballet not be reproduced at all if he were not to be involved. He, perhaps realizing that this wish would not be met, offered a second slightly more realistic request. That, as long as the ballet was to go forward anyway, that his name not be used on the posters advertising it.<sup>54</sup> Apparently upset by the lack of response from the Bolshoi he added that

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<sup>51</sup> In Petrograd, at the same time as Goleizovsky, Lopukhov was also experimenting in ballet, perhaps best depicted in his 1923 revolutionary ballet *Dance Symphony*. Christina Ezrahi discusses the ballet in *Swans of the Kremlin* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 37-41.

<sup>52</sup> The date 1928 likely stands out to readers familiar with historical periodization of the Soviet Union as the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. A discussion of the role of the Cultural Revolution at the Bolshoi Ballet can be found in chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>53</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 625 l. 20. Letter from Goleizovsky to Bolshoi Theater Administration. December 1928.

<sup>54</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 625 l. 18 Letter from Goleizovsky to Bolshoi Theater Administration. 3 November 1928.

it had “no right to remain silent.”<sup>55</sup> However, remain silent it did, and the work’s original author apparently decided not to pursue the issue further, at least through any official channels that documented the exchange.

Despite his appeal for various concessions it is clear that his first preference would have been to take part in the restoration of the ballet himself. As such, Goleizovsky made a last ditch appeal in his correspondence. “Without my participation in the production, such reproduction will be considered by me as rude” in particular because it was an affront to his “rights” as an author.<sup>56</sup> Despite Goleizovsky’s long tenure at the Bolshoi and his personal appeal to the Director, his rights as an artist were simply no longer regarded as necessary to protect. In comparison to the pay disputes surrounding the reproduction of *Esmeralda* the differences are striking. As seen in the previous chapter, Tikhomirov’s appeal was channeled through his union and received official review from the Bolshoi and finally brief ruling from the court, which ultimately ruled in their favor. Goliezovsky’s appeal was precisely the opposite, unofficial, without institutional response and ultimately futile. Both appeals took place in 1928 and the differences were therefore not due to institutional vagaries. Instead the key difference between the experiences of the artists in these cases was the *relationship* between the artists and the institutions in question, the Bolshoi Theater, the artists’ unions, and Narkompros. Tikhomirov and Galperin were able to successfully use the tools available to them to challenge their fate, while Goleizovsky was left by comparison impotent in his ability to interact with the state apparatus, including his former Bolshoi Theater.

Goleizovsky’s story is hardly new. He stands as one of the most famous of the avant-garde ballet masters and choreographers of the late Imperial and early Soviet periods. However,

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 625 l. 20.

the tension between Goleizovsky and the Bolshoi Theater, especially after 1925, has often been framed entirely in terms of political tensions between himself and those like Tikhomirov, and the state that eventually characterized him as a “formalist.”<sup>57</sup> To be sure, Goleizovsky’s art never quite managed to fit the mold the Bolshoi Theater was searching for in the 1920s, and by the late 1920s it was politically easy for his work to be dismissed as formalism. Yet, he was also a headstrong artist who was unwilling to compromise his artistic vision. This factor has been, I argue, somewhat overlooked in the tension between Goleizovsky and the Bolshoi’s “old guard” that was by no means only beginning in 1928. He already stood at odds with the likes of Tikhomirov in 1925 when he wrote a letter to the Bolshoi expressing his anger the lack of support and at times outright hostility from the “academic” theater. Writing to the Bolshoi Theater’s Directorate in September of 1925, he claimed that an “unending number of small and large troubles have incessantly followed this performance [of *Iosif Prekrasnyi*].”<sup>58</sup> “After long reflection and the comparison of different facts” Goleizovsky asserted, “I have come to the conclusion that these conditions are the result of the old masters’ dislike of my work”<sup>59</sup> He particularly called attention to Tikhomirov who had referred to his work in the past as pornographic. While he did soften the blow a little by adding it was “hard to hear this accusation from the respected V.D. Tikhomirov.”<sup>60</sup> These tensions between the two artists began boiling over as early as this confrontation in 1925 and ultimately seem more a matter of infighting at the Bolshoi than an act of political calculus and repression aimed at Goleizovsky.

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<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Souritz discussed his place at the Bolshoi generally speaking in *Soviet Choreographers in the 1920s*. See also, Christina Ezrahi’s *Swans of the Kremlin*, which focuses on the political aspects of ballet in the 1920s and 30s.

<sup>58</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 696 l. 10. Letter from Goleizovsky to the Bolshoi Theater Directorate. 26 September 1925.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

In fact, the 1928 incident regarding the restaging of *Iosif Prekrasnyi* was not the first time the academic theater sought to impose its vision on his work. The same thing happened in 1925 when the work was first going to move from the experimental stage to the academic stage. In a letter to Lunacharsky the following week, Goleizovsky outlined the breach of contract that occurred when his choreography was assigned a coach to teach it to the troupe and his dismay to find that the choreography had changed substantially.<sup>61</sup> He demanded that in the future he have some say over the coach (in accordance with his contract) and that in order to fix the choreography he wanted eight rehearsals for himself, three of which should take place on the main stage.<sup>62</sup> In the political atmosphere of 1928, such action against Goleizovsky seems a consequence of the early rumblings of the Cultural Revolution, but the fact that similar conflict existed three years earlier complicates this narrative. Tikhomirov's influence at the Bolshoi Theater, bolstered by the relative success of *Esmeralda*, *Daughter of the People* and then *The Red Poppy*, no doubt contributed to the fact that Goleizovsky's relationship with the institution continued to be strained.

Goleizovsky's work also becomes surprisingly relevant in the context of *The Red Poppy* because he was well known for his interest in ethnography and folk dance. Writing in 1964 as a "folklorist", Goleizovsky claimed that "the evolution of folk art forms, including choreography, always proceeded according to social and living conditions."<sup>63</sup> This fairly straight-forward Marxian claim that art arises from material conditions is itself unremarkable. But the Goleizovsky who wrote these words was thirty years the senior to his younger self that had stirred the pot at the Bolshoi in the mid-1920s. The book does not mention ballet in the context of folk dance at all. He focuses throughout mainly on smaller, rural forms. Goleizovsky's work

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<sup>61</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 696 l. 14. Kasian Goleizovsky Letter to Anatoly Lunacharsky. 3 October 1925.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Kasian Goleizovskii, *Obrazy russkoi narodnoi khoreografii*. (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964), 7.



on Russian folk dance was published just a handful of years prior to the publications of Kealiinohomoku's article on ballet as ethnic dance. Although he did not put his analysis in quite the same terms, it is clear that Goleizovsky understood the very features in ballet that led to the very imperialist, Orientalist attitudes that were on display in *The Red Poppy* and other classical ballets. Already in 1925 Goleizovsky wrote "imagine a person walking out of Spain and into *Don Quixote* and his surprise at the almost complete lack of the Spanish in this Spanish ballet."<sup>64</sup> He continued "or imagine a person's knowledge of Egypt was tested through *Pharaoh's Daughter*. Maspero would laugh in the face of the choreographer who made "*Pharaoh's Daughter*."<sup>65</sup> Goleizovsky too saw this deficiency as related to the Ballet School and not just to the choreography. He took a shot across the bow of the school when he wrote "the word 'choreographer' encompasses the knowledge and recognition of all forms of dance and dance of all ages. If they would look at ballet through my eyes, the academic Ballet School would not be so weak as it is now. Students are, upon finishing, fit only for 'classical ballet.'"<sup>66</sup>

As someone genuinely interested in folk dance, it was not difficult for Goleizovsky to see the problems in the "character dance" on display in classical ballets, and he was not shy about taking the Bolshoi Theater to task for it either. Yet, these statements should not be taken as evidence that Goleizovsky himself transcended the kind of orientalism that he was critiquing. It is easy enough to see Goleizovsky's own European bias creeping into the statement when asks his reader to imagine themselves as a Spanish person when evaluating *Don Quixote* but a French Egyptologist when evaluating *Pharaoh's Daughter*. Furthermore, while Goleizovsky points to Maspero as an authority on Egypt, there is also no doubt that Maspero is precisely the kind of

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<sup>64</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 1 d. 696 l. 11. Letter from Kasian Goleizovsky to the Bolshoi Theater Administration. 26 September 1925

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. Here, Goleizovsky is referring to the noted French Egyptologist Gaston Maspero.

<sup>66</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 1 d. 696 l. 10. Of course, making students fit for "classical ballet" was precisely what the school was designed to do, and was considered a strength rather than a weakness by most.

scholar that Said would later criticize for his brand of Orientalism. Taking this realization into account, where does it leave the analysis of Goleizovsky's critique? It still stands as some of the starkest evidence available from the 1920s that the inability to critique classical ballet from the standpoint of technique was one of the most important aspects of discussion about the art and that ultimately let ballets like *The Red Poppy* to be created. While the definition of formalism was never particularly well defined, and in any case certainly not by 1925 when Goleizovsky wrote those words, it was precisely the fact that he *was* a formalist that allowed him to make the critique in the first place. By disenfranchising choreographers and artists like Goleizovsky, the ballet world in the Soviet Union was silencing the very people who were capable of making the sharpest critiques.

For Goleizovsky, this was not merely a means by which to critique the existing ballet, but also a blueprint for its continued development. Indeed, Goleizovsky found value in classical ballet as a basis for his own work and took the position, that it could provide the basis for a new form. Unlike Tikhomirov, he was interested in probing the limits of the form rather than demonstrating its ability to satisfy socialist needs "as is." In the same letter, Goleizovsky wrote "after Gorsky's death [in 1924] and in the absence of classical choreographers, everyone tried to fill the cracks in the academic ballet... the old masters are mistaken in thinking that I destroy the classics (*unichtozhaiu klassiky*), they are my foundation. They do not need to fear me."<sup>67</sup> He understood his position to be creative, rather than destructive. Indeed, he added "I do not deny that I bring our art to someplace completely new – but I am not to blame for this – it is the work of our time."<sup>68</sup> This, no doubt, has the familiar ring of revolutionary enthusiasm about it. But what did revolutionary enthusiasm mean for ballet? Ballet certainly seemed like an odd canvas

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<sup>67</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 1 d. 696 p. 12. Letter from Kasian Goleizovsky to the Bolshoi Theater Administration. 25 September 1925.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

on which to paint the revolution. Yet, as Richard Stites remarked in the opening to his landmark monograph *Revolutionary Dreams*, “one must not envision the utopianizing process of the revolution as one where actors scrutinize a text in order to find a guide to action – though this often happened – but rather as a very thick and rich interaction between what is sometimes called life and art, one imitating the and each reshaping both.”<sup>69</sup> If there was a utopianism in ballet, Goleizovsky’s “radical” formalism and desire to integrate folk dance into the art form was certainly inspired by the revolutionary breeze that was still blowing through Moscow in the mid-1920s.

Nonetheless, avant-garde artists in ballet like Goleizovsky were several years “behind” their counterparts in other revolutionary artistic endeavors. From a purely artistic point of view, the Soviet ballet world had remained remarkable steady during the civil war.<sup>70</sup> Much of this can be seen as the result of there being no possibility for what might be called “mass ballet.” “Mass ballet” in this sense would refer to a form of the art that is widely participatory. While the prospect of ballets that would appeal to the masses eventually did become an important consideration for those working at the Bolshoi Theater, there was never proposed path for ballet that involved the participation and dance of “the masses.” To commemorate the first anniversary of the revolution, Stites recounts the importance of “festivals of the people” that were characterized by popular participation that was designed to “satisfy the demands of the masses and to evoke their ‘collective creativity.’”<sup>71</sup> Notably, Stites also shows that Petrograd and

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<sup>69</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 7.

<sup>70</sup> This is not to say that ballet, or the Bolshoi Theater in general, was entirely stable during the years of the civil war. As shown in chapter one, the theater did face considerable hardship from the onset. However, the more significant instability was met with remarkable resiliency. During the first years, day-to-day questions were far more concerned with keeping the heat on during the winter than the creation of a Soviet form of ballet.

<sup>71</sup> Stites, 93.

Moscow did not host entirely equivalent festivals of the people.<sup>72</sup> According to his analysis, Moscow was a “talking city,” with “engraved solemnities on the walls and unveiling speeches for the new statues placed at strategic places, constant reminders for the pupils of his gigantic new revolutionary school.”<sup>73</sup> Petrograd, on the other hand, was the “theater city,” home to the most vibrant and enthusiastic displays of mass theater and performance that were often times independent of or at least not in total lockstep with official Bolshevik ideology.<sup>74</sup> The differences in expressions of revolutionary enthusiasm were also instructive for the purpose of contextualizing the development of revolutionary ballets in Moscow. When it came to mass festivals, Moscow had a “national mystique,” due to the presence of the Kremlin and due to Lenin’s mission to transform the capital into just such a “talking city.”<sup>75</sup> With its monuments, inscriptions and statues, the talking city could be said to have been socialist in content, if not in form. Perhaps then, it is not surprising then that the Bolshoi Theater was the site of ballets like *The Red Poppy* that had a very strong socialist narrative, even if it did not make any strides towards reconciling classical form with socialist ideology. Compared to the expressions of revolutionary enthusiasm seen in the realm of mass theater immediately following the revolution, revolutionary enthusiasm in ballet were relatively muted, and by the time they did arise the tide was already beginning to turn against the avant-garde.

The images that emerged from the festivals were not always based in reality, regardless of their source. Choi Chatterjee's *Celebrating Women* suggests that the attention given to women and women's issues through celebration and festival was largely lip service only. Much of Chatterjee's book deals with the celebration of Women's Day in the early Soviet Union. Women's

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<sup>72</sup> For more on Bolshevik Festivals see, James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals 1917-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>73</sup> Stites, 89.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 92-94.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 93.

continued role in the lead up to and execution of revolution was undeniable, and yet it appears that the celebration of women often failed to create genuine enthusiasm over the long term. Among the general population, Chatterjee reports a rather uninspired response. Men often treated the holiday with “antipathy” and even “at Women's Day gatherings, rank-and-file women workers often appeared bored and unresponsive.”<sup>76</sup> This stands in contrast the festivals described by von Geldern which were generally received enthusiastically. The source of this difference is not clear. Chatterjee suggests that the historical gender roles assigned to women, as mothers, wives, and caretakers, may have influenced this disinterested attitude. Regardless of the source it is clear that the Bolsheviks saw it as a serious problem.

Chatterjee explains that “both the Communist Party and the Zhenotdel believed that the success of the *kulturno-bytovoï pokhod* would be achieved by a combination of administrative action and popular participation.”<sup>77</sup> This was a conscious attempt to raise the collective consciousness of the population through public participation. This persistence apparently was met with at least modest success in changing the discourse around women. Even when not fully accepted or treated as equals by their male counterparts, women entered the public realm in which they had previously seen little presence. Chatterjee adds that “in public propaganda Soviet women, unlike their counterparts in tsarist Russia, subscribed to the vision of the welfare state. They expected the Soviet state to provide certain social services, employment and educational opportunities.”<sup>78</sup> While these expectations cannot be said to have been shared by all women in the early Soviet Union nor were they always met when they were, it did mark a shift in women's role in culture and society. This image endured even in the late 1930s amongst Stalin's more

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<sup>76</sup> Choi Chatterjee, *Celebrating Women: Gender, Festival Culture and Bolshevik Ideology, 1910-1939* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 65.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

restrictive family policies. The Cultural Revolution curbed experimentation and utopian thought that was endemic to the festivals. Chatterjee's example of the image of women suggests that the results of Bolshevik festivals were able to endure and that even in the face of more conservative policies that women retained some political legitimacy because of it. Chatterjee's work, here, highlights the fact that experimentalism engaged with issues of gender in the ways that ballet seemed relatively incapable of reproducing.

While I would argue that ballet would essentially always reproduce many of the orientalist tendencies that it did in this case of *The Red Poppy*, the fact that the Bolshoi Theater ended up silencing one of the few critics with both the technical expertise and will to mount a credible analysis of the dance contributed greatly to the environment where a revolutionary ballet could be quite surprisingly classical. On this final point, not many would have argued. However, Goleizovsky ultimately pleased neither those devoted entirely to classical ballet or the emerging anti-formalists who felt a focus on technique of any kind, classical or otherwise, was the wrong direction for the art form.

While it is analytically unnecessary to argue what "should have" or "should not have" constituted Soviet ballet, one can say that Goleizovsky's work, ironically, may have been more "native" to the Soviet Union than the classical and Romantic forms and structures that remained prominent in works like *The Red Poppy*. It is clear from his later work on ethnography that he saw his interest in folk dance as a tie to the material conditions of reality that influenced the development of dance. This very Marxian analysis, already apparent in his writings from the 1920s, looks like a path not taken for the development of Soviet ballet in the 1920s. Whether or not this path would have seemed to make more sense to historians looking back at the early

Soviet Ballet, it does serve to remind us that there was real tension between the artistic directions in ballet.

### ***Act III - The Red Detachment of Women and The Red Poppy***

Goleizovsky and Tikhomirov's spat had resulted mainly from disagreement about the role of classical ballet in the socialist context. In this light, the development of classical ballet in China serves as a fascinating comparison that rings more true than comparing early Soviet ballet to developments in Europe and the United States. Brian Demare has written extensively about culture and land reform in China after the revolution and even included a chapter in his 2008 dissertation on "land reform operas." In this chapter, titled "The Revolution will be dramatized," Demare argues that land reform operas were an important tool in spreading Communist ideology in the countryside. The Communists in 1940s and 50s China used terms similar to that of Soviet Communists in the 1920s describe artistic desirability, notably among them "realism."<sup>79</sup> This realism, not so different from socialist realism that came to the Soviet Union as a matter of official policy in 1934, emphasized "party ideology and goals as much as it was a true representation of the complexities of rural life."<sup>80</sup> Communists in China, even before the revolution, emphasized the importance of "scientific" art forms that were best suited to the portrayal of "real" life. This very nearly mirrored the discourse on the arts in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and 30s. However, despite coming from a similar place in terms of its reliance on Marxist theory to inform art policy, the Chinese took the path to a quite different conclusion. Whereas Communists in the Soviet Union remained wary of classic European forms like opera and ballet, even as they held on hope that the forms could be reformulated for socialism, the

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<sup>79</sup> Brian Demare, "Turning Bodies and Turning Minds: Land Reform and Chinese Political Culture, 1946-1952." (Ph.D. Diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2008), 97.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in particular Zhou Enlai, was interested in pursuing European art forms for communist purposes precisely *because* of their European heritage. As early as 1942, “the exclusive pursuit of technical excellence and broad emphasis on the European classics were the result of his (and others’) preoccupation with the theory of realism as the linchpin of Marxist-Leninist literary policy.”<sup>81</sup> This was not just a matter of Marxist theory, according to Zhou, but also a matter of practical application in the arts. David Holm further recounts “the Chinese tradition, [Zhou] said, was weak in techniques,” which made European forms even more appealing to artists.<sup>82</sup> If opera and ballet’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pedigree made the Bolsheviks nervous, their European heritage made them enticing for their prospective ability to elevate the scientific level of the arts in China.

Although there was genuine debate over how ballet must be changed in order to accommodate socialism in the Soviet Union, even those like Riabstev who believed that classical ballet held within it all the necessary components of a socialist art form had to admit that the art form had come from an aristocratic and certainly not socialist place in history. From inside Russia, where ballet had flourished in the Imperial era for more than a century, it was easy for them to see this problem, if nigh impossible to solve. By contrast, Zhou’s position that classical European art forms were inherently more scientific and therefore suitable to socialism highlights ballet’s foreignness. Looking at *The Red Poppy* and *The Red Detachment of Women* together helps to make sense of this difference in perspective. *The Red Poppy*’s chauvinism is not just present in the theme of a Russian communist traveling to China to help raise the consciousness of the working class, but also in the very structure and technique of the dance.

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<sup>81</sup> David Holm, *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 102.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.



Ironically, the same global reach of Europeans and European thought in the twentieth century that brought the European interests to China in the 1920s also exported Marxism and ballet to China. If, as Holm argues, “to say that European techniques were more advanced and scientific was, in effect, to say that there were intrinsically superior, and therefore, in the cultural-Darwinian scheme of things, bound sooner or later to replace entirely the less advanced and less scientific Chinese techniques”, then we can in some sense the same underlying attitudes that led to *The Red Poppy* also led to *The Red Detachment of Women*.<sup>83</sup> In the Soviet context, we have a Russian inspired revolution China and in the Chinese context we have a ballet used to further the aims of a Chinese communist revolution. Both arise from a point of view that considered China to be politically and culturally backward and therefore in need of European assistance. In the case of *The Red Poppy*, this emerges both in the ballet’s story and in its use of traditional ballet structure and movement. In the case of Chinese works like *Red Detachment of Women* and other works like land reform operas, it was derived from Zhou’s specific statements in favor of European forms. At the same time, making art accessible and enjoyable to the rural population was a matter of tactical importance when it came to disseminating Communist ideology in the countryside. Like those in the Soviet Union, Communists in China faced questions about the artistic future of their country. Also like those in the Soviet Union, the Chinese Communists tried to strike a balance between elite art that could raise the level of culture in their respective countries and the desire to produce popular art that would appeal to the masses.

According to Demare, “while novels were generally aimed at urban intellectuals, land reform operas were specifically designed for a largely illiterate peasant audience.”<sup>84</sup> In this case,

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>84</sup> Demare, 96.

the form was thought to be an appropriate way to raise class consciousness among peasants. To this end, land reform operas, according to Demare, often focused on the theme of abusive landlords and peasant repression. The Chinese countryside cannot be taken as a uniform space with uniform people. Although land reform operas did *try* to universalize the experience of peasants, in practice they also understood the importance of locality, if only for the purposes of improving the effectiveness of their propaganda, by “utilizing local styles” and “employing local actors and local stories.”<sup>85</sup> Very much unlike ballet this shows that the land reform operas relied less on highly professionalized and technically trained artists. Nonetheless, both Demare and Holm agree that “all of these productions... were musically a mixture of folk song and local opera organized within a Western operatic framework.”<sup>86</sup> Importantly, this further establishes an existing trend of what might be called “European in form, Chinese in content.”<sup>87</sup> This was not absolute. Chinese forms did become integrated with opera, but it was opera that provided the underlying, essential base. One such opera mentioned by both Holm and Demare, “The White-Haired Girl,” was even transformed from opera into ballet in 1964 and continued this very process.<sup>88</sup> According to Rosemary Roberts, the ballet “incorporated elements from traditional Chinese opera including martial arts, acrobatics and the frozen pose.”<sup>89</sup> This strapping on of traditional Chinese forms onto “scientific” European forms was but one of the important features of early land reform operas that help to provide the context necessary for a full and complete understanding of *The Red Detachment of Women*.

In one sense, the despotic villains that peppered land reform operas are quite similar to the malefactors present in *The Red Poppy*. Both feature the oppression of the poor by the rich.

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<sup>85</sup> Demare, 101.

<sup>86</sup> Holm, 323. See also: Demare, 100-101.

<sup>87</sup> A play on a common description of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union – “Realist in form, Socialist in content.”

<sup>88</sup> Demare, 101, 103. Holm, 323.

<sup>89</sup> Rosemary Roberts, “Performing Gender in Maoist Ballet,” paragraph 6.

However, this theme is presented in at least one importantly different way. In land reform operas the villains were frequently Chinese landlords while in *The Red Poppy* the villains were framed specifically as capitalists. In the Soviet Union it made sense that the villains would be capitalists and it is not surprising given Bolshevik anti-capitalist rhetoric that such elements would find their way into a Soviet ballet instead of a more nuanced understanding of oppression in the Chinese countryside. However, despite the interest in Western form, the narrative differences that appeared in land reform operas also found their way into *The Red Detachment of Women* in 1963. When *The Red Detachment of Women* came to the stage in China a decade after the land reform operas travelled the Chinese countryside, the theme remained very similar. Also like the land reform operas and *The Red Poppy*, it featured women in the leading roles.

The Communists had high expectations that opera would be able to specifically win over women, who they believed would be more easily won over through a form like opera.<sup>90</sup> That women consistently found themselves as the forefront of land reform operas suggests that the Communists' imagined women's place in the revolution, particularly in the countryside, to be central. However, as Demare himself notes, the choice to put women in these roles and the use of the form to specifically appeal to women were motivated by "sexist assumptions" that drama appealed mainly to women and that therefore opera provided an ideal medium for reaching women in the countryside.<sup>91</sup> These underlying sexist assumptions existed in spite of a professed desire to transform the countryside and overturn "feudal" behavior. Regardless of this contradiction, Gail Hershatter argues that "participating in these projects, women changed their sense of who they were and what they might become" and further that "what the revolution did for rural women was to remove the stigma associated with 'outside' labor, changing its context,

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<sup>90</sup> Demare, 100.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

structures of feeling and rewards.”<sup>92</sup> As a matter of artistic experience, being a local participant in a rural land reform opera could hardly be further from being a trained ballerina. Nonetheless, women’s participation in land reform operas does have at least one important similarity to the ballet. Women in leading roles in both helped to mediate the negotiation of revolutionary ideals and the traditional world.

Land reform operas, despite being mainly a feature of the countryside, nonetheless bore other important resemblances to ballet in the post-revolution Chinese context. The Communists attempted in both to blend Chinese culture – folk and Communist – with what were traditionally Western forms. Both also constituted attempts to answer a familiar question about how pre-revolutionary art forms could be made revolutionary. Beyond the thematic elements, the combined focus on women and the local as important aspects to an art form devoted to spreading communism in the countryside seems to corroborate Hershatter’s assertion that “even the most prescriptive edicts of a centralized state must be implemented in widely varied environments.”<sup>93</sup> At least in the Chinese context then, issues of gender can grant insight into the political issues surrounding the spread of Communist ideology. This statement, in some sense, borders on the banal. Yet, the fact that the Chinese Communists seemed to place women in this central position in works of art based on European forms provides a point of departure for discussing the contradiction between those European forms and the perceived place of women in Communism. Just as Ekaterina Geltser was compelled by the very structure and choreography of *Esmeralda*, *Daughter of the People* and then *The Red Poppy* to reproduce the values of the nineteenth-century aristocracy even as the ballet sought to literally embody a more socialist framework, so too did the women in the leading roles of *The Red Detachment of Women*.

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<sup>92</sup> Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China’s Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 66.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Rosemary Roberts argues that this similarity is not merely coincidental. She contends that after the revolution in China “both Chinese traditional cultural forms and Western elite culture were to be used to serve the class interests of society’s new masters... At the same time the Soviet Union was not just China’s closest Cold War ally but also world-renowned for its brilliant ballet tradition.”<sup>94</sup> She even mentions *The Red Poppy* in particular as an influential revolutionary ballet in the Soviet Union. Like early Soviet ballet, early ballet in China first focused on reproductions of classics. However, like in the Soviet Union, revolutionary themes were more desirable. Roberts even notes that Zhou Enlai “suggests that the ballet school move beyond foreign ballets about ‘princes and fairies’ and try to create something more revolutionary such as a work depicting the Paris Commune or the October Revolution.”<sup>95</sup> This characterization of the classics as “foreign” is vital to the understanding of the critical differences in *The Red Poppy* and *The Red Detachment of Women*. Ballet was considered many things in the Soviet Union, but it was not considered to be “foreign.”<sup>96</sup> In Zhou’s conception there was a distinction to be made between the themes of foreign, romantic *ballets* and the technique of foreign *ballet*, which was a few socialist themes away from being truly revolutionary.

Roberts continues that the reaction was not, in fact, to create a ballet on the topic of a historical revolution – Paris or October – but to create an entirely new work based on the more recent revolution in China itself. In this way, the ballet in China took a small measure in establishing itself as distinct from its Western counterparts. This choice was not an outright rejection of Western elite art, which Zhou was long on record as supporting for its “scientific” qualities, but rather an attempt to bend it to the needs a different contingent historical moment. In

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<sup>94</sup> Roberts, para. 4.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., para. 6.

<sup>96</sup> Note that here I am saying that it was not conceived of as foreign by contemporaries, rather than contradicting my earlier point that, in a way, ballet was in a totally unfamiliar environment in the early Soviet Union.

this sense, the Chinese artists in the realm of ballet found themselves in a similar position to their comrades in the Soviet Union. How could ballet – an art form with historically aristocratic origins – be made more compelling for their present historical moments? Their answer built on the way that opera had been utilized in the land reform dramas in the countryside a decade prior. They used the classic form, but superimposed upon it a revolutionary theme.

In the case of *The Red Poppy* and *The Red Detachment of Women*, we can also see family resemblance in depictions of gender. Narratively, women play central roles in the story of ballets and are even transformative characters, in the case of Tao-Khao making a revolutionary transformation herself and in the case of the members of the titular *Red Detachment of Women* in bringing a revolutionary transformation to the countryside through their revolutionary action. Much of Roberts' analysis of gender in *The Red Detachment of Women* relies on theory of gender in dance put forward by Judith Lynn Hanna's in *Dance, Sex and Gender*. Hanna's theory ties particular movements to power relationships between men and women, therefore providing means by which to analyze a movement or dance. Hanna also takes a broad approach, by coming up with a list of "stereotypic nonverbal gender behavior" associated with masculinity and femininity respectively. The "nonverbal behavior" that she outlines is not limited to movement and is also by no means limited to the study of dance, however, it exists to provide a baseline from which dance can be analyzed. One clear example from her list is that male behavior is to "begin actions" and female behavior is to "respond to actions."<sup>97</sup> Such gendered movement is often most clearly seen in partnering.

In principle, this method of analyzing gender in dance is sensible and even robust. First, and most importantly, it links notions of power and gender to a vocabulary of movement that can

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<sup>97</sup> Judith Lynn Hanna, *Dance, Sex and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance, and Desire*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 60.

be used to discuss how a dance signifies and reproduces gender beyond the thematic or narrative elements present. It is particularly relevant when analyzing ballet in the context of Western and European culture and history. Hanna argues, “kinetic patterns evince visualizations of social relations and sexual behavior. Even when a dance intends only to explicate movement forms, the dancer’s body is said to disappear into the movement; even when the shape of the body is obscured by costume, signs and symbols of sexuality may be read into the dance.”<sup>98</sup> That movement can carry meaning beyond the intention of the mover is reasonable. The danger, here, is assuming that the “kinetic patterns” in question are simply images of the “social relations” in question. Socio-cultural context is important, but dance should not be seen as outside of culture but rather mutually constitutive with it. Indeed, if the kinetic patterns themselves are to be analyzed, then it must be with an eye to the kinetic and not just toward the “signs and symbols.”

However, one relative, not insignificant weakness of Hanna’s list of nonverbal stereotypes is that it is very much situated in Western styles of movement. Applying her methodology to classical ballet of European origin makes sense. But what to do when ballet is taken out of that setting? If we treat, as Joanna Kealiinohomoku recommends, ballet as a form of European ethnic dance, particularly one coming from a particular, aristocratic European heritage, then it is not so clear that it can be understood the same way in other times and places. Indeed, Hanna goes on to argue that dance can at once contain “displays of femininity (the romantic sentiment of imposed limitations) and masculinity (often male chauvinism), but at the same time images embody feminist thought, a critique of male supremacy.”<sup>99</sup> Although the specifics given relate mainly to European culture, this realization is important in the analysis if a ballet so fraught with contradiction like *The Red Poppy*.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

Rosemary Roberts also analyzes the gendered nature of movement in *The Red Detachment of Women*. *The Red Detachment of Women*'s narrative focus on revolutionary women and their role in overthrowing the old regime of course stands in stark contrast to the narrative of *The Red Poppy*, which more closely resembles the narrative of the romantic ballets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the choreography itself was still steeped in classical ballet and thus Roberts raises the question about whether the narrative elements that emphasize the agency of women are borne out in the movements performed by the dancers on stage. According to Roberts, *The Red Detachment of Women* did not present a simple case of classical choreography on a revolutionary theme. Instead care *was* taken to choreographically challenge traditional gender roles. Nonetheless, even in scenes where this challenge to traditional norms is apparent, traditional roles crept back in. It is worth quoting part of her analysis here at length:

“Both male and female characters are choreographed with the whole range of assertive and passive interactions, but whereas the female characters are all positive, the male characters are divided into positive (proletarian revolutionaries) and negative (counter-revolutionaries), and significantly only the latter are choreographed with the passive role in interactions. Hence in *The Red Detachment of Women*, women are supported by other women and lifted, supported and assisted by both positive and negative male characters... No positive male character, however, is lifted, supported or assisted in any way by other males or females at any time... Read in the light of Hanna and Burt's argument that the dance who lifts and who manipulates other is culturally kinetically coded as more assertive and dominant than the dancer who is lifted or manipulated, dance interaction within the ballet sets up and implicit hierarchy in which the positive male characters clearly occupy the highest level of power and dominance.”<sup>100</sup>

Consider this further in light of the fact that the choreographic tradition being reproduced here is of distinctly European – including Russian - origin. In spite of Zhou's insistence that European forms were scientific and suitable to glorify the values of the revolution, *The Red*

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<sup>100</sup> Roberts, para. 24.



*Detachment of Women* serves to show that even when choreographic care was taken to include women in more positions “kinetically coded as more assertive and dominant,” classical form worked to again create the very traditional gender norms that the ballet was supposed to challenge. If the ideal communist woman was, as Roberts suggests, “no longer a frail, helpless ornament confined to the domestic sphere, but a sturdy, active, unadorned woman [who] contributed to the revolution as the equal of men,” then *The Red Detachment of Women* ultimately failed to run this line of thought all the way through its structure and choreography. It is not going too far to say that this was a very *imperial* character of the ballet. Consider that *The Red Poppy* also reproduced these same themes some twenty-five years earlier. The reason in both cases is the same. The choreography includes traditional understandings of gender in spite of purely narrative attempts to deemphasize these very same conservative gender roles. Understanding the Chinese case, then, helps to show just how extensive the imperial roots of the ballet in the Soviet Union remained. *The Red Poppy* was not the beginning and end of imperial attitudes in the ballet, but rather a Soviet expression of an attitude that that stemmed from its aristocratic origins.

### **Conclusion**

*The Red Poppy* was the first revolutionary, first “Soviet,” ballet produced by the Bolshoi Theater. In building on the Romantic elements that had also appeared in *Esmeralda*, *Daughter of the People*, it was a ballet truly in two worlds at once. It is fascinating to see nearly the same contradictions that are visible through historical analysis also visible to contemporary critics and audiences. Although they were not articulated in the same fashion, and did not rely on more recent developments in the analysis of imperialism and gender, they nonetheless understood that as enchanting as *The Red Poppy* was to many people, there was something decidedly un-Soviet

about it too. Using *The Red Detachment of Women* as a comparative element helps to show how those contradictions arose and their continued prominence in ballet. That Chinese Communist artists grappled with many of the same issues decades later speaks to the far-reaching influence classical ballet had even in socialist contexts.

Finally, a careful study of *The Red Poppy* also demonstrates that the melodrama of Romantic ballet translated most easily into the drama of revolution. In much the same way that *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* retained the ability to delight audiences with its Romantic themes and classical dance, *The Red Poppy's* success lay most significantly at the feet of its very Romantic plot and classical sensibilities, in spite of its revolutionary setting. It was in this fashion that a dream sequence leading to individual transformation could make sense as an allegory for socialist revolution and societal transformation. But by making those thematic elements personal and emotional, *The Red Poppy* partly subverted the very values it was purporting to advocate. The first Soviet ballet, then, only partially vindicated those who believed that ballet was compatible with socialism. While the result was far from unproblematic, it seems that socialist ideas were able to reach a popular audience when blended with Romantic aesthetics.

## **CHAPTER 5: Football at the Bolshoi: The Reorganization of the Bolshoi Theater**

On 17 August 1933, E. K. Malinovskaia, still in a leadership position at the Bolshoi Theater, wrote a memo that decided the professional fate of forty-three year old ballerina Elena Mikhailovna Adamovich. Her tenure at the Bolshoi had lasted 25 years from 1908 until 1933, in what can only be called an impressive show of longevity. Although she had been a regular performer on the stage for more than two decades, at the age of forty-three she was on the verge of being forced into retirement. Malinovskaia suggested that she be moved to a personal pension. After a brief description of the dancer and her situation, Malinovskaia concluded that “the retirement of a 43-year-old ballerina is absolutely necessary, especially when a group of strong young people are in waiting.”<sup>1</sup> Beginning in the late 1920s a strong group of dancers was beginning to emerge from the Ballet School and were preparing to enter the Bolshoi’s ballet troupe. In that year, six graduates from the Ballet School were “subject to competitive tests” for entry into the troupe.<sup>2</sup> Several more students of the Ballet School also expressed interest in joining, but their level of preparedness is not mentioned. Talented young dancers continued to step out from the Ballet School and onto the Bolshoi Theater’s stage in the early years of the 1930s.

By 1933, Adamovich was one of the oldest remaining dancers in the ballet troupe and her dismissal marked the waning days of the Bolshoi Theater reorganization’s influence. The reorganization had begun in 1928 and ended in late 1929, but the changes it brought continued to influence the theater. This changing of the guard was a symbolic moment for the Bolshoi Ballet. By the early 1930s, the Ballet School had produced a class of ballet dancers that were trained

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<sup>1</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 733. Letter to the Deputy Head Secretariat of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR 17 August 1933.

<sup>2</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 733. Meeting of the Commission on the revision of the state and personnel of the GABT USSR. 1 June 1930.

entirely after the revolution. At last, it had become feasible to imagine the ballet in an entirely socialist context, at least as far as the artists were concerned. The struggle with the creation of a socialist ballet, which clung to its aristocratic origins, had existed from the time of the revolution. The struggle had always been artistic, but by 1928 the issue of the dancers' social character was also coming to the forefront. Other art forms, such as theater, had already produced countless examples of working class art and participation. At its height, the Blue Blouse troupe had widespread participation in theater.<sup>3</sup> RAPP, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, pushed its radical agenda in literature, even though the height of its influence was relatively brief and ended entirely in 1932. These largely youth led movements gained more clout than ever in 1928.<sup>4</sup> These movements were not unproblematic in the eyes of Soviet authority, but by comparison the lack of a mass ballet was troublesome. It was all the more noticeable given the art form's elite history. But, in spite of the art form's aristocratic origins, the artists themselves most frequently came from bourgeois and petty bourgeois backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> The institution was faced with the question of whether or not these dancers represented the aristocratic ballet in which they were trained, the bourgeois families that could afford to train their daughters or sons in the art form, or something else entirely.

Thus, in the same year the Bolshoi Theater began a "reorganization."<sup>6</sup> The reorganization spanned the entire Bolshoi Theater, not just the Ballet. In the case of the Bolshoi Ballet, the reorganization was less an entire overhaul of the institution and more reassessment of priorities and a reevaluation of works and artists. Unlike many of the well-intentioned ideas that the

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<sup>3</sup> Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*, 70-73.

<sup>4</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1992), 240-241.

<sup>5</sup> RGALI f. 683. op. 1 d. 64 l. 7.

<sup>6</sup> The term reorganization appears throughout the documents and I have chosen to use the same term here. Although a reorganization can imply a dramatic change in the institution, it is much better described as a series of reforms.

Bolshoi Theater put forth during the 1920s, the reorganization had the planning and resources to actually follow through. The commission's Presidium, led by officials from the still newly created Glaviskusstvo, organized the work for the reorganization and delegated specific tasks to several sub-commissions staffed by experts.<sup>7</sup> The Presidium set up sub-commissions for evaluating labor discipline, mass work, ballet repertory and another still for the "development of theses on ballet."<sup>8</sup> Bolshoi Ballet notables were present on the sub-commissions on ballet.<sup>9</sup> This at once provided an anchor that helped to prevent the Bolshoi Ballet from drifting too far as a result of the reorganization's reforms and ran counter to the underlying logic of a generational shift. Soloists, choreographers and directors were far more resilient in the face of the changes brought on by the reorganization than dancers in the *corps de ballet*.

Work began in earnest on 2 June 1928 when the Presidium laid out the plan for the reorganization in great detail. Much of the evaluation was set to begin in October 1928 and run into April 1929. Although some of this initial plan did not proceed as scheduled and in other cases new meetings were added, the overall schedule was accurate. In February 1929 the Sub-commission on Ballet Repertory was set to evaluate new ballets, give comments and feedback, and ultimately determine their fate at the Bolshoi. No initial date was given for the development of the new theses on ballet. The plan for the reorganization alone reflects the goal of the process. The reorganization was to finally solve the oft asked question, what place did ballet have in a world of socialist art? Despite the success of *The Red Poppy* a year earlier the answer remained elusive. That ballet had captured lightning in a bottle, but as a blueprint for future ballets its still-prominent Romantic features posed significant problems. The Commission knew that it required

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<sup>7</sup> Glaviskusstvo was official created in April 1928 under Narkompros as a central arts administration. For a detailed discussion of the creation of Glaviskusstvo, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The Emergence of Glaviskusstvo: Class War on the Cultural Front 1928-1929" *Soviet Studies* Vol. 23 No. 2 (Oct 1971), 236-253.

<sup>8</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 648 l. 1.

<sup>9</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 648 l. 14.

the evaluation of current and new ballets and the artists who danced them. The Commission also looked further towards the future. Glaviskusstvo understood that success could not be achieved immediately. The reorganization, it hoped, would create the conditions necessary for the creation of socialist ballet.<sup>10</sup> The Bolshoi Ballet faced substantial changes designed to spur the creation of socialist ballet, but also of socialist ballerinas. From the beginning, the Commission placed enormous emphasis on the importance of the youth.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, some of the most significant changes came at the Ballet School.

### **The 1928 Ballet School Reforms**

The Ballet School had continued to exist with relatively little changes through to until the 1928 reorganization.<sup>12</sup> However, by 1928 the winds of change were blowing quite fiercely in the Soviet Union. The ramifications were felt throughout Soviet society and culture, not the least of which was in education. As the country turned towards projects that can be briefly summarized as “building socialism,” like mass industrialization of the economy and collectivization of agriculture, “everyone associated with schools was told to join campaigns to provide Soviet Russia with a uniform secular culture and transform it into a might colossus of machines, black smoke, and waves of grain.”<sup>13</sup> One is immediately reminded of the vast building projects the creation of Magnitogorsk and its towering blast furnaces.<sup>14</sup> In spite of the project of building socialism being sold in such grandiose terms, it was not by any means universally accepted or received with optimism. Collectivization proved disastrous in the countryside and sparked

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<sup>10</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 648 ll. 1-3.

<sup>11</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 648 l. 73.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion about the Ballet School after its reopening under the Bolsheviks, refer to chapter two.

<sup>13</sup> Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse*, 116

<sup>14</sup> On the topic of Magnitogorsk see: Steven Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

numerous bouts of peasant unrest and resistance.<sup>15</sup> While not uncontested, building socialism became the *raison d'être* for any number of reforms that came in the late 1920s and 1930s. It was in this vein and with this motivation that changes came to the Bolshoi Theater's Ballet School as well.

The first task before the Ballet School in 1928 was to clarify its purpose in relation to the entire theater and to reassess its fundamental goals and requirements. The primary aim of the college was to “give theoretical and practical training to specialist workers in the field of choreography.”<sup>16</sup> Of course, many students began their study very young, and the school charter indicated that the school was willing to accept students as young as eight. The full curriculum was to last a potential nine years. The program was divided into two parts. The first seven years were for the “preparatory” school that trained young dancers in advance of a professional career. The final two years for those who had satisfactorily completed the preparatory program or otherwise demonstrated their ability for serious ballet careers.

Once accepted, students were required to go through a medical examination to show their physical readiness for the rigors of the program and “for professional work in the field of ballet.”<sup>17</sup> The exam was a requirement of both the preparatory program and the college, meaning that even young students were to be evaluated for the perceived likelihood of success in ballet. The specific qualities are not mentioned, but one can imagine the limitations of evaluating what an eight-year old might be like physically a decade into the future. At the same time, students in the Ballet School, entrants being required to be between the ages of 15 and 18, underwent a similar evaluation. Both exams indicate a concern with bodies. Ballet did and does require

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<sup>15</sup> On peasant resistance to collectivization see: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1716 l. 14.

<sup>17</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1716 l. 15.

intense physical (and mental) training and discipline. Seeking to ensure students were physically capable made sense. It also shows that the Ballet School was interested in strong, resilient and fit bodies that were free of injury. Those people, those bodies, would go on to represent socialist people and socialist bodies on the stage of the Bolshoi.

For those in their final years of study it was possible to take part in some Bolshoi Theater performances.<sup>18</sup> Simply graduating from the ballet school was not any guarantee of making into the ballet troupe at the Bolshoi. Exceptional students were evaluated for their potential to enter into the professional ballet troupe. Such evaluations were based on their technical ability shown in class, their performance ability at such events and also a separate audition. Even those who worked hard to complete their nine years of training at the ballet school faced an uncertain future in the art form. Much like today, only those at the very top had a chance at a professional career. This added yet another barrier to accumulating working-class ballet dancers inside the academic theaters. Even if they were able to enter the Ballet School, it did not mean that they would make it all the way to the Bolshoi Ballet.

Despite Lunacharsky's initial charter for the school in 1920 that had dictated free attendance, financial reality dictated that the school did charge students tuition – albeit on a graded scale – for their participation in the ballet school. He had hoped that eliminating the need to pay for training would encourage members of the working class to enroll their sons and daughters. This would lead to the Bolshoi's ballet troupe naturally taking on a more working class character. However, requiring payment had precisely the effect that Lunacharsky had hoped to avoid by decreeing that the school should be free in 1920. By the late 1920s the ballet school had a crisis when it came to the class makeup of its students. A memo from 1928 explained the dire nature of the situation. "In this school," it explained, "we have 2.3% children of workers,

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<sup>18</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1716 ll. 15-16.



1.5% children of peasants, 62% children of white collar families (*sluzhashchie*) and 34% other.”

The numbers seemed particularly dire because, according to their own statistics, other similar schools were made up of 16% working class students and 51% from the peasantry.<sup>19</sup>

This was all the more disturbing given that the Bolshoi reorganization was happening on the heels of the Shakhty trial. May and June 1928 were tumultuous months. The state accused a group, made up mainly of members of the bourgeoisie, of widespread wrecking in the region. Even under NEP there had been a contentious relationship between workers and specialists in many factories. But in the atmosphere of the first Five Year Plan, such contention often turned to outright hostility. The Shakhty defendants were tried as much for their class as for their individual misdeeds.<sup>20</sup> At the same moment, Lunacharsky, long a bulwark against attacks targeting high culture in the 1920s, was losing his ability to resist such offenses due to the political climate. In many professions this upheaval was accompanied by the desire to build up a new class of specialists of working class origins. But what of an organization like the Bolshoi Theater that was largely made up of bourgeois artists?

The answer was not clear, but in such a climate the numbers demanded action. The commission recommended that the neediest twenty-five percent of students should not have to pay tuition.<sup>21</sup> The remaining seventy-five percent of students continued to be charged tuition on a graded scale based on their ability to pay. For some the cost was as little as three rubles per month. Even with this change, tuition fees continued to be a problem. It was commonplace for students and their families to fall behind on their monthly payments. The school's records from early 1930, less than two years after the reorganization began, show that a staggering ninety

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<sup>19</sup> RGALI f. 683 op. 1 d. 64. l. 7

<sup>20</sup> Shiela Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union 1921-1935* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 113.

<sup>21</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1716 l. 17.

percent of the school's 288 students were behind on their payments.<sup>22</sup> The Bolshoi Theater wanted to encourage working class enrollment in the ballet school. However, there continued to be financial barriers in the way of this long term solution. Nonetheless, in the absence of an immediate answer to the problem, the youth in the Ballet School represented the best hope for a socialist ballet.

Elena and Natalia Orlovskia were sisters studying at the Ballet School during the reorganization. Their family was one of those that had failed to pay their monthly tuition on time. They owed a mere 30 rubles. The monthly tuition for each girl was twenty-five rubles. The financial burden on the family was doubled because the two sisters each accrued their own tuition costs. Unlike the other parents, their father took issue with the amount being charged and contested the payment. Orlovskii vociferously challenged having to pay tuition for both daughters. He argued that the tuition cost was too much of a burden and that therefore the sliding scale for payment should apply to the family and not to the individual student. According to his logic, Elena and Natalia should have been able to study at the ballet school for half of what he was paying. After refusing to pay the outstanding fee, the case was taken to the Moscow provincial court. On May 15, 1928 the court ruled that Orlovskii pay the ballet school his outstanding tuition fee.

"It is not the 30 rubles," Orlovskii insisted. "The court's decision effectively deprived me of legitimate benefits. Not just for the current school year, but also for all future years until the end of my children's training in the ballet school."<sup>23</sup> He saw the sliding tuition scale as a benefit and felt that charging him 300 rubles a year for each of his daughters was not just asking too much, it was actually illegal. According to him, the court's decision had "significant fundamental

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<sup>22</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1846 ll. 201-205.

<sup>23</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1846 l. 3.

errors and required very careful examination.”<sup>24</sup> The problem was not merely economic. By Orlovskii’s estimation it was also a question of politics. He carried on: “the Soviet authorities did not make professional art education the domain of propertied individuals and groups.”<sup>25</sup> If the letter of the law was not on his side, Orlovskii certainly felt that the *spirit* of the law was. We cannot know for certain whether Orlovskii was invested in the ideological position or simply using its language in an attempt to save himself money. Regardless, he was using language very similar to the reorganization commission in an appeal to reduce the cost of attending the Ballet School.

After the court ruled against his case, Orlovskii apparently continued to ignore part of the family’s tuition payments. It was only months later, in early 1929, that history repeated itself. This time the family was being taken to court for 80 rubles. Again he contested the fees and went as far as attaching a copy of his work log to prove his annual earnings of 3000 rubles to the court. He also referenced the Narkompros Weekly Bulletin from October 5, 1928 that had introduced the policy that total tuition should not exceed ten percent of a family’s total income.<sup>26</sup> The new policy had been put into place after the initial court proceedings and offered a new avenue to contest the payment. This time the case ended in compromise. The tuition for Elena and Natalia Orlovskiaia went down by about twenty-five percent, but they still owed the unpaid fees to the school.<sup>27</sup>

The year-long dispute suggests that the changes made during the reorganization actually made some difference to the families of students at the Ballet School. It gave them ammunition to contest fees that were unpayable. However, the fact that in 1930 such a large percentage of the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1846 l. 4.

<sup>26</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1846 l. 8.

<sup>27</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 1846 l. 204.

families remained behind on tuition payments to the school also shows that the school remained expensive to many people. Beyond the social character of the Ballet and its school, the Commission also recommended changes to the Ballet School curriculum. One of its chief concerns was intensifying the teaching Marxism to the students. This was to serve not only to teach Marxist theory to the population like it was in other schools in the Soviet Union, but also specifically to promote a socialist character in the Bolshoi by means other than class makeup.

Regardless of their class backgrounds, students were already dutifully learning their Marxist theory year after year in the ballet school. The reorganization prompted the introduction of a mandatory sixty-hour class on Historical Materialism that was scheduled for the students' sixth year with similar classes following in the remaining years. Such classes were hardly unique to the Ballet School, but it is nonetheless important in understanding the ways in which the Communists sought to remake the Bolshoi in a socialist image. Although one can understand the Communists' motivation for such an ideological regimen, the image of fourteen year olds finishing their morning ballet classes and shuffling off to an hour of instruction in Dialectical Materialism cannot help but be amusing.

Joking aside, the course was considered an important part of the dancers' education by the state. Furthermore, it certainly mattered in the lives of the students who, regardless of their special talent for dance, were being trained like others around the Soviet Union. Again, the reorganization did not introduce the teaching of Marxism in the Ballet School. However, it was intensified in order to emphasize the importance of Marxist theory in their world and in their art. The goal of the class on historical materialism was "the completion and consolidation of the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the students by developing the key questions of the philosophical

and sociological theory of Marxism.”<sup>28</sup> In this sense, the schooling of the future ballet dancers in the finer points of Marxism was as central a part of making a socialist ballet. It was not just a matter of debating the relative merit of different styles of choreography and dance in intellectual circles— a debate that played an important role in the development of the Bolshoi during the 1920s and 30s – but also a matter of building a ballet that was, on the level of the individual, socialist.

To that end, the schedule of the sixty-hour course on Historical Materialism was outlined as follows:

Introduction: 2 hours  
Nature and Society: 2 hours  
Productive forces and relations of production: 6 hours  
Classes and class struggle: 8 hours  
Theory, base and superstructure: 12 hours  
Dialectics of social development and the theory of revolution: 4 hrs.  
Doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat: 6 hrs.  
Dialectical Materialism: 16 hours  
Marxism and Leninism: 4 hours<sup>29</sup>

The sixteen hours of dialectical materialism emphasized the importance of “idealism and materialism as the basis of trends in philosophy.” It specified that students learn about “the concept of the material world as objective reality” and the “unity of the mental and physical.” It also demanded that students be exposed to “pre-Marxian” materialism and to the arguments against it.<sup>30</sup> Finally, students should learn that “internal contradiction” is “the cause of development of the objective world” and that dialectics was important both in theory *and* in practice.<sup>31</sup> The course meant to train the students in understanding the world from a Marxist

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<sup>28</sup> RGALI f. 683 op. 1 d. 70. l. 54.

<sup>29</sup> RGALI f. 683 op. 1 d. 70. l. 55.

<sup>30</sup> RGALI f. 683 op. 1 d. 70. l. 62.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

perspective and importantly the state, as a stakeholder in the Bolshoi, understood that the Ballet School's task was not just to teach its students about dance, but to make sure that they were well educated and prepared to be citizens of the Soviet Union. However, the idea of "practice" is also particularly important because of the ever increasing demand on ballet that it reflect socialist reality. If ballet was to achieve that feat – and by 1928 it was clear to all that it still had not – then building a group of artists who intimately understood dialectics seemed like a necessary step. The degree to which such classes actually helped to spur a scientific, Marxist approach to ballet among the students of the Ballet School is difficult to determine. Regardless of the result, the Ballet School took the subject seriously. In the context of the Bolshoi reorganization it also speaks to the anxiety about class character that motivated many of the decisions of the Commission. That the reorganization featured direct changes to the Ballet School demonstrates that the institution was understood to be of fundamental importance to the ultimate future of the art form. However, once again, changes to the ballet curriculum were almost non-existent. Ballet technique itself was effectively untouched by the reorganization. Increased training in a Marxist understanding of the world was meant to have a lasting impact on the relationship between socialism and ballet, but the technique that acted as ballet's base continued to be taught uninterrupted.

### **A Tragic Intermission**

In 1928, a rare tragedy occurred in an apartment near one of the Ballet School's studios. A young six-year old girl named Vera Dunashi, who lived on the same floor as one of the studios in which children's ballet classes were regularly taught, contracted a serious illness and succumbed to the sickness. An account of the event ended up in the Bolshoi's hands when a mother of one of the students wrote a letter to its administration because she was concerned that

her daughter may have been exposed to the illness during her time in the studio. The victim was not a student at the school herself, but would frequently mingle with the students before and after their classes and was a friend to many of the young students studying there.<sup>32</sup>

The mother's chief concern was that the studio be closed for a day to be entirely disinfected, due to the fact that the autopsy had shown that the disease was "highly contagious."<sup>33</sup> Her account of her daughter's experience the day she found out about the death shows that the Ballet School had more to worry about than simply teaching dance. When the students arrived at their classes on Monday and found out what had happened in the early hours of the morning, they were understandably distraught and according to her letter it appears that class was significantly disrupted. The startling picture that emerged here is that although the Bolshoi Theater and its Ballet School were great, respected institutions, in this case the curtain is pulled back and a much more haphazard, informal organization seems to be in its place.

The students played with the girl in between classes and the concerned mother indicated that Vera regularly "ran among the students."<sup>34</sup> This does not conjure the rigid, structured view of Russian ballet schools that animate our minds on the matter. Of course, this is partially due to the fact that the Ballet School was teaching students of all ages. The vast majority of young dancers, students at the Bolshoi or not, were not (and are not) going to be professional ballet dancers. Still, when one looks at the Bolshoi Ballet as a whole, the Ballet School and therefore this training of young dancers must also be considered. This story, despite its somewhat macabre details, is important because it is one of the few insights we have into the every-day life of young students studying at the ballet school. Mothers came to drop off or pick up their children from class, the dancers played and mingled between classes. Despite the seriousness with which the

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<sup>32</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 625 l. 260

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

Bolshoi Theater took its task in training the next generation of students, children were still children.

Furthermore, as the letter indicates, the parents were not made aware of the events that had happened and this concerned parent found out only after the fact from her daughter. Even the risk of disease aside, which was at least considered a serious possibility, there was no effort on the part of the any of the Ballet School personnel to contact parents about the situation, despite their knowledge.<sup>35</sup> This suggests that although the Ballet School was an important part of the education of the young dancers and their preparation for future work in the arts, the connection to their homes was not always particularly strong. Indeed, it seems like the only time the Bolshoi made it a point to send messages to the homes of their students was when payments were late or missing. The Bolshoi was a large institution, especially when the Ballet School is taken into consideration. Although the Ballet School's goal was to train dancers in preparation for a professional career, the school by definition dealt mainly with amateurs and at most professionals in training. Given the relatively stormy conditions of 1928 and the reorganization of the Bolshoi Theater and Ballet School, it is worth reflecting briefly on the above story as a reminder that these small personal stories continued on regardless of the politics surrounding the Theater.

### **Evaluating Dances and Dancers**

In addition to the changes to the Ballet School that affected the Bolshoi's up and coming dancers, a re-evaluation of the professional ballet troupe commenced early in 1929. For members of the ballet troupe, this meant the possibility of being moved to different part of the theater, demoted, or removed from the troupe entirely. The evaluation was not good news for the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



dancers, especially older members of the troupe and those with weaker technique. The majority of dancers remained comfortably in their position in the troupe. The purpose was undoubtedly to make way for younger dancers who represented not just an artistic improvement but also a political a social one. First, this process shows how the restructuring of the Bolshoi Theater affected the lives of ballet dancers, the precarious nature of their status in the troupe, and the harshness with which they were judged. It also set a precedent for several more rounds of evaluation that occurred yearly afterwards. The dancers, identified only by their last name in the reviews were given terse, critical evaluations. It is not an exaggeration to say that their careers often depended on the outcome.

“Gorshkova - Because of age and health situation continued use in the ballet is inadvisable.” Unfortunately, no further information was given as to the nature of her “health situation.” Age and injury have sidelined or ended the career of many a dancer and the unceremonious nature of the recommendation that she not continue to dance in the troupe at Bolshoi suggests that it was no different for this leading dancer in the *corps de ballet*. She was gone before the beginning of the 1929-30 season.

Golubina was a dancer in the second *corps de ballet*. Therefore, her position was far from the spotlight. Her peripheral position on the stage did not hide her from criticism. Her brief evaluation reads: “Bad stage presence, limited dance possibilities, as an artist, colorless (*beztsvetna*). Release from work in the ballet.” Her evaluation is notable because she was released exclusively for her lack of performance quality and not at all for age. Even younger dancers were subject to dismissal if their skill was diminished.

A member of the first *corps de ballet*, Chechelva, faced similar criticism. Her evaluation notes that “the question of her dismissal has been raised several times due to her weak stage

presence and low level of mastery,” and concluded that she “require[d] replacement by a younger dancer.”<sup>36</sup> It was not just women who received such harsh, pointed, criticism. The male dancer Konovalov’s evaluation read: “Weak as a dancer. As an artist, uninteresting. Transfer to retirement.”<sup>37</sup> However, the comparative lack of available male dancers meant that men’s places in the ballet were generally far more secure than women’s.

Retirement was an option for older dancers, but others were simply let go at a younger age with little or no prospect of returning to work in ballet. Some older dancers who were not as spry as they had once been but were still proficient and healthy were moved to other parts of the Bolshoi. Vasileva was an experienced member of the *corps de ballet* who was moved to the miming ensemble. This allowed her to continue to perform, albeit in a reduced role that required less dancing. The evaluators suggested in a slightly softer tone that the ballerina Dezire had suffered a “reduction of professional qualities.” In her case they recommended that she might find other work at the Bolshoi, “perhaps at the Ballet School.”<sup>38</sup>

The questions of age and injury appear several times throughout the evaluations and reinforce the idea that the late 1920s and early 1930s marked not only a time of artistic change within the Bolshoi, but also of generational change. Younger dancers had the advantage of being newly trained and more physically resilient than older dancers. They fit with the overall vision of the Commission that wanted to phase out the older members of the troupe who were understood to be most steeped in the pre-revolutionary ballet. Here ideology overlapped with physicality. Youthful dancers also projected an image of stronger, healthier bodies. In the early Soviet Union

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<sup>36</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 733. “Characteristics of ballet artists.”

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

the understanding of the body as an important part of the new Soviet person “blurred the lines between bodily health... and societal health.”<sup>39</sup>

In practice, as we have seen with the trouble of the ballet troupe’s makeup, pre-revolution and post-revolution dancers were often not as distinct as the evaluators imagined. They often came from the bourgeoisie and trained in classical technique. There was also little turnover among soloists in the ballet, with the hardest hit group of dancers being those in the *corps de ballet*. At the end of the day, talent continued to be the most important characteristic for dancers in the ballet troupe. Despite the young talent that was finally making its way from the Ballet School to the ballet troupe, the numbers were not great enough to overhaul the Ballet entirely. Furthermore, turnover in the ballet troupe, while ostensibly desirable, was not without challenges. New dancers had to be integrated into the troupe, learn their new parts, and adjust to life as a professional.

On 12 January, 1929 Glaviskusstvo resolved that that a new studio called the “Stage Workshop” would be created by the Bolshoi with the goal of creating a space for training promising new artists at the Bolshoi Theater. This was meant to address the 2 June, 1928 proclamation by Glaviskusstvo that declared that there was a “crisis in ballet and opera.” The new workshop would help to bridge the gap between “old masters” and the “new young forces” entering the theater.<sup>40</sup> In no other element of the reorganization was the generational nature of the changes at the Bolshoi so clearly recognized. The tension between young and old was particularly troublesome in the realm of dance. Ballet’s extreme technical precision and exhaustive training regimen meant that achieving expertise absolutely required teaching from an experienced dancer. The Bolshoi desired highly trained, talented young artists to lead ballet in a

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<sup>39</sup> Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene and the Revolutionary State* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 67.

<sup>40</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2 d. 673a l. 27.

new direction. This level of expertise and training required more than was possible at the Ballet School. Therefore, the studio was created as an arm of the Bolshoi Theater for the purpose of fostering exceptional young talent that would not just perform in the troupe, but hopefully be among its best dancers and perhaps choreographers. Only the “most gifted young people” were eligible to train there and only nine positions were available per year. Those precious few slots were spread across the Ballet and the Opera. Glaviskusstvo hoped that the workshop would provide for the “systematic and planned youth involvement in the main repertory of the theater” based on “careful selection and continuous training.”<sup>41</sup>

The Bolshoi paid artists in each of the nine slots an eighty ruble per month stipend, which was meant to further attract talented individuals in both ballet and opera.<sup>42</sup> The budget for the workshop came in at just over 17,000 rubles per year to pay the stipends for the trainees and the salaries of the teachers. Glaviskusstvo’s creation of the workshop represented a serious attempt to create the conditions necessary for the flourishing of socialist ballet at the Bolshoi Theater. The Ballet School was an acceptable way to train dancers for the Bolshoi’s troupe. Getting the most artistic output from the most talented among the new members of the ballet troupe was another issue altogether. Glaviskusstvo recognized that, while a generational shift was desirable, the value of older, experienced experts in training the youth was also a necessary part of the process. And it was a process. Neither Glaviskusstvo nor anyone at the Bolshoi Theater knew exactly what socialist ballet was going to be even a decade after the revolution. The creation of the workshop, like the changes at the Ballet School, was part of creating a structure that it hoped would allow that process to occur. In short, creating a socialist ballet was first about creating a structure that could support a socialist ballet and then allowing it to develop within that system.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Therefore, the value of the old guard of soloists and choreographers that made up the elite of the Bolshoi Ballet remained high. They also continued to be in charge of the day to day rehearsals and preparations for performance. Finally, in teaching at the workshop they had a clear structure through which to pass along their technique, knowledge and styles to the most talented up and coming performers at the Bolshoi.

Although the Commission believed it had established a program that would spur the creation of socialist ballet, the question of the upcoming seasons still loomed. Whether or not the changes to the school and the creation of the workshop would eventually leave their mark on ballet at the Bolshoi, they certainly would not have any significant influence immediately. So, the Commission was not satisfied with just the structural changes aimed at long term success. It also insisted on shaping the works created and performed at the Bolshoi in the short term. The commission exhaustively evaluated new ballets for their appropriateness for the Bolshoi Theater's stage. Classic ballets were often given relatively little feedback. New ballets, often only accessible through their librettos, having not always been yet fully choreographed or performed, received much more attention.

Several works in particular caught the eye of the Commission in late 1928 as it began the process of reviewing new works. *The Green Fly* and *Four Moscows* were considered promising and received substantial attention from the Commission, which scheduled a more thorough discussion of the works for February 1929.<sup>43</sup> The February meeting was headed by the Subcommission on Ballet Repertory and also included dancers from the ballet troupe in the discussion. One dancer, Podgoretskaia, argued that *The Green Fly* had plenty of “space for dancing” and that the librettist, Gaev, had achieved an “ideologically correct plot” through allegory. The setting was, unfortunately, depressingly familiar for a classical ballet – Christmas.

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<sup>43</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 648 l. 3.

Others, therefore, added that it was “uninteresting,” contained “nothing new,” and was “very naïve.”<sup>44</sup> It was nonetheless a promising effort. Chernetskaia, a representative of the Ballet School at the meeting, suggested that the work could be reworked as a one-act children’s ballet.<sup>45</sup>

*Four Moscows* was a four act ballet with each act set in a different period of Moscow’s history. It began in Ivan Grozny’s Russia and ended in the Soviet Union. The concerns with the libretto were almost exactly the opposite of *The Green Fly*. Faier and Lashschilin, a composer and choreographer respectively, called the libretto “very interesting.” Everyone agreed that the premise was both compelling and appropriate. The Subcommission disagreed over the libretto’s suitability for dance. Podgoretskaia argued that there was very little dance explicitly written into the libretto, and Moiseev quickly agreed with her. Faier, on the other hand, insisted that there was still “plenty of room for classical dance.”<sup>46</sup> The emphasis on a suitable theme is evident in the discussion of both librettos. But debate about how classical dance could be integrated into *Four Moscows* also shows how classical dance itself was still a desirable feature of the ballet.

A libretto for a ballet called *Kommunarka* also gained some traction. The ballet was about the Paris Commune and therefore excited the commission due to its revolutionary theme. Even so, the Commission remarked that the libretto needed “a number of changes.”<sup>47</sup> At this early stage a great deal of attention was also given to *The Footballer* as a candidate to achieve the goals the Commission was after and its potential to contain elements of mass theater. In the end, the Commission favored *The Footballer* and the Bolshoi began to move forward with its choreography and production. Meanwhile, others were quickly dismissed. The Commission reviewed, for example, the libretto for a ballet titled *Path of Fire*, among others, and quickly

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<sup>44</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2 d 648 l. 98.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 648 l. 93.

determined that it was not suitable. The chief concern was that that an audience would not understand it.<sup>48</sup>

More broadly speaking, the discussion was also an open debate about the librettos. Although the Subcommission for Ballet Repertory was in charge of evaluating the works, dancers from the ballet troupe were invited to give feedback as well. This serves as a window into the functioning of the reorganization. Although the reorganization was heavily influenced by the Commission that was staffed mainly by representatives of Glaviskusstvo, the day to day evaluation of dancers and dances was left to the subcommissions made up chiefly of experts in the art form. Dancers and choreographers were able to voice their opinions and debate the merits of particular aspects of the librettos being considered. Finally, given that ballets are expensive and time consuming to choreograph and stage, those librettos were the main way that new ballets could be evaluated. Therefore, the Subcommission on Ballet Repertory had to make such choices before the ballet troupe went on to actually produce and eventually perform the ballets.

The lack of promising new work played an important role in the continued presence of classical ballets in the Bolshoi repertory. The problem was compounded by the lack of funds that the Commission had hoped to use to attract talent to develop new ballets for the Bolshoi. The addition funding that was available went to the aforementioned workshop. Despite the ideological concerns, the need to fill the schedule with performances pressured the commission to allow them to remain in the program. This compromise led the commission to call for a “revision of the classical repertoire with the goal of filling existing gaps.”<sup>49</sup> As a result, by March of 1929 the 1929-30 season at the Bolshoi was slated to feature regular performances of *The Red Poppy*, *Esmeralda*, *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Humpbacked Little Horse*, *Raymonda*, and

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<sup>48</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 648 l. 55.

<sup>49</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 648 l. 12.

either *Petrushka*, *La Sylphide* or *Spanish Capriccio*.<sup>50</sup> Only *The Red Poppy* was a new ballet created since the revolution. *The Footballer* was not planned to debut in 1930 at this time, but it would go on to premier during the same season.

The Commission on reorganization identified several reasons for what it called the continued “backwardness of ballet.”<sup>51</sup> The first, and most important, was the lack of appropriate “scenarios” for socialist ballets. Although the Bolshoi had long struggled with what socialist ballet really meant, the Commission’s emphasis on scenarios as the starting points for creating socialist ballet is notable. On one level it was an unremarkable statement. Librettos always come at the beginning of the process of creating new ballets. However, it marked a change that would continue to intensify in the following years in which the focus on themes became nearly the entire discussion. The new socialist ballet was not just a matter of creating acceptable librettos. The Commission believed that changes to librettos would help to create “new forms.”<sup>52</sup>

Finally, the Commission understood that there was a public relations question that went beyond the art and artists. The Bolshoi Theater needed to reach a broad, mass audience. The Commission determined that ballet lacked a “cultural, artistic and social ideological identity” in the early Soviet Union. In addition to the reforms that were supposed to spur the creation of socialist ballets themselves, the Bolshoi had work to do in order to “raise public opinion about the importance of ballet in the arts of the USSR.”<sup>53</sup>

But the Bolshoi Theater, for all its well-intentioned desire to create socialist, mass work, was still an elite institution. When it came to convincing the public otherwise, the administration understood that it still had most of its work ahead of it. G. Alexandrovskii, an administrator at

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<sup>50</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 648 ll. 62-63.

<sup>51</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 648 l. 73.

<sup>52</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 648 l. 74.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



the Bolshoi Theater wrote a letter to the editor of *Literaturnaya Gazeta* in the summer of 1929 in an attempt to do just that. In the letter he explained that the Bolshoi Theater, as an institution, was closer than ever to the people. His dwelled on two points at length. First, the Bolshoi Theater was selling many tickets to workers. He claimed that roughly eighty percent of all tickets sold were sold to members of the working class.<sup>54</sup> It is not clear how Alexandrovskii calculated that number, but two points require clarification. The records of tickets sold at the Bolshoi indicate that this was an exaggeration. Instead, half or slightly more than half were sold to workers according to the Bolshoi's own records.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, the numbers do not seem to include the number of tickets reserved for party members that were not strictly speaking "sold." However, the number also does not include working class spectators that visited the Bolshoi as a part of excursions from the factories, clubs, and so forth.<sup>56</sup> The Bolshoi Theater was reaching working audiences, but not to the extent he implied. Alexandrovskii also emphasized the changing nature of the performances at the Bolshoi. He insisted that "except for a small extent... all the old theater has been completely swept away."<sup>57</sup> Even taking into consideration the changes made during the reorganization this statement is surely an exaggeration. The Bolshoi Ballet continued to perform classical ballets during the 1928 and 1929 seasons. It also, as we have seen, still heavily relied on the skill of older ballet masters in places like the workshop to train the new artistic elite. Alexandrovskii's letter indicates that the Bolshoi understood its job in the late 1920s to be a public relations effort in addition to artistic and institutional reforms.

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<sup>54</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 673a l. 85.

<sup>55</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d 1660 ll. 113-114a.

<sup>56</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 673a l. 85.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

## Football at the Bolshoi

While the reorganization forced the Bolshoi Theater to ponder its social character, it also marked a refocused and concerted effort to address the still-lingering questions about the role of the art produced there and its relationship to the revolution. The effects of the reorganization can therefore be understood not just through the institutional changes themselves, but by the works that were created during and immediately after it. *The Footballer*,<sup>58</sup> striking for its combination of athletic and balletic movements, emerged from the candidates for a new ballet and was ultimately choreographed and performed in time to premier before the end of the 1929-1930 season. The ballet provides insight into the relationship between the masses and the Communist elite who wanted the art form to reflect its ideology.

Historians have long recognized the importance of the year 1928 in the history of the Soviet Union. In more recent years, the discussion has been about exactly what the importance was and how historians can understand the year in the context of cultural revolution. Sheila Fitzpatrick identified, for example, a conflict between “Red” and “expert” and their relationship to the desire to empower a revolutionary youth in the cultural realm (or, as it were, on the Cultural Front).<sup>59</sup> The task has become to complicate the notion of cultural revolution in order to understand the underlying assumptions of such dichotomies as they emerged during the late 1920s and early 1930s. It is also, as we shall see, vital to understanding the Bolshoi Ballet in the same era and particularly apparent in *The Footballer*.

Michael David-Fox’s article “What is Cultural Revolution?” did not fundamentally change the recognition of the period’s importance. Rather than entirely overturning the narrative

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<sup>58</sup> *The Footballer* is titled simply “*Futbolist*” in the original Russian. For the sake of consistency, I use the word football throughout when referring to the sport Americans call soccer, and refer to the titular character as “the footballer” rather than “the soccer player” or simply “the player.”

<sup>59</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, 150. David-Fox himself refers to this period as part of a “Great Break.”

of cultural revolution, David-Fox encouraged a more nuanced reading of it. He emphasized the need to acknowledge both the continuities with earlier Bolshevik cultural projects and their “reformulation” in 1928.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, he identified what he called an “internal-external nexus” that is characterized, in part, by “reflexivity” in which “approaches toward the other were formulated in terms of the self, the periphery in terms of the center, *the masses in terms of the elite*.”<sup>61</sup> On the final page of his landmark article, David-Fox makes a call for postrevisionist scholars to “open up the two-way street between Communists’ attempt to remake others and their ongoing quest to transform themselves.”<sup>62</sup> Understanding the process of cultural revolution as reflexive is useful not just for understanding the intellectual and social history of cultural revolution, but also in studying the work the Bolshoi produced in the years after 1928.

In studying the Bolshoi Ballet, my goal was not to take up David-Fox’s call. Nonetheless, the case of the Bolshoi Ballet from 1928 to 1930 is ripe for this type of analysis. The Bolshoi had already long struggled with the relationship between its long-standing role as an elite institution and the desire, after the revolution, to create works that embraced socialism. At the heart of the discussion were the sometimes paradoxical goals of bringing culture to the masses and making ballet into an art form that transcended its aristocratic origins. Trying to achieve this herculean task was central to Bolshoi Ballet’s experience of cultural revolution. *The Footballer* attempted to answer the question by bringing popular matter to the stage of the Bolshoi. The merging of the popular culture of football with the high culture of ballet was at the core of the reflexive nature of the cultural revolution.

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<sup>60</sup> Michael David-Fox, “What is Cultural Revolution?” *Russian Review* Vol. 58 No. 2 (April 1999), 198.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 200. (emphasis mine)

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

Even before the creation of the league in 1936, football was, Robert Edelman tells us, “the game of the working class” in the Soviet Union.<sup>63</sup> The year 1928 was also a landmark year for football in the Soviet Union. In that year, Dinamo Stadium was constructed in Moscow. This made it possible, Edelman argues, for football to transform into a “mass spectacle on a scale it had achieved in other countries.”<sup>64</sup> Football had become a mass sport. It attracted large crowds and filled stadiums. Nowhere was it clearer that football had become the sport of the working class than at Dinamo. But it was not merely the widespread popularity of football that marked it as for the masses. Edelman argues that the players “had not accepted the values or orderliness and discipline that the authorities sought to inculcate through sports” and that the crowds also cared little for the official role of sport.<sup>65</sup> In his other work on the topic, Edelman expands on this idea and discusses the idea of competing notions of masculinity within the sport. Ideally, football was supposed to inspire discipline. However, according to his study “Spartak’s supporters practiced a Soviet version of that rough British working-class masculinity that was often violent and little concerned with sportsmanship.”<sup>66</sup> Like ballet, football’s place within Soviet society and culture was not entirely clear by 1928. Lack of regulation even led to many games scheduled for weekdays “causing large numbers of fans to skip work.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, it also proved to be a cultural conundrum for the Communist elite, who saw sport as another avenue towards cultural development. Tricia Starks notes that this development of physical culture and discipline also had an important economic component. Writing on the Soviet body in the 1920s and analyzing the Soviet discourse about the body through propaganda, Starks explains that “by modifying

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<sup>63</sup> Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the U.S.S.R* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1993), 44.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Edelman, *Spartak Moscow: A History of the People’s Team in the Worker’s State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 103.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

movement, training the body, and rationalizing work” the Soviet authorities felt they would ultimately “make labor more efficient, thereby getting the most out of each worker.”<sup>68</sup>

Starks’ commentary also evokes the concept of the “New Soviet Man/Woman” that was centrally important to the Bolsheviks’ project of revolutionary social transformation.

Transforming society, the Bolsheviks understood from the beginning, also meant the transformation of the individual. Jay Bergman explains “for the revolution the Bolsheviks advocated to be morally an intellectually defensible, it had to bring with it in some fashion the ethical improvement of humanity, leading eventually to the emergence of a new human beings- what the Bolsheviks referred to as the New Soviet Man – whose superior qualities and attributes would be the most obvious indication that a Communist society was preferable to all others.”<sup>69</sup> In the context of building socialism, the importance of the New Soviet Man was only heightened. In embodying extreme discipline, precise movement and an almost mechanistic uniformity, ballet did reflect some of the values that came to be associated with the New Soviet Man.<sup>70</sup>

Interestingly, this connection between dance and work discipline in movement was not limited to the Soviet Union. Rudolf Laban, famous for his contributions to modern dance and labanotation, used for notating dance, also made the connection in his 1947 work *Effort: Economy of Human Movement*, which was a kind of Taylorist<sup>71</sup> analysis of movement and labor written with the goal of reducing inefficiencies in common movements used in everyday labor.<sup>72</sup> Football and ballet

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<sup>68</sup> Starks, *The Body Soviet*, 164.

<sup>69</sup> Jay Bergman, “The Idea of Individual Liberation in Bolshevik Visions of the New Soviet Man” *European History Quarterly* Vol. 27 No. 1 (1997). 57.

<sup>70</sup> Scholarship on the New Soviet Man had already pointed to relationship between the New Soviet Man and the importance of technology and mechanization in building socialism. See for example: Slava Gerovitch “‘New Soviet Man’ Inside Machine: Human Engineering, Spacecraft Design and the Construction of Communism” *Osiris* Vol. 22 No. 1 (2007), 135-157.

<sup>71</sup> Taylorism is a scientific approach to labor productivity that focuses on rationality and efficiency.

<sup>72</sup> Rudolf Laban and F. C. Lawrence, *Effort: Economy of Human Movement* (London: McDonald & Evans, 1947). On the topic of Taylorism and Soviet labor see: Lewis H. Siegelbaum, “Soviet Norm Determination in Theory and

were strange bedfellows when the sport became the subject of a ballet, but together they addressed issues of discipline and disorder, ultimately with relevance to building the New Soviet Man. The two came face to face with *The Footballer* at the Bolshoi.

The galloping, sportsman-like movements of Asaf Messerer in *The Footballer* invoke the semiotics of the sport. This “language”, unlike the language of the ballet, was approachable to the popular audiences that the Bolshoi Theater sought to engage with the work. Although, as Edelman pointed out, the masses did not understand their fandom and spectatorship of the sport as ideologically motivated or relevant, the widespread exposure of the masses to football gave them a kind of native fluency in its nonverbal language. However, in blending the language of soccer with the language of the ballet, *The Footballer*, conflated the popular and the aristocratic, the mass with the elite. The result was movement that was both familiar and unfamiliar to working audiences. William Sewell’s 2005 treatise on social theory, *Logics of History*, argues that semiotic practices can be thought of as *discursive* but only as long as the idea of discourse includes “non-linguistic” communication. “The world of meaning,” he reminds us, “is much wider than the world of speech and writing.”<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, the contact between linguistic and non-linguistic semiotic systems plays an important role in the “world of meaning.” Using the example of the rules of basketball to illustrate the complexity and difficulty of engaging with kinesthetic meaning, Sewell argues that a “kinesthetically generated problem” will be “worked out in language – in deliberations by the sport’s rule-making body.”<sup>74</sup> He argues that this example is illustrative of the broader relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic semiotic systems. Finally, he concludes by arguing that “reflection, deliberation, and argumentation in

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Practice, 1917-1941” *Soviet Studies* Vol. 36. No. 1 (1984), 45-68. On such norms during the first five-year plan, see the same, pages 52-57.

<sup>73</sup> William H. Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2005), 335.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.

language plays a disproportionate role in governing semiotic practices of all kinds.”<sup>75</sup> In the Soviet Union, this was certainly the case. The Communists debated the direction for ballet at length. Much of the difficulty of assessing the influence, and ultimately the importance, of *The Footballer* requires both an engagement with the non-linguistic semiotic practices of the ballet and the linguistic discussions that surrounded it.

Likewise, scholars working in the field of Dance Studies, Anthropology and Folklore have toiled over the difficulty of dealing with the relationship between bodies and movement, the meaning embedded in them, and the linguistic world that surrounds them. Katherine Young’s introduction to the edited work *Bodylore* argues that “the body, extended into space, elaborated into cosmology, inscribed into the social order, is exteriorized, turned inside out, to form the objective structures of the social world.”<sup>76</sup> Put otherwise, she adds “culture consists of aspects of the self seen, as it were, from the outside.”<sup>77</sup> The process is reflexive. Culture also leaves its mark on the body. Young’s work here is reminiscent of David-Fox’s identification of an “internal-external nexus.” She also takes a cue from Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*. Both invoke the notion of “disposition” as a way of reconciling this cultural process with individual agency.

Thus, bodies are an important *site* of cultural reproduction and meaning. But, even when accounting for “disposition,” the question of the relationship between the individual and culture is not entirely clear. Brenda Farnell, professor of Anthropology and theoretician in the study of movement, has long focused on action and agency as central to understanding movement. Her work focuses not just on dance *per se*, but on movement in cultural and social theory. Her recent monograph *Dynamic Embodiment for Social Theory* attempts to resolve the tensions between

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Katherine Young “Introduction” in *Bodylore* ed. Katherine Young (University of Tennessee Press: Knoxville, 1993), xvii-xviii.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., xviii.

personal agency and cultural reproduction. Central to her argument is the rejection of a dualist understanding of human beings that, she argues, fails to deal with unconscious forms of knowledge.<sup>78</sup> In breaking down such barriers, Farnell asserts that the *semiotic* and the *somatic* should not be “artificially separated.” Like Sewell, Farnell acknowledges and argues for the importance of treating a discourse of the body (distinct from a discourse *about* the body) as an important aspect of social theory. Unlike Sewell, she does not think that somatic discourse is, finally, subordinated to linguistic discourse at the level of argumentation. The distinction is important because it provides a clearer path for understanding the difficulty the Communists had with critiquing classical ballet.

Football and ballet were both part of this larger, Soviet discourse of the body. The collision of the two “worlds” of meaning is critical to understanding first, the importance and meaning of *The Footballer* and second, the responses to it. Using this as a window into the Soviet discourse of the body also provides insight into David-Fox’s question about the Communist desire to remake both the masses and themselves, as well as the anxiety that emerged from the process.

### **The Footballer**

*The Footballer* has long been known to scholars, but has been largely dismissed as unimportant or uninteresting. Elizabeth Souritz mentions the work only in passing in her study *Soviet Choreographers in the 1920s*.<sup>79</sup> Mary Grace Smith’s *The Art of the Dance in the U.S.S.R* briefly outlines *The Footballer* in a chapter questionably titled “Ballet’s Time of Troubles.” She

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<sup>78</sup> Brenda Farnell, *Dynamic Embodiment for Social Theory: “I move Therefore I Am”* (Routledge: London, 2012), 81-84. Her example of “knowing how” to ride a bike clarifies the point. One can “know how” to ride a bike but be entirely incapable of explaining the action.

<sup>79</sup> Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers*, 254. In her defense, *The Footballer* premiered in 1930, and was therefore technically outside the scope of her work.



quickly concludes that it was an “inane attempt at a Soviet scenario.”<sup>80</sup> Tellingly, she adds that dance’s “chief claim to fame” was that the world renowned Igor Moiseev was involved in the choreography.<sup>81</sup> This mode of analysis and critique places ballets and the artists creating and performing them within ballet’s canon of masters and masterpieces. Jennifer Homans’ *Apollo’s Angels*, chronicling ballet’s long history, devotes only a few short pages to Soviet ballet of the 1920s and 1930s. “It is tempting,” she concludes her discussion of the Soviet Ballet from Stalin to Brezhnev, “to set aside the carcass of socialist realism (those awful ballets) and elevate the dancers as heroes who transcended them. But although the ‘great dancers, terrible ballets’ adage is not entirely wrong, it does miss an important point: ballet in the USSR was made by and for its own people, in a world defined and circumscribed by a totalitarian police state.”<sup>82</sup> Although she deserves credit for resisting the impulse to dismiss it, she can only conclude that the entire Soviet period is scrutable under the reductive idea that “‘they’ really were different from ‘us.’”<sup>83</sup>

In a long history of ballet, Homans’ somewhat ham-fisted analysis can be at least partially forgiven.<sup>84</sup> But even in studies that focus on the Soviet Union, the broader history of ballet often creeps (or even charges) into this analysis. Through a focus on archival research and an emphasis on historical context, this study provides an opportunity to understand the ballet in a new light. *The Footballer* becomes not just a noteworthy ballet, but also a vibrant source of material for better understanding the role of ballet in the late 1920s and 1930s Soviet Union. Conversely, understanding the broader cultural and historical context also serves to provide a background for an analysis of the work itself that neither trivializes nor dismisses it. The point of

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<sup>80</sup> Mary Grace Swift, *The Art of the Dance in the U.S.S.R* (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1968), 88.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Jennifer Homans, *Apollo’s Angels: A History of Ballet* (Random House: New York, 2010), 394.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> In fact, as a history of the art form, *Apollo’s Angels* is mostly well researched and well written. My criticism of this particular section of her work should not be taken as dismissing it as a whole.

such analysis is not to renovate the early Soviet ballet in the eyes of the broader history of ballet, but rather to transcend that narrative in favor of one more specific and historically situated.

The Bolshoi's creation and performance of *The Footballer* was not the only attempt to solve the question of popular ballet by turning to the sport. Christina Ezrahi explains that *The Golden Age*, which was performed in Leningrad during the 1930 season, "depicted a fight between a group of fascists and a Soviet football team."<sup>85</sup> According to her critique of the work, *The Golden Age* featured an emphasis on pantomime, at the expense of more classical dance.<sup>86</sup> Yet, Soviet critic Yuri Slonimskii wrote in his 1950 history of the Soviet Ballet that it, and *The Footballer* too, had "formalist tendencies"<sup>87</sup> Writing in the early years of the Cold War, still under Stalin, Slonimskii certainly had to make political decisions in his analysis of the work. Nonetheless, the disagreement, even separated by long distances in both time and space, illustrates an important point about the study of ballet in the Soviet Union. It is not productive to become mired in a discussion that evaluates the ballets on the terms of the Soviet politics of the time. One could argue endlessly over the degree to which ballets of the late 1920s were or were not "formalist." Instead, as I have argued from the beginning, a more productive question is to ask what they meant, and to whom. It is important to call attention to this point once more, particularly given the heightened political rhetoric associated with the early cultural revolution. The political discourse surrounding the creation of ballets is also an unavoidable and indeed vital part of the discussion. However, the temptation to evaluate whether or not the ballets, in this case *The Footballer* and *The Golden Age*, displayed "formalist tendencies" or in fact eschewed them

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<sup>85</sup> Christina Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia* (University of Pittsburgh Press: Pittsburgh, 2012), 46.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Yuri Slonimskii, *Sovetskii Balet: materialy k istorii sovetskogo baletnogo teatra* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1950), 94.

is less important than analyzing them within the cultural discourses, both verbal and somatic, of their historical moment.

*The Footballer* premiered on the stage of the Bolshoi Theater on 30 March 1930 to little interest and acclaim. Despite Mary Grace Smith's too easy dismissal of the work, her characterization of the ballet's story as "standard fare" was apt.<sup>88</sup> The ballet featured the usual cast of characters inspired by the classical form. The hero – the footballer himself – danced by Asaf Messerer, a cleaning woman danced by Anastasia Abramova, a bourgeois man and woman who served as the comic villains of the work, and of course the large *corps de ballet* that danced spectators, shoppers, workers and members of the Red Army. The drama of the ballet centers on the conflict between the footballer, the simple cleaning woman and the bourgeois couple. Although formulaic, the ballet had a light hearted and occasionally comedic tone.

The ballet was written and performed in three acts. The final libretto, created by Vsevolod Kurdumov, dated November 1929, described a first act that introduced the main characters and took place primarily at a stadium and the streets outside it. Here, the dances emphasized sport-inspired movement that was not limited only to football, but also included javelin throwing and archery. The final two scenes of the first act portray a whirlwind of sports imagery, topped by the footballer's athletic display. After his triumph, the bourgeois woman, predictably, falls for him.

The second act followed the footballer, now trailed by his admirer, as he finds his way into the sports section of a department store to buy a new football. Nearby the bourgeois couple is buying tennis shoes. The dances here mock the bourgeoisie in the store. The footballer and bourgeois dame eventually come face to face over the course of several scenes of narrative punctuated by dances. The third and final act turned to scattered scenes that appear to have been

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<sup>88</sup> Swift, 88.

an attempt to cram more explicitly “socialist” content into the ballet before its conclusion. The ballet concludes with imagery of industrial and agricultural construction, coal mining, a bountiful harvest and a parade of athletes.<sup>89</sup>

The ballet’s first act most clearly and forcefully combines the discourses of football and ballet. In this act, the footballer’s sports-inspired movement, including kicks, jumps and in some cases pantomime was combined with classical ballet movements and structure. The footballer’s feet are not pointed as he jumps and kicks in vague imitation of the sport, rather than in the classical pointed, winged form.<sup>90</sup> As Edelman points out football in 1920s Moscow was often far from what fans now often call “the beautiful game.” Instead the games were filled with fouls and aggressive play.<sup>91</sup> The players, following from this, moved with power, aggression, and perhaps most notably, lack of discipline. As already noted, this trend concerned Communist onlookers, who hoped sports would instill a sense of a discipline appropriate to a good Communist. By contrast, the classical ballet that was still predominately practiced by the Bolshoi Ballet was steeped in order and discipline.

It is this distinction that speaks most clearly to the conflict in the discourse of the body that appeared on the stage of the Bolshoi. Football may have been less disciplined, but it was undoubtedly popular. Popularity, in the sense of being relatable to the common worker, was absolutely critical to the Bolshoi Ballet’s mission to create new work. It was the popularity of the football that Moiseev and Lashchilin, the choreographers, hoped to invoke when creating the movement based on Kurdumov’s libretto. In practice ballet’s very technical, disciplined and orderly movement was much more in line with the Communist ideal for physical culture, but was nonetheless inescapably linked to an aristocratic past both historically and somatically. Thus, the

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<sup>89</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 681 ll. 12-17.

<sup>90</sup> Slonimskii, 94.

<sup>91</sup> Edelman, 53.

appeal of combining the two is actually not difficult to see. Ballet could be made more appealing, and the more acceptable parts of ballet, insofar as they related to the “remaking” of Communists could be infused with a popular, accessible discourse of the body.

The former was a clear motivation for combining the two. *The Footballer* had finally premiered at the Bolshoi Theater in March 1930. However, its journey to that stage had begun in 1928. In October of that year, a meeting of the commission on the reorganization of the Bolshoi deemed that the earliest versions of the libretto were compelling enough for “the setting to be desirable.”<sup>92</sup> Two further notes stand out from this first evaluation. First, it was concerned that the characters were too “Romantic,” a common criticism of ballets at the time. Despite *The Red Poppy*’s success, the Romanticism that had helped make it a hit among audiences was no longer considered a legitimate direction for socialist ballet. Instead, new ballets were to be “realistic.” Second, and more importantly, the commission concluded that because the work had “lush, decorative techniques” it was appropriate not for the experimental theater, where some experimental works were created and staged, but rather on the main stage of the Bolshoi Theater itself.<sup>93</sup> Yet, in early 1929 when dealing with a revised libretto, concerns turned to the plot and whether or not the relatively weak characters could carry an entire ballet. The libretto was sent back with instruction to increase the dramatic elements.<sup>94</sup> The back and forth over *The Footballer*’s libretto betrays the uncertainty between a move towards dramatization in ballet and the desire to retain classical style. The two were not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, finding the balance between drama and dance was coming to the forefront in the debate about ballet.

*The Footballer* went from initial libretto to complete ballet precisely in the moment that this question was gaining momentum. It is clear from the rejected librettos that the suitability for

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<sup>92</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 648 l. 10.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 648 l. 47.

the Bolshoi Theater was still primarily based on artistic quality. In ballet that still meant the classical style. The desire to find socialist themes did not entirely overshadow the traditional understanding of the art form. Classical technique, despite the desire to bring a more accessible material to the theater, was still valued and in fact preferred for the Bolshoi's main stage. Therefore, *The Footballer* found itself on an acceptable middle ground. It was at once desirable for its popular subject matter and still suitable for showcasing classical ballet. Although the Commission did not express the idea as such, its decision to recommend the work for the Bolshoi Theater on the basis of its technique suggests that it understood that football did not just have something to bring to ballet, but that classical ballet also had something of value to bring to football.

David-Fox's assertion of the "internal-external nexus" of cultural revolution, then, finds itself in alignment with an analysis of *The Footballer* based on a framework informed by Farnell and, to an extent, Sewell. In the discourse of bodies, the masses *were* being reformulated in the terms of the elite. Furthermore, I contend that the desire and effort to remake the ballet – an elite art form – in a socialist image can be understood as a reflection of the desire of the new cultural and political elite within the Communist Party to affirm its own communism. The Communists who spurred the production of *The Footballer* wanted to both bring the theater to the masses and bring the masses to the theater.

Such a desire also extended to the Bolshoi's audience. The Subcommittee on Mass Work made several recommendations in order to more actively attract working class viewers. Its premise was simple: "It is necessary to value the old bourgeois culture, in this case the theater, to use for the political and artistic education of the masses."<sup>95</sup> This had been a fundamental part of the Bolshoi Theater's place in the Soviet Union from the onset, and the Cultural Revolution did

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<sup>95</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 648 l. 108.

little to diminish that fact, and in fact only heightened the acceptability of this claim. The focus on finding appropriate themes for socialist ballet was, we have seen, an important part of this process. However, the Subcommittee realized that simply creating the work was not enough, particularly given the historic distance between an institution like the Bolshoi Theater and the working class. The main recommendation focused on further education of audiences before shows, and soliciting the feedback after the show. The former would be achieved by holding introductions to the work about to be performed twenty to thirty minutes before the performance. The latter required more direct feedback from working audiences. Therefore, it suggested getting workers to “express in writing or orally in a meeting... whether or not they understood the work.”<sup>96</sup> The post-performance feedback would serve not only to inform the Bolshoi about its success or failure to engage members of the working class but also as an educational opportunity. Expressing their opinions about the performance, the Subcommittee argued, would help working audiences “accept and internalize” the work and “lead to an increased interest” in it.<sup>97</sup> The Bolshoi administration decided to solicit feedback from the workers several months in advance of the ballet’s premier at the Bolshoi Theater. On November 26, 1929 parts of *The Footballer* were shown at the workers club the Red Beam. Comrade Sheshin began by discussing the venue and the relationship between the performers and the audience.<sup>98</sup> Performing scenes from the ballet at a workers’ club, instead of at the Bolshoi Theater, was symbolic of the desire brought on by the reorganization to reach out to a working class audience. The act was mainly symbolic because the majority of the feedback still came not from workers, but from internal sources. To a working class audience, Sheshin argued, the old method of the audience

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Only the last names of the participants were recorded in the transcript of the feedback session.

sitting in a theater to look at the “nice legs” of ballet dancers was “not so interesting.”<sup>99</sup> Bringing ballet to the workers’ club and listening to their input was meant to help remedy this problem.

The subject matter of football was also deemed to be an exciting development in the world of ballet because of the popularity of the sport among the populace. Sheshin also reported that there was great excitement at the scene in which the Red Army was featured and danced.<sup>100</sup> By including “real life” scenarios and stories, as opposed to the romantic stories of classical ballets, *The Footballer* delivered subject matter that was both acceptable and relatable. To some of those present, it certainly seemed like the new socialist ballet had arrived.

Kulshakov proudly exclaimed “I want to draw your attention to an important event in the world of theater, especially ballet. What we saw here today.”<sup>101</sup> *The Footballer* was, to him, an example of the success of the efforts of the reorganization. “Previous ballets,” he continued “were about beautiful legs. But now in the twelfth year of the revolutionary theater, it is finally coming to the working audience.”<sup>102</sup> In a way, his assessment was correct. The reorganization had successfully taken the ballet into a workers club. The content of *The Footballer* was substantially different from the ballets that came before, at least from those that were performed at the Bolshoi Theater.

Nonetheless, the commission had failed to seek out the opinions of actual workers until the production of the ballet was mostly complete. The preview at the Red Beam was the first exposure to a working-class audience and the first attempt at soliciting their feedback. This led one worker to muse: “should we show these works in workers’ clubs? I think it is necessary to participate when it is still rough (*chernovaia rabota*), and not when the Bolshoi has already spent

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<sup>99</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 681 l. 18.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.



a lot of money.”<sup>103</sup> He appreciated the effort the Bolshoi had spent to perform the ballet for the workers, but also felt that at such a late stage it would be difficult to make changes. In fact, he wanted the workers to be more fundamentally involved in the process of shaping the work from the beginning. Yet, ordinary members of the working class did give their feedback, both on the dance and on the process as a whole.

Kravych acknowledged the difficulty of an untrained working-class audience in evaluating the ballet. As far as he was concerned, “ballet [was] widely regarded as one of the most difficult types of work and therefore it [was] difficult to understand what is good and what is bad.”<sup>104</sup> He was, in a sense, acknowledging his own illiteracy in the language of ballet. But it still had *meaning* to him, and that meaning was certainly tied to his understanding that the art form required some specialization to fully evaluate. In other words, it was for a particular cultural elite. Nonetheless, he conceded that “the youth have achieved a lot in the field of ballet and have brought ballet closer to our audience.”<sup>105</sup> The explicit mention of the youth is noteworthy. We cannot know whether Kravych genuinely felt that the youth was helping the ballet progress towards socialist art or if he was repeating a talking point that he understood to be important. His attribution of the successes of *The Footballer* to “the youth” puts emphasis on the point that the administrators, artists and the audience too understood ballet’s transition to socialist art to be a generational process.

Sosnovskii concluded the meeting with a statement of hope that such experiences would become more common. As a representative of the Bolshoi at the meeting he stated that the workers would be “working with us, and we, in turn, will try to find the ways to teach the

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<sup>103</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 681 l. 19.

<sup>104</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 681 l. 18.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

working masses.”<sup>106</sup> In spite of his desire, the practice did not become widespread. But, in the context of the Bolshoi Theater reorganization, the episode does suggest that the desire to engage workers in ballet was more than mere lip service. Despite this honest effort to engage workers, the night at the Red Beam had only minimal influence. Ultimately, it served more as a celebration for the Communists, who felt that had reached a working audience, than a valuable feedback session for the choreographers and dancers. Ultimately, when the Bolshoi Ballet premiered the work several months later, it pleased neither the elite critics, nor the working audience.<sup>107</sup>

### Conclusion

The Bolshoi reorganization in 1928 was an important moment in the continued push towards finding a model for socialist and Soviet ballet. Changes at the Ballet School to emphasize training in socialist theory and the promotion of the younger generation within the Bolshoi Ballet itself were designed to encourage a socialist character in the Ballet. However, the reforms at the Ballet School did nothing to address the “problem” of classical ballet technique itself. In choosing to promote socialist character at the Bolshoi as a strategy for achieving socialist ballet more broadly speaking, Glaviskusstvo’s reforms in the Ballet School reflect the limitations of anti-formalist rhetoric in achieving movement away from classical ballet. The faces at the Bolshoi Ballet were beginning to change, with the younger generation finally beginning to take the more prominent role in the company that it had desired in 1925. In this sense, 1928 marked a shift at the Bolshoi. A focus on youth and the popular, “realistic” subject matter of football helped to push *ballets* at the Bolshoi in a new direction, culminating in *The*

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<sup>106</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 681 l. 19.

<sup>107</sup> Slonimskii, 87-95.

*Footballer*. But ballet itself was relatively unchanged, as were the basic questions the Bolshoi and its artists were asking about the future of their art.

In combining the disciplined movement of ballet technique with a popular sport, ballet also became a site of Bolshevik anxieties about the relationship between the working class and the political and cultural elite. As David-Fox reminds us, cultural revolution in the Soviet Union was not merely about changing the working class, but also about political elites reifying their own socialist credibility and continuing the revolutionary self-transformation they associated with building socialism. This process was far from limited to the stage of the Bolshoi Theater, which was simply another place where Bolshevik concerns about the “New Soviet Man” came to the forefront by the late 1920s. The strong, physically fit, disciplined bodies of the ballet fit well alongside concepts of labor discipline and the transformation of the Soviet working class into model laborers.

The production of *The Footballer* also contained the most strenuous attempt to date to involve the working class more closely not just in the consumption, but also in the production of ballet by soliciting feedback directly from members of the working class. Although the involvement of workers at the Red Beam ultimately did little to influence *The Footballer* as a work of art, it is nonetheless a perfect example of Glaviskusstvo’s attempt to encourage a socialist character in ballet during the Bolshoi’s reorganization. As with the desire for a ballet with a popular theme, popular participation was meant to bring the art form to the people. The failure of workers to contribute meaningfully to the ballet speaks again to the importance of recognizing ballet’s technical difficulty and the expertise needed to both perform and create it to charting ballet’s path through the 1920s. In the end, ballet remained an elite art form that was

largely inaccessible to workers regardless of its subjects or themes, a fact that was even explicitly acknowledged by one participant in the workers' feedback session.

Glaviskusstvo had known from the beginning of the reorganization that it was putting into motion a process that would eventually, not immediately, push the Bolshoi to discover and create socialist ballet. *The Footballer* had proven that its efforts in reorganizing the Bolshoi had not been without effect. It was *The Footballer* that eventually emerged from the bevy of librettos that the Commission reviewed because of its perceived ability to transcend the boundaries of the popular and the elite. In the end, it failed because audiences did not respond as well as hoped. It was not the answer Glaviskusstvo and the Bolshoi had been looking for. Therefore, although the ballet gives us, as historians, a fascinating object of analysis, the Bolshoi Theater was left going back to the drawing board to solve the riddle of Soviet ballet.

## CHAPTER 6: The Brigade of the World Proletariat

On 25 January 1932 the Bolshoi Theater administration convened a commission to begin discussing the prospect of a competition in the arts. The idea became a competition in opera, ballet, and symphony to produce works that best represented the spirit of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolution. The theme of the competition – The Brigade of the World Proletariat. In the early 1930s, even after more than a decade of struggle with its place in the new society and culture, the Bolshoi continued to chew over the prospect of turning its historically imperial art into socialist inspiration. By the time the competition came to a close in 1934 the intervening two years of discussion, artistic production and adjudication had produced wide ranging documentation that gives insight into the way in which anti-formalism developed and influenced ballet while at the same time allowing classical ballet technique to flourish. Socialist realism became officially accepted at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in August 1934 and found its expression in the anti-formalist rhetoric that had dogged ballet since the late 1920s. Anti-formalism, paradoxically, helped to protect the form of ballet by deflecting discussion away from classical ballet technique and towards a focus on choreography. As a result, classical form received far less attention than one might assume, giving the Bolshoi School the opportunity to pass it along to its students and the Ballet the chance to keep performing its classics on stage.

The commission talked over the current state of affairs and the potential the competition would have to finally produce satisfactory answers to the question of how to reconcile the Bolshoi's clearly problematic history with its still well respected art. Boris Arkanov, noted in part for his work with Shostakovich in the opera, started the conversation by stating "the question of the creation of a socialist operatic repertory ripened long ago."<sup>1</sup> The time was long

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<sup>1</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 741. GABT Commission on 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. 25 January 1932.

past the time when these questions should have, to the minds of those on the commission, been answered. The statement was no doubt obvious to everyone in the room and it was not limited only to the opera. Clear as it may have been, the point in the context of the competition is an indicator of what the competition was to become. It was an attempt to once and for all clarify what socialist art meant for opera and ballet and to end the period of confusion about their place in the Soviet Union.

E. K. Malinovskaia, who continued in a leadership role at the Bolshoi Theater into the 1930s, summarized the situation in brief. “the Bolshoi Theater shows a lot of potential, but it needs works.”<sup>2</sup> In truth, the Bolshoi Theater was not short in number of works created and produced. Since 1924, the Bolshoi Ballet had produced many ballets, some of them earning the title “Soviet”, but had not hit upon a satisfactory blueprint for the consistent creation of socialist ballets. But in an atmosphere of heightened pressure to define and produce truly socialist artworks, suitable work did seem scarce. The competition was to solve two problems. First, to harness the potential of the Bolshoi Theater which had until 1932 produced relatively few notable and outstanding works since the revolution, even including the works that had since been denounced as formalist. Second, to spur the production of truly socialist opera and ballet that was both ideologically sound and popular.

The breadth of work that was considered ideologically fitting for the Bolshoi’s stage was actually fairly substantial. Mary Grace Swift’s research into dance in the Soviet Union revealed that only four ballets were entirely rejected. Many of the most traditional classical ballets from the nineteenth century were deemed acceptable. A comprehensive review of ballets by Glaviskusstvo in 1929 even determined several classics to be “universally recommended for

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

presentation.”<sup>3</sup> Most were deemed acceptable for the stage and only a few were outright forbidden.<sup>4</sup> Although the landscape of ideological acceptability was hardly stable, classical ballet continued to be performed at the Bolshoi without interruption.

Another committee member suggested that the competition be announced in conjunction with the newspaper *Komsomolskaia Pravda* in order to give it a “social character, which should be maintained throughout the competition.”<sup>5</sup> If the artistic and cultural goals for the competition were clear, so were the social goals. The public announcement of the competition that appeared in the newspaper on 20 June was not an afterthought, but a fundamental aspect of the competition. The commission hoped it would reach a broad audience rather than be a competition by and for only the participants. The competition was meant not just as a project of cultural reform, but also contained an important social element. Combined with the emphasis for producing new works, the competition took a more practical character even as it spurred spirited internal debate. It was finally time for ballet to take its place alongside other art forms on the cultural front.

While the goal was essentially uncontested, the methods of achieving it, from the form of the competition to the subject matter of the work, were not so immediately clear. The discussion that followed illustrated the difficulty the Bolshoi faced in balancing the competing interests of those who were mainly interested in the thematic elements of ballet and those who maintained that classical ballet itself was an important artistic element. For example, one member of the commission argued that the “the theme should not be the Five-Year Plan, but rather - the future, our life in the conditions of socialism.”<sup>6</sup> His words capture the uneasy relationship between the

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<sup>3</sup> Swift, *The Art of the Dance in U.S.S.R.*, 80.

<sup>4</sup> Ezrahi. *Swans of the Kremlin*, 45.

<sup>5</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2. d. 741. GABT Commission on 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. 25 January 1932.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Soviet past, present and future in the early 1930s. Such forward-looking optimism foreshadowed a key element of socialist realism, which was on its way to becoming the acceptable form across the artistic landscape. Turning that kind of general impetus into actual regulations for the competition proved difficult. The details of what constituted an acceptable vision of the future “conditions of socialism” were, predictably, not discussed.

Another Committee Member, Golovanov, added that the “works should be emotional, theatrical and ideological” adding later that “we need work on a modern theme” and that such work would be “difficult with collaborative work between composers and librettists.”<sup>7</sup> However, he was countered by another who insisted “a team involving the artist and director is necessary, otherwise it will be impossible to find new forms” quickly adding that “the old forms are unsatisfactory.”<sup>8</sup> The “old forms” here refer not to classical ballet technique, but to the structure of classical ballets. Classical ballets often juxtaposed pantomime and dance and this feature was of significant concern to those who wanted to move ballet in a more dramatic direction. In this case it was imagined that the task required an entire team of artists to achieve. The use of a choreography competition to generate such new work was not a new idea.

Christina Ezrahi’s briefly recounts a similar competition held by the Leningrad State Academic Theater of Opera and Ballet (the former Mariinsky) in 1928-29. Compared to the grandiose plans in connection with the notable anniversary of the revolution at the Bolshoi Theater a few years later, it was a much smaller scale and hoped to find a single work that could be performed on its stage. Despite the difference in scope, the intentions of the former Mariinsky’s competition was quite similar to that of the Bolshoi. Ezrahi describes them as seeking to “upgrad[e] elements of realistic drama in ballet, expressed through pantomime, and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



downgrading classical dance, especially any form of abstract choreography.”<sup>9</sup> The competition then, like at the Bolshoi in 1932, began in hopes of generating new works with an emphasis on theatricality. Ivan Sollertinsky’s fervent advocacy for dramatized ballet pushed that competition firmly away from classical ballet. Ezrahi’s use of the term “downgrading” once again shows the distress caused to some historians about the changes that took place in the Soviet ballet during this time period. Although drama was emphasized and classical technique downplayed, it is clear that the ballet schools in both Moscow and Leningrad continued their devotion to teaching and emphasizing classical technique and that classical dance was not being downgraded in the context of the Bolshoi Theater. In the end, the winner of the competition premiered in Leningrad the following year and proved to be a nearly immediate flop.<sup>10</sup>

Such contests were not unheard of in the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> Two years later, in 1934, the Department of Cattle and Dairy Sovkhozes put together a competition with regard to cattle housing. Lewis Siegelbaum’s study of this contest sheds particular light on the living conditions of the sovkhov workers who participated in the contest and into the material culture of the mid-1930s.<sup>12</sup> The striking thing about that contest was the documentary goldmine left behind by the correspondence with the contest winners, inquiring about aspects of their lives including family status, eating habits, and education levels.<sup>13</sup> The Bolshoi Theater’s competition was something quite different. If the contestants’ voices were heard, it was only through their submissions to the contest and even then those voices were harshly judged. Both competitions show, however, that even as the state consolidated itself as a distribution center – whether disseminating culture or

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<sup>9</sup> Ezrahi, 46.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> See: L.S Rogashevskaya, *Sotsialisticheskoe sorevnovanie v SSSR: Istoricheskie ocherki 1917-1970 gg.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977).

<sup>12</sup> See: Lewis Siegelbaum, “Dear Comrade, You Ask What We Need: Socialist paternalism and Soviet rural ‘notables’ in the mid-1930s” *Slavic Review* Vol. 57 No. 1 (Spring 1998), 107-132.

<sup>13</sup> Siegelbaum, “Dear Comrade, You Ask What We Need”, 108-109, 117.

consumer goods – it engaged with people in perhaps not entirely intuitive ways. Although I hesitate to draw too close a comparison between these two rather disparate contests, they both demonstrate that “the state under Stalin... was not a unitary entity, nor did ‘it’ exhibit much consistency about the criteria of behavior according to which punishments and rewards were distributed.”<sup>14</sup> As the distance between the states goals and rules for the competition on the one hand and the criteria by which the submitted work was judged on the other demonstrate precisely this kind variance in the state’s handling of the arts, among other things.

Classic ballets had continued to be performed at the Bolshoi Theater throughout the 1920s and 30s and in fact even during the time of the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Competition and the anti-formalism campaign that Ezrahi laments. Rather than being the expression of a single vision for the Ballet, the competitions were part of the ongoing debate about what the Ballet should become. While strong voices opposed to classical ballet emerged, they were ultimately one opinion among many. The internal debates within the Bolshoi Theater indicate that these voices were a part of the conversation, but did not control its direction entirely. The rules of the competition reflect this reality. Concern over formalism was certainly present, but the emphasis was on the ability to reform ballet rather than replace it with *drambalet* entirely. What became a two-year competition in ballet and opera was more than just an excuse to commemorate the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of October. It was to propel the Bolshoi Theater and the art form of ballet into a clearly socialist future.

### **Form and Content**

By the end of the June 1932, the commission created and distributed a small pamphlet that contained all the guidelines for the competition. Several rules stand out as the best attempt

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 130.

by the commission to clarify the relationship between choreography and technique in its vision for a new ballet. Foremost, it stipulated that the premise for new ballet should “overcome the bourgeois-idealistic ballet repertoire, corny (*slashchavii*) Romanticism and sentimentality while maintaining a critical mastery of all the valuable things of the classical ballet school.” At the same time, however, it insisted that the new work “completely abandon conventional gestures, replacing them with dramatic situations.”<sup>15</sup> The latter is typical of the anti-formalist sentiment of the late 1920s. Gone was the willingness to wait for an artistic process to transform ballet into a completely socialist art, as Riabtsev had advocated 1925. The former, however, betrays the ballet’s lingering aesthetic power.

Furthermore, another guideline insisted that “in the construction of the ballet maximum attention should be given to the dance, not allowing the prevalence of pantomime. Dance should be an organic element in the development of the action on stage and not a mechanical ‘sideshow.’”<sup>16</sup> This is of particular importance in understanding the role of anti-formalism in the context of ballet. Although anti-formalism has been understood by other scholars as singularly hostile to classical dance this suggests a more complex relationship characterized by a contradiction where ballet in particular was able retain much of its classical technique but was discouraged from displaying it too plainly on stage. The criticism is leveled at the structure of classical ballets that often had narrative scenes full of pantomime, followed by dances that often do not directly move the story along.

Anti-formalism is most associated with ballet for the campaign of 1936.<sup>17</sup> However, the rules of the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Competition show that the anti-formalist critique was already becoming influential by 1932. In the world of Soviet ballet, anti-formalism can be traced at least

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<sup>15</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 846 l. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> See, especially, Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 57-66.

back to 1928 with Sollertinsky's campaign for *drambalet* that emphasized the dramatic elements of classical ballet. As I have demonstrated, similar discourse had already begun to appear far earlier, although its character was not so clearly defined. While some ballets such as the avant-garde *Whirlwind*, or the previously mentioned *Iosif Prekrasnyi* by Kasian Goleizovsky were easier to attack using this criterion, pre-revolutionary classical ballets – *Swan Lake*, *Esmerelda*, and *Sleeping Beauty* among others – proved to be much more elusive targets.

Part of the anti-formalist critique was of dance in the absence of or separate from a socialist story, rather than the critique of form itself. In this way, classical ballet was at least minimally acceptable if it could be integrated “organically” with the story. This also helps to explain the reason that the Bolshoi's Ballet School was able to justify the continued teaching of classical ballet technique in the late 1920s and 30s even in the face of anti-formalist critique. Ballet itself was considered to be less of a problem than the way it was presented on stage. In the studios of the Ballet School, young students were free to tenaciously practice their *tendus* and *degages* without coming under fire for what would have been formalism had it been in front of an audience.

This also belies the aesthetic attitude towards ballet in the early 1930s. Anti-formalism, as it pertained to classical ballet, can be understood as a kind of anti-aestheticism or perhaps better yet anaestheticism.<sup>18</sup> The tension between the desire to leave formalism behind and the persisting allure of classical ballet – both in technique and choreography – suggest that ballet carried substantial aesthetic power and influence that was not easily dismissed even in the face of ideological criticism. In some cases even the willingness to engage in an aesthetic critique became condemned as formalism. However, in doing so those who were most forcefully against

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<sup>18</sup> I use the term anaesthetic here as a way of indicating first of all this is historically distinct from anti-aesthetic position taken by many beginning in the 1960s and often associated with post-modernism and second because I think it better describes the character of the rejection of an aesthetic critique - one of disengagement.

classical ballet were robbing themselves of an avenue of attack. The anti-aesthetic movement in the arts is quite far afield from the 1930s Soviet Union. However, Michael Kelly's recent critique of the movement is instructive in this case. He states plainly that "to reject aesthetics by adopting the anti-aesthetic stance is to weaken or undermine art that aspires to be critical, which is clearly self-defeating as long as a major rationale for this stance is critique."<sup>19</sup> So it was for the anti-formalist critique of ballet.

Furthermore, much of the difficulty in the deliberate search for a new direction for ballet by early 1930s was caused by the fact that cultural and political elites deemed classical ballet to be aesthetically *beautiful* but not aesthetically *good*. The beautiful, according to Kant, "pleases us" as a "disinterested and free delight."<sup>20</sup> The cultural elite certainly still held ballet to be beautiful. However, the good requires further consideration. Something cannot be aesthetically *good* if "it is mediately displeasing, i.e, to reason that looks ahead to consequences."<sup>21</sup> In the context of socialist realism, the "consequences" of classical ballet and its aristocratic origins and stories gave them pause. Given that both the beautiful and the good tend towards being understood as universal, the contradiction between the two was at the heart of trying to reconcile classical ballet with revolutionary ideals.

Despite the temptation towards universality associated with aesthetic beauty, it is always culturally and, importantly, socially contingent. Aesthetic sense, according to Pierre Bourdieu, is a "distinctive expression of a privileged position in a social space whose distinctive value is objectively established in its relationship to expressions generated from different conditions."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Kelly, *A Hunger For Aesthetics: Enacting the Demands of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), xix.

<sup>20</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. Nicholas Walker. Trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 41.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 56.

Ballet was firmly established as high art in Imperial Russia and was historically associated with the cultural elite. As demonstrated throughout this study, it retained both of these features across the revolutionary divide. Following from this, Bourdieu claimed that “aesthetic stances... are opportunities to experience or assert one’s position in social space, as a rank to be upheld or a distance to be kept.”<sup>23</sup> Among the cultural elite in the early Soviet Union, ballet remained an important part of their cultural, and therefore social distinction. This distinction was only amplified by the politics of the 1930s.

Sheila Fitzpatrick writes of the “glaring contradiction” between revolutionary values of the 1920s and the bourgeois values of the emerging 1930s elite.<sup>24</sup> But the persistence of ballet in the 1920s through to the early 1930s suggests that the disconnect between the two eras is not so clear. Ballet’s aesthetic power in the early Soviet Union lay in the fact that it retained its aesthetic beauty in the minds of the cultural and often political elite. In a sense it had never stopped being an element of social distinction. It was, however, very difficult to mount a credible, successful argument entirely against ballet’s aesthetic in spite of its clearly aristocratic character even in a political atmosphere that was increasingly ripe to denounce it.

The same critical perspectives and artistic styles that emerged in the context of other arts, socialist realism among them, also applied to the ballet. But ballet, notably unlike theater to which it was most commonly compared, carried with it a specific and unique history that made it difficult to critique using the same methods. It was easy enough to critique classical ballet for being conceptually or politically unacceptable. The fact that it remained understood as beautiful complicated the discussion. Even among those who wanted ballet changed drastically, the line of criticism stemmed from the fact that classical ballet was not understandable and relatable to the

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<sup>23</sup> Bourdieu, 57.

<sup>24</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 216.

masses or that the themes of the ballets were in discord with socialism. Therefore, common in the discussion of ballet surrounding the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Competition were calls for a logical or scientific rather than aesthetic reconfiguration of ballet.

Despite the apparent desire to finally transcend the imperial origins of the ballet, the committee simply could not help but think that classical ballet remained a valuable art form. It was this attitude, held by those ultimately in charge of the Bolshoi and the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Competition that continued to allow classical ballet to remain front and center at the Bolshoi Theater during the early 1930s and influenced the guidelines for the competition. Even in this moment infused with revolutionary rhetoric, classical ballet continued to be respected and understood to be an important part of what ballet would become under socialism.

Despite some remarks on form, the guidelines for the competition were much more concerned with the content of the work produced. The competition guidelines suggested nine possible themes that entrants could consider for the plot of their submissions. The themes, perhaps more than any other feature of the competition, reflected the interests of the state and the desire of cultural institutions like the ballet to produce socialist content. Among those listed were “the socialist industrialization of the country,” “socialist labor,” “collectivization,” and the now-*cringe-inducing* “construction of socialism in the backward countries of the East.”<sup>25</sup> While only two somewhat vague and contradictory guidelines were given for the form of submissions, the commission offered no less than nine possible themes and still further subthemes. In contrast to the difficulty in plotting a direction for ballet as an art form, recommending ideas for the thematic content of the submission was rather simple.

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<sup>25</sup> RGALI f. 648 op 2. d. 846 l. 2.

## **The Dispute over Ballet**

After laying out the basics for the competition it was plainly obvious that the fundamental questions that arose during the initial conversation had not been answered. The most basic and most important among them was – what should the path of the ballet be? A serious discussion was necessary to lay down the expectations of the competition and just such a discussion took place on 19 April 1932. The resulting meeting produced one of the most valuable documents available for understanding the way the intellectual debate over the direction of ballet actually influenced how the Bolshoi proceeded in trying to generate new works from the competition. The conversation was both in depth and diverse in opinion. The conversation brought together representatives of Narkompros, the Bolshoi Theater and *Komsomolskaia Pravda* in order to discuss how the competition should be used to influence the path of ballet. Although there was rough consensus that formalism was to be discouraged in favor of ballet based on “real life,” the details of that reality remained openly in dispute. In the end many questions remained unanswered about the direction of ballet at the Bolshoi. Nonetheless, building on the general ideas of the competition, participants discussed the way to achieve their broad goals in the specific context of ballet. In the process they left behind an important record of the thought processes that informed their decisions about the direction of the competition.

Pavel Novitsky, the Deputy Chief of the theater section of Narkompros and the individual in charge of the meeting, opened the discussion with what amounted to a tirade against the state of ballet in the Soviet Union. “When they talk about ballet” he began “no one talks about worldview, no one talks about creative method, no one talks about the content, but they talk about ballet technique, they talk only about the shape and tone of the pirouette, the



beautiful line *en pointe*.”<sup>26</sup> To him then, it is clear that the problem with ballet was a problem of content or that the art focused too extensively on form rather than message. He clearly recognized that ballet’s aesthetic beauty was still not seriously questioned. However, note that his critique is aimed not at the technique itself, but the attitude towards it. He is more concerned about the voices who still emphasized classical ballet than with the classical ballet itself. Of course, by 1932 his assertion that there was no talk of worldview or content was demonstrably false. The discussions of ballet that had occurred throughout the 1920s as well as the propensity already within the Bolshoi for performing very theatric classical work all suggest that by the time of the ballet competition formalism was already under fire. Regardless of the accuracy of the statement, the meaning is clear. For ballet to be a socialist art form, it had to eschew formalism and embrace a method of content and message delivery as its chief purpose.

Ballet, Novitsky suggested, was a special case because “ballet theater, more than any other form of theater preserves tradition, insularity, a well known cast of characters, conservatism and routine, the greatest inveteracy, and conservatism of form and systems.”<sup>27</sup> It required, then an entirely different answer than other forms of theater for ensuring the production of socialist content. The practical problem from his standpoint was that those who had tried to answer these questions in the past were not sufficiently socialist in character and were too embedded in the formalist tradition. “We have no work” he asserted “except for some statements by formalist critics and aesthetes.” This observation is closer to the truth. The world of ballet was still overwhelmingly dominated by those who were trained in and valued classical ballet and its aesthetics. As a result, those working within the Bolshoi and elsewhere were devoted to finding

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<sup>26</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 842 l. 1.

<sup>27</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 842 l. 2.

an answer to the ballet question that still focused on classical ballet. Instead, he argued that the reform of ballet had to start with a “modern scientific assessment of ballet.”<sup>28</sup>

This line of thought was common and critical to understanding the paradoxical way an attitude that was logically hostile to classical ballet and at the same time protected it from direct attack. The desire for this direction existed alongside the propensity for the cultural elite to still perceive ballet as beautiful. Novitsky’s rhetoric explicitly traces the problem back to the critics, who still privileged aesthetics in the first place, rather than the aesthetics of ballet itself. The room agreed with the necessity of a scientific approach, but in fact most of those in the room were as steeped in, if not as outspoken in favor of, classical ballet aesthetics. If there was a group that was best capable of analyzing that aesthetic in a rational manner it was likely assembled there. But by insisting on a “modern scientific assessment” a harsh aesthetic critique was avoided.

Emmanuel Kaminka was quick to add that ballet is a very specific type of dance. The discussion should therefore not be about dance per se. He argued that “we should be talking at present about not dance in general, but about ballet theater and about the art of ballet.”<sup>29</sup> This attitude, repeated by other members of the discussion, further helps to explain the relative lack of debate about movement, ballet technique and aesthetics. Although focusing on movement was dismissed as formalism this statement also makes it clear that movement itself was not in principle the main problem. Instead they purposefully chose not to focus on “dance in general.” But an appeal to “ballet theater” was practically just as vague. What, then, should this dispute have focused on according to Kaminka?

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<sup>28</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 842 l. 3.

<sup>29</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 842 l. 4.

Ballet, he goes as far to say, “is not the art of dance, but the art of dramatic action carried out by music and the art of expressive movement.”<sup>30</sup> By current standards the distinction between “dance” and “dramatic action” characterized by “expressive movement” seems contrived. But in the context of the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of October competition it was this kind of difference that was perceived to be important for discovering a socialist path for the ballet. One can see the influence of *drambalet* in these statements that minimize the importance of “dance.” However, they also suggest that a more complex notion of dance existed in the 1930s. Formalism was a problem because it subordinated the importance socialist content to a particular form. This moderate opinion actually suggests that ballet could be molded to fit new ideas without drastic changes. Absent by now was the idea a purely socialist form that could entirely replace classical ballet. Instead it needed to be reframed and reimagined for socialism.

And so it was with the other arts in the 1930s. Socialist Realism was becoming the dominant form and *drambalet* was, essentially, socialist realism applied to the ballet. Kaminka says that finally, “when we talk about ballet, we talk about a system of emotional, dance and dramatic images which reflect objective reality.”<sup>31</sup> This claim was meant to be one of the significant ideological arguments about the direction for the ballet and the other participants echo it. On the other hand, little attention is given to defining what such a ballet might look like in practice. In much the same way that Eisenstein’s classic studies in montage like *October* or Vertov’s *Man with the Movie Camera* became criticized as formalism, so did Goleizovsky’s ballets.<sup>32</sup> The aforementioned works were created with genuine enthusiasm for building socialism and all contain a distinctly revolutionary message, but were no longer deemed

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Vertov even says in describing his notion of documentary film making that capturing objective reality is a specific goal that inspired his work and his methodology for montage. See: Annette Michelson ed., *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, trans. Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 67.

applicable to the building of socialist art. Those artists too, had appealed to the concept of objective reality and genuinely thought their work was a reflection of it. Kaminka's appeal sounds familiar to myriad other voices that used the language of science to call for change in the arts. But the persistence of montage in Eisenstein's films just as the persistence in the idea that "dance" was distinct from ballet theater suggests that not all interest in form was simply determined to be formalism and forbidden.

Despite the rejection of formalism, Isadora Duncan was even brought up by one of the discussants. Duncan's rejection of classical ballet gave birth to modern dance and her revolutionary attitude drove her to the Soviet Union in 1921. Kaminka summarizes her ideas that "to dance, music is not necessary. To dance one needs life and a relationship with it."<sup>33</sup> Everyone agreed that ballet needed to be made closer to life and more scrutable to Soviet audiences. Indeed, Duncan's words can certainly be used to argue that dance must have a relationship to real life, but there is also no doubt that her work was by the standards of most participants in the discussion, also formalist. Her invocation in this discussion, nonetheless, shows the disorder and unclear nature of the debate over ballet that had begun in earnest about a decade prior. The borders between interest in form and formalism were unclear, but the difference was not entirely lost. Technical training and even abstract dance were both tolerable, but the line – blurry as it was – was drawn if ballet became "the absolute dominion of pure technique and formalist art"<sup>34</sup>

Another participant chimed in to agree that "when we talk about the reformation of ballet theater... is it not necessary to start with technique, not with technical methods, and not with those technical systems, which traditionally were established in ballet theater, but it is necessary to start with the formation of images, therefore, it is necessary to start with world view and that

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<sup>33</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 842 l. 6.

<sup>34</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 842 l. 8.

means primarily to start with *themes*.”<sup>35</sup> Taken together, this exchange suggests that the debate did not form around the idea that balletic movement was inherently aristocratic or even bourgeois. On the one hand, the concern was that the themes of the ballet be appropriate for the socialist epoch at hand. On the other, formalism was *categorically* dismissed as bourgeois art. Therefore, it was not classical ballet technique *per se* that was the focus of critique. Instead it was the fact that ballets lacked clear socialist messages and instead seemed to favor an interest in form itself, regardless of what that form actually was or where it came from. It was precisely this kind of talking point that helped to insulate classical ballet technique from harsh criticism. With attention explicitly turned away from the “technical methods” of ballet, it was able to continue on as it previously had.

In response, Malinovskaia again compared the predicament in ballet to that of the theater. “The system of proletarian theater,” she added “is being created and formed in the process of ideological struggle.”<sup>36</sup> This emphasis on struggle and process is also important to understanding the overall purpose of the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Competition. While the dispute over the direction of ballet did occasionally verge on the theoretical, the fact that the discussion was tied to the competition itself was important. Malinovskaia had not lost sight of this fact. In other words, the path of ballet could not be entirely decided by the participants at the meeting regardless of their expertise or power. It demanded artists who were involved in that struggle. The competition was meant as a way to engage artists in taking part in the struggle, all in the name of celebrating the Revolution that had initiated it. This is also one of the chief reasons why the Ballet School at the Bolshoi Theater was able to continue to teach classical ballet to its students. This logic insisted that the way to teach proletarian ballet dancers was not by dismantling their education in

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<sup>35</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 842 l. 7. Emphasis mine.

<sup>36</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 842 l. 13.

classical ballet and teaching a different kind of technique, but through rigorous training in Marxism alongside their traditional dance classes. Only through their participation in that fight would they be able to truly create socialist or proletarian ballet analogous to the proletarian theater had emerged after the revolution.

When the conversation did finally, briefly, turn to technique it revealed that although it was possible to identify the problems with classical ballet technique, the criticism met fairly firm opposition from those most closely identified with the ballet. The criticism was short, to the point, and as one might expect. “Classical ballet,” one of those present argued, was a “residual fragment of feudal society.”<sup>37</sup> But Mikhail Gabovich, principal dancer for the Bolshoi Ballet since 1924, asked them all to consider “whether or not the art form is really inherently bourgeois and aristocratic.”<sup>38</sup> He even went on to admit that it had a feudal past and that it had largely been preserved by the Bolshoi, but that because the artists were so steeped in its culture, what was causing “protest” among others “has no effect on us.”<sup>39</sup> So among those who were most responsible for the actual work at the Bolshoi ballet’s “feudal” origin was less important. He felt their work in the Bolshoi showed that classical ballet may have been feudal in the past, but was necessarily so by nature. In fact, his position was more than simply neutral towards classical ballet. He was convinced that “everything [was] possible through the classical school. It [was] a weapon to create a new ballet.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, he understood the acceptable language for talking about it. He prefaced his entire statement by stating that dance “is derived from the labor and production of movements of people,” thus placing ballet within a socially acceptable framework

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<sup>37</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 842 l. 51

<sup>38</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 842 l. 20

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 842 l. 24. Here Gabovich is talking about the “classical school” in the general sense of classical ballet technique, *not* the Ballet School at the Bolshoi Theater.

by linking it to the people.<sup>41</sup> From his perspective, then, it was not necessary to change from classical ballet but to determine the best way to harness it as a socialist art form. Malinovskaia echoed his general point, saying that “Goleizovsky had dancers *en pointe*, but it was not feudal,” even adding in no uncertain terms that ballet was “a great art.”<sup>42</sup> Those most closely associated with the Bolshoi itself stood up most forcefully in defense of ballet. Importantly, their voices were successful in defending classical ballet and deflecting criticism of it. Furthermore, they were able to avoid being labeled formalist because they were perfectly willing to admit that ballet needed reform on some fronts and to engage in the discussion about thematic changes. Their willingness to engage in that criticism helped lend credibility to their defense of classical ballet’s aesthetic.

By now, however, the direction of the conversation had gone somewhat far afield. The abstract discussion about the general direction of ballet did not get the committee any further towards making concrete decisions about the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Competition, and this point was not lost in midst of the spirited discussion. I. I. Bachelis, representing *Komsomolskaia Pravda* at the meeting, insisted on bringing the conversation back towards the competition ahead of them. “This is one of the moments through which we can reconstruct ballet,” he said focusing the group back to the competition at hand, “This is the moment for the dramatization of ballet.”<sup>43</sup> And so the conversation had neared its end and shifted once again back to the idea of dramatization. It is no accident that the representative of the newspaper that had been included from the beginning as a way of ensuring the “social character” of the competition was also the one who desired to steer the conversation back towards dramatization. Those less steeped in the world of classical ballet cared less about relatively abstract discussions of technique and more

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 842 l. 29.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

about the final product. This element also played an important role in the way that the desire to move towards dramatization actually helped to shield classical ballet technique from damning criticism.

By the end of the conversation, little had been decided in practice. However, the dispute over the path of ballet does reveal the mindset of those running the competition and how they viewed its role for directing that path. First, they wanted to focus on the dramatization of ballet around topics of real life with “real” people, not the lofty figures that appear in many classical ballets. Second, it reveals that there was significant disagreement even within those running the competition about classical ballet itself. Classical ballet had its explicit defenders who stood up for its value, most clearly Malinovskaia and Gabovich. Those who criticized it took two main tacks. First, that its feudal origins and therefore themes and characters were unacceptable, a point the former group did not take strong issue with. Second, that it was a *focus on form*, much more than the form itself, that presented a problem. This argument was the harder hitting of the two in the end and was part of the force driving ballet towards *drambalet*. However, it did not attack classical ballet at its core, at its technique.

This challenges the notion that ballet was in critical danger because of its origins as an aristocratic art form. By the early 1930s, the ballets of the mid-1920s, with their explicitly socialist stories and revolutionary intent, were under just as much scrutiny as the pre-revolutionary ballets of the previous century. In fact, Goleizovsky’s work often faced far harsher criticism and censorship than classical ballets created in the nineteenth century. But his work was dismissed in the same wave of the hand as that of Isadora Duncan, who was certainly not practicing classical ballet.<sup>44</sup> In this way the anti-formalists took an anaesthetic stance. The

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<sup>44</sup> Novitsky, in fact, does dismiss both of them in his statements that closed the meeting. RGALI f. 648. op. 2. d. 842 l. 55.



position amounted to denying the aesthetic a place in ballet in a way of sidestepping the contradiction that had arisen in its critique. But their denial did not make aesthetics disappear. Instead their critical sleight of hand left the participants of the competition in a precarious position. The guidelines for form were vague and self-contradictory, much like the dispute itself had been. Like those at the Bolshoi, the participants would fall back on what they knew.

The debates taking place from the pages of *Zhizn' Isskustva* to the halls of the Bolshoi Theater focused overwhelmingly on choreography.<sup>45</sup> The assumption made by Sollertinsky in his campaign for *drambalet* was the same as those made by those who favored a less drastic change. The key to reforming ballet lay in the ability of choreographers to create a new kind of work. Although the emphasis on drama, pantomime and socialist themes all seemed to implicitly understand that classical ballet technique posed a problem, they paid little attention to actually reforming the technique itself all the way into the 1930s.

The relationship between choreography and technique also belies the assumed differences between choreographer and ballet dancer. Although the most famous dancers received both high praise and high salaries, the dancers were ultimately a tool for the choreographer. This relationship was hardly unique to the early Soviet period. However, despite the efforts of dancers during the 1920s to assert themselves through their labor union, their subservient position within the Bolshoi changed only little in practice. They were understood to be cogs in the Bolshoi's balletic machine. As a result, an emphasis on choreographers as the chief artists gave shelter to classical ballet technique and to the dancers perfecting it.

The competition commission held its spirited debates to develop the rules and regulations that would ultimately express its vision for a future Soviet ballet. But the students in the ballet school continued to hone the same skills their predecessors had for decades. By 1932, the Ballet

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<sup>45</sup> The debates published in the art journal *Zhizn' Isskustva* appeared in 1928 and 1929.

School was in its twelfth year since being reopened by then Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky, who had personally written the new charter for the school in 1920. With the school's program lasting nine years, only two classes had graduated from the school and begun to filter into the Bolshoi's ranks.<sup>46</sup> Their nearly decade long schooling took the young dancers from dance studio to classroom in what was designed to be an education both in classical technique and Marxist ideology. This strategy, they hoped, would create a generation of ballet dancers both taught in and inspired by Marxism, enabling them, perhaps, to resolve the lingering contradictions in ballet.

### **The Competition Drags On**

On 27 April 1933, just three days before the original deadline for submissions to the competition on operas and ballet, it was apparent that many participants would not meet the deadline. A small meeting was convened to discuss the state of the competition and the best course to allow the competition to achieve its original goals. The commission estimated that if it extended the competition through the summer it would receive roughly 30 operas and ballets in total. It did not mention the number of submissions that would have been ready by the proposed due date, but their words suggest that numbers were disappointing, if not grim. What is clear is that the works in progress would not have met the criteria listed in the rules for the competition and would not have been eligible.<sup>47</sup> At the time it was merely a setback, but it was the first sign that the great theoretical effort that had gone into the plan for the competition might not be paying off.

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<sup>46</sup> After the new charter was written and the school reopened they accepted older students into the program and welcomed back some students who had studied prior to its closing after the revolution. As a result, students had been finishing the Ballet School's program since the early 1920s. But only two classes of students had been through the entire post-revolution program from the beginning by 1932.

<sup>47</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 846 ll. 78-82.

The deadline was moved to 1 November to allow for more complete submissions. The consequences of this were two fold. First, it did allow for more complete submissions and the estimated number was in fact close to accurate. The total in the end numbered thirty-six including both ballets and operas. But it also meant that the judging of the competition would drag well into 1934. The so-called 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of October competition was not going to be finished until nearly the 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In addition to a disappointing number of works, the revolutionary spirit of the competition was somewhat diminished by its delay. Nevertheless, the competition dragged on through the summer months of 1933 and into the autumn, as submissions began to come in.

Even with the extended deadline precious few submissions met the commission's requirements. When November deadline rolled around, only three "complete" ballets had been submitted. Several more were considered incomplete but were judged in a separate category that did not receive prizes. This paled in comparison to the thirty-three operas that were presented to the jury. However, neither the operas nor ballets impressed them. The lack of quality was so stark that the prizes were restructured at the last moment, and not a single opera or ballet was awarded a first prize!<sup>48</sup>

Originally planned as separate categories with separate awards, operas and ballets were now moved into the same category. First prize, as mentioned, was left vacant. The new prize of 5,000 rubles went unclaimed. Second prize was awarded to the libretto for the Opera "Arman," receiving 3,000 rubles. Two ballets were among the several works jointly awarded third prize and were each awarded a sum of 2,000 rubles. The prizes awarded for these works were substantially lower than those originally announced. It is also unclear how or when the commission decided to allow for multiple entries to be awarded at a single prize tier. Judging

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<sup>48</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 860 ll. 41-42.

from its lack of enthusiasm with the submitted work, it may simply have been due to the opinion that the submitted work simply did not deserve the previously advertised prizes. The commission did make it clear that “none of the submitted librettos fully [met] the conditions of the competition.”<sup>49</sup>

A single jury presided over the entire competition across ballet, opera and symphony. Ballet, like the others, had its own sub-jury of experts that was to evaluate the submissions in its area of competency. The existence of the sub-commissions is in itself notable. With experts in each of the arts placed on the commission, it was understood that those best equipped to judge submissions were professionals in the arts themselves. Expertise was still a valued characteristic in the arts. It indicates the still rarified air in which the arts created and performed at the Bolshoi Theater existed. Ballet may have needed a new direction, but trust was still placed in those most thoroughly trained in its conservative form. In ballet, expertise was still equivalent to mastery of classical ballet.

The Expert Commission for ballet featured, among several other experts in theater more generally who were there to judge elements like set design, Mikhail Gabovich and Igor Moiseev.<sup>50</sup> Both were highly trained classical ballet dancers and it is no doubt that their status played an important role in that way that they judged the submissions in ballet. By the time Moiseev and the others turned their attention to the paltry number of ballets that were before them in November 1933, a year and a half had passed since the dispute over ballet had taken place. Among the experts placed on the commission, only Gabovich had been present for the discussion and stood as a firm defender of classical ballet. In the face of submissions from

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<sup>49</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 860 l. 41.

<sup>50</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 741 “Expert Commission for Librettos under the Jury”

unproven choreographers and librettists they judged their work by the standard so those professional trained in classical ballet, whose aesthetic supremacy remained unquestioned.

*From the Renaissance (Iz epokhi vozrozhdeniia)* by Alexei Ermalaev was the first of the two ballets receiving the third prize. The ballet is set in the Italian Renaissance, which was deemed an “advantage” because of the “nature of dance” associated with the era. Specific comments as to what that nature actually entailed were not forthcoming. The commission did, however, laud Ermalaev’s ability to create a dance with “an interesting fiction and plausible fantasy” and noted further that the “aspiring librettist has undoubted talent.”<sup>51</sup> Although the details are unfortunately omitted the Commission was consistent with its insistence that ballet reflect real life by pointing out the seeming plausibility of its content.

In the face of the call for new themes in the ballet it is striking that the expert commission had a relatively positive response to *From the Renaissance*. The Expert Commission was, it seems, judging both the aesthetic beauty and aesthetic goodness of the ballet and perhaps even emphasizing its beauty in this case. Ermalaev’s skill created a ballet that was satisfactory in the former category, but less so in the later. This contradiction was undoubtedly one of the reasons the ballet did not receive a higher prize and is also reflective of the contradiction that existed within ballet as a whole. Ermalaev was himself, like those judging his work, trained in classical ballet and this was reflected in the choice of his theme. Furthermore, this is the first and best example of the expert commission judging ballets with classics as the benchmark. It privileged classical ballet that was executed at a professional level of proficiency. Alexei Ermalaev, already by this point an accomplished classical dancer, was well positioned to create the kind of ballet

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<sup>51</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 860 l. 41. Ermalaev was born in 1910 and was therefore only 22 at the time the competition was announced. Although the brightest spots of his career in ballet stretch beyond the scope of this study, he did become a very successful choreographer in Belarus in the 1940s and 50s. It is interesting to see the experts recognized his talent for creating ballets at this relatively young age when it was rare to see a ballet dancer ascend to that level.

the judges were predisposed to like. Despite the volume and ideological character of critiques from Narkompros and its overtures towards moving past classical ballet, in practice those with the most ability to influence the direction of the ballet in the competition were also those most likely to appreciate classical ballet. The competition did help to identify a talented young choreographer in Ermalaev, but his work was not the kind of inspired beacon that would lead the way to a socialist ballet that the competition committee had hoped to create.

*Naked King*, an adaptation of the classic Hans Christian Anderson fairytale “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” won an additional third prize. The commission was impressed with two particular aspects of the work. First, it approved of the use of satire because it felt that satire was “rare in the ballet repertoire” and could therefore be a useful addition to the art form. The use of satire to criticize royalty certainly seems like a reasonable topic for a ballet, although it did fall outside the guidelines in the original rules. It is also particularly notable because the ballet was certainly not following the trend towards socialist realism. Finally, the prize does lend some credence to the idea that classical ballet with an appropriate theme could be made that was compatible with socialist ideology. On the other hand, the focus on irony suggests that this ballet was not going to move the art form forward in the direction that the Competition Committee had originally hoped. Furthermore, the content itself was deemed interesting “for an adult audience and also for an audience of children.”<sup>52</sup> The second point was particularly emphasized. In the ideological environment laid out in the rules, finding content that was enjoyable to children was not paramount, but this was considered appropriate nonetheless. The potential for a ballet that appealed to children and had an acceptable theme was intriguing to the judges. Despite the fact that it, like the others, did not conform to the competition guidelines it was an interesting and compelling enough submission to receive one of the few awards that were actually given out.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

Beyond those that received awards, several operas and ballets were awarded what might be called an honorable mention by being listed after those works receiving official honors as having “some positive qualities.”<sup>53</sup> Three ballets were mentioned in this group. These works and the jury’s evaluation of them suggest that coming up with a truly new direction for ballet continued to prove difficult and that librettists and choreographers continued to be entrenched in the traditions of classical ballet. The list in total was *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Spartacus* and *The Story of Carmen*.<sup>54</sup> Like those that received a prize, the notes given critiqued the music and librettos (where applicable), their artistic quality, and the degree to which they served the political purposes of the competition. The notes of these ballets also clearly display one of the problems with the competition. The Bolshoi Theater, it almost certainly goes without saying, remained one of the most prestigious cultural institutions in the Soviet Union. Many of the submissions were simply not up to the standard associated with that institution. Ballet’s high degree of technical difficulty in both dance and choreography, alongside its still high aesthetic value meant that amateurish, incomplete work was simply unacceptable.

*Till Eulenspiegel* was based on the German folk character of the same name. The jury, who remarked that it created a “favorable expression” and was “comfortable for dancing,” was impressed by the music. It quickly added that at least one full act should be submitted before it could be fully reviewed.<sup>55</sup> This experience typified the judging process. The jury was faced with fragments and incomplete submissions. In this context, the fact that its members were interested in hearing a full act at all was a sign of their approval, rather than an expression of skepticism.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> A rendition of the opera *Carmen* was also submitted to the competition. On early lists the ballet also appears as simply “Carmen” and was changed near the end.

<sup>55</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 860 l. 18.

The libretto, however, was not acceptable. The narrative was unclear and the dance was considered “unconvincing.” Furthermore, the use of pantomime in the ballet did not impress the jury, who stated that the “author abuses pantomime” and criticized its “predominance” in the dance.<sup>56</sup> This is a striking observation because supporters of *drambalet* often promoted the use of pantomime as an alternative to formalism. Despite the larger controversy over ballet, this comment alone stands as further evidence that when it came to the competition, the decisions were being influenced and made by those who still privileged classical ballet. Classical ballet, of course, also incorporated pantomime and the criticism levied here is that the artist’s implementation of it was amateurish and poor. Finally, the jury makes reference to the novel by Charles Coster on which the ballet is based. Coster’s version of the story turned the traditional folk character into a makeshift revolutionary.<sup>57</sup> The jury believed the theme of “social justice” from the novel should have been more prominent in the libretto. Nonetheless, the quality of the music led them to conclude that that ballet had potential if the libretto were to receive substantial changes.<sup>58</sup>

*Spartacus* had very few redeeming qualities. The jury approved in principle of the idea of creating a ballet based on the events of the famous slave revolt. In practice, the execution left the ballet wanting. The judges lamented, “the author does not have enough skill or talent to cope with such a difficult task.”<sup>59</sup> This again speaks to the amateurish nature of the competition and the difficulty the judges had in evaluating work that did not meet the Bolshoi’s incredibly high standards. The debate about the relationship between form and content that had been discussed at length more than a year before during the planning stages of the competition arose again in the

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<sup>56</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 860 l. 18.

<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, a film based on this folk story was made in the Soviet Union in 1977. *Legenda o Tile*, directed by Aleksandr Alov and Vladimir Naumov (Moscow: Mosfilm, 1977), Film.

<sup>58</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 860 l. 18.

<sup>59</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 860 l. 20.



judging of this work. The competition was supposed to once and for all inspire the creation of a new socialist ballet. *Spartacus*, it appears was too formulaic and classical. “In respect to choreography” the jury noted the dance seemed “designed from templates.” Furthermore, they criticized the librettist for “adapting the content to the structure of old ballets.”<sup>60</sup> The guidelines of the competition had explicitly stated that the dance should not be a “mechanical sideshow.” This remained one of the chief concerns about classical ballets. However, avoiding this shortcoming was difficult enough for professionals, let alone V. Yana, the unknown librettist responsible for *Spartacus*. Ironically those most equipped with the skills necessary to create a new direction for ballet, one that helped to resolve the tension between the two aesthetic judgments, were also the artists most steeped in its classical tradition.

This was a surprising judgment of the ballet given the fact that the ballet went on to receive an honorable mention when the prizes were finally awarded. *Spartacus* was initially judged in late 1933, early in the evaluation process. By the time the final prizes were awarded, it is clear that the standards had changed due to the practical problem of the mediocrity of the submissions. By the time the competition reached its conclusion, the jury seemed content to promote good ideas for ballets as much as good ballets themselves.<sup>61</sup> *Spartacus* achieved that goal with the artist’s astute choice of subject matter that appealed to the judges and was enough to be notable. It was not, however, a story of the Russian Revolution, the struggles of modern life and the working class or the victory of socialism. In fact, the submitted ballets did not seem to

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> A ballet based on the story of Spartacus of the same name by Aram Khachaturian premiered at the Leningrad Theater of Opera and Ballet (the then name of the Mariinsky Theater) on December 27, 1956. This libretto served as the basis of the ballet that was eventually performed there! It is interesting that this idea was put forth at the competition and was later used to create what became a very successful ballet that has been performed at the Mariinsky as recently as 2010 and in 2014 in New York. The environment of the 15th anniversary competition was, perhaps, the wrong historical moment for the ballet.

address these subjects at all despite the fact that the suggested themes were clearly articulated in the rules of the competition.

*The Story of Carmen* was considered the best of the three non-prize winning submissions during judging. The notes were, however, brief. The jury praised the “simplicity and efficiency” of the libretto and concluded that the ballet would “greatly benefit from competent directorial guidance.” Even the small amount of music was considered acceptable despite being a bit “samey” (*odnoobrazie*).<sup>62</sup> Despite the favorable response to the submission, the ballet did not receive a prize at the end. This is most likely due to the fact that the submission did not meet the requirements of the competition and was, as so many others, incomplete. The notes from the jury mention that only a summary of the libretto was submitted and was accompanied by only “fragments” of the score. This ballet then, properly captures the failings of the competition at large. Well-intentioned and sometimes undoubtedly good ideas combined with poor execution.

The judging of these three ballets reflects the contradictions of ballet in the early 1930s and the difficult of realizing the lofty ideas set out for it as socialist art. Despite clear instructions and what became a year and a half to complete their submissions, the ballets were, regardless of one’s assessment of music, dance or story, mostly incomplete. Ballet was hostile to amateurs to begin with and the Bolshoi an even more uninviting environment for those with less than stellar skills and training. It is not surprising that given the high degree of training needed to create an entire ballet, to say nothing of the time and effort, the entrants were not able to create complete, satisfactory submissions. Although the entrants were artists by trade, the monetary reward was going to come, at best, at the end of their process and only if their ballet placed highly. In the meantime, the artists had to use their own time to work on what was supposed to produce a professional quality work. Ballet, unlike other art forms like theater that gave rise to enthusiastic

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<sup>62</sup> RGALI f. 648 op. 2 d. 860 l. 22.

amateur arts after the revolution, was simply not accessible to amateur artists.<sup>63</sup> This fact is reflected in the quality of the work submitted to the competition, even among the “winners.”

### Conclusion

The celebratory, energetic attitude of the competition’s origin stood in stark contrast to the disappointment of its failure to produce any memorable submissions. By the time the inadequate works were received and finally judged, the competition had stretched over the course of two years. The final decisions were made and prizes awarded on May 9, 1934.<sup>64</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of October had long since passed and the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress taken place just months earlier. In August, the First Congress of Soviet Writers would be a watershed for the arts in the Soviet Union due to its official adoption of socialist realism. The competition revealed that although the same ideas that led to the prominence of socialist realism was also gaining traction within ballet, how those ideas could be applied in its case was still unclear. Regardless, it was not a one-way street.

The competition reveals that classical ballet and its advocates were still strong in the “dispute” over the path of ballet. Their influence came not just from their numbers or the logical strength of their arguments, but from the aesthetic beauty still attributed to classical ballet itself. The anaesthetic position against them had the political might to push ballet towards dramatization, but it lacked the cultural weight to overturn classical ballet’s place in Russian high culture or to attack it as its core. The clash between these two positions was not one that can be characterized by attempts at political control and artistic dissidence. Instead, by the early to mid-1930s, the lines were drawn much more along line of professionalism and *kul’turnost’*, the

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<sup>63</sup> For a discussion of amateur theater after the revolution, refer to the aforementioned Lynn Mally, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the Soviet State 1917-1938* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

<sup>64</sup> RGALI f. 648 Op. 2 d. 860 p. 41.

Soviet conception of “culturedness” that encompassed everything from physical fitness and labor discipline to literature and, it would seem, ballet.<sup>65</sup> The “social character” that the participation of *Komsomolskaia Pravda* was supposed to infuse in the competition in the end amounted to its representatives’ presence at a few meetings and a handful of blurbs published in the newspaper.

Despite changes in what might be called the aesthetic periphery of ballet – the influence of dramatic elements and the conflict over formalism in choreography – the aesthetic core of ballet, its technique, was largely conserved. In this sense Gabovich was right. Classical ballet was a versatile enough art form that it could endure criticism and ultimately changes grounded in politics. Theatrical elements continued to become more prominent as *drambalet* came even more to the forefront in the mid and late 1930s. Nevertheless, it retained the technical elements the made it recognizable as classical ballet.

And so, the ballets submitted to the competition, in addition to falling short of the guidelines, also had the misfortune of being judged in the shadow of the Bolshoi Theater. The judges themselves were part of the Bolshoi Ballet’s legacy and could not help but judge the submissions in the context of the supremacy of classical ballet. The submitted works that were supposed to help lead the way to a new socialist ballet were nonetheless subject to the scrutiny of those highly trained and educated in classical ballet. They were products of classical ballet. In spite of their ability to critique and discuss the art form as it pertained to its development in the early Soviet period they were still a part of and were greatly influenced by its powerful aesthetic tradition. That aesthetic legacy, much like the Bolshoi Ballet itself, did not disappear after the Revolution in 1917. Nor did it succumb to the criticism of early anti-formalists in the late 1920s. Instead, it continued to affect the direction to ballet into the 1930s. When it came to creating the

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<sup>65</sup> Also refer back to chapter five and the discussion of the Cultural Revolution in the section titled “Football at the Bolshoi.”

guidelines for the competition the best the competition could do was create a rather uninspired list of predictable themes that glorified the Soviet project.

What started as “The Brigade of the World Proletariat” was in fact attended mainly by the cultural and political elite. Indeed, it speaks to the cultural, social and historical importance of ballet in Russia that it continued to have an important place in the artistic world of the early Soviet Union despite its Imperial origins. It also suggests that *kul'turnost'* in the early 1930s included at least some remnant of aristocratic (or in their own words, “feudal”) culture. Whether or not one thinks that a return of some elements of bourgeois culture in the 1930s is indicative of a “great retreat” or not, the continued prominence of a historically aristocratic, highly professionalized and conservative art complicates the narrative.<sup>66</sup> It is difficult to call ballet's privileged position a “retreat” because the cultural and political elite had been grappling with the same questions since the revolution. Classical ballet had retained its status throughout the 1920s even as other arts experienced times of significantly more and varied experimentation. Instead, it suggests that elements of aristocratic culture were present throughout the revolutionary era. The anti-formalist rhetoric of the late 1920s and 1930s was potent and did influence the direction of ballet in general and at the Bolshoi Theater specifically. However, it was not well equipped to critique the aristocratic dance form that was so culturally entrenched. Ballet was high culture, and the words of political and cultural elite involved in the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Competition indicate that it was certainly part of *kul'turnost'* in spite of its shortcomings. Part of being cultured in the early 1930s, it appears, was *both* the ability to criticize classical ballet and to appreciate an evening at the Bolshoi.

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<sup>66</sup> In addition to Nicholas S. Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York: Dutton, 1946), refer to the panel discussion on “Stalinism and the Great Retreat” with contributions from David Hoffmann, E. A. Dobrenko, Jeffrey Brooks and Matthew Lenoe, *Kritika* Vol. 5 No. 4 (Fall 2004) p. 651-733.

## **CONCLUSIONS: The Ascendancy of Anti-Formalism and the Persistence of Classical Technique**

In his recent, fascinating study of Socialist Realism in literature, Petre M. Petrov muses, “it is bound to seem a scandal of sorts that in my approach to the culture of socialist realism the first step should be Russian Formalism.”<sup>1</sup> Petrov is interested in the relationship between modernism and Socialist Realism in literature, a discussion to which I have not directly contributed here. However, in concluding that formalism and Socialist Realism did, in fact, have something in common in the realm of literature, not necessarily from an ideological standpoint but from an aesthetic and structural standpoint, this work stands alongside his. For Petrov, it is the relationship between the author and the text, namely, the “displacement” of the author from the text that ties the two together as part of a larger trend in literature.<sup>2</sup> The same specific argument about the relationship between authors and works cannot be made for ballet. However, the same general analysis – that perhaps Socialist Realism was not such a break with art forms in the 1920s, is relevant here. In ballet, the line from formalism to Socialist Realism is drawn instead by the permanence of technique.

The advent of Socialist Realism in 1934 did, no doubt, mark an end to the period of uncertainty that I argue characterized the time theretofore since the revolution. It was, however, emergent from a discussion about literature. It was not immediately obvious to artists what “Socialist Realism” meant even in that context, let alone for art like ballet. Socialist Realism was eventually reduced, as a matter of policy, to “realist in form, socialist in content.” In this sense, “realist” did not so easily translate to ballet. Socialist Realism itself was far from a clear and orderly policy, it did, at least, lay the groundwork for consensus about what socialism in ballet

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<sup>1</sup> Petre M. Petrov, *Automatic for the Masses: The Death of the Author and the Birth of Socialist Realism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 55.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

was meant to be. That central question, which informed both the discourses about and of bodies in the Bolshoi Ballet during the 1920s, was largely put to the side. The answer to the question of realism in ballets became, at least as a matter of policy, dramatization. Note, first of all, that here, I use the word, *ballets* rather than *ballet*. This distinction, as it has been throughout, is critical. *Drambalet*, as even the transliterated Russian term should suggest to an English speaking reader, emphasized the dramatic in ballet to the near exclusion of the “formalist divertissements” that had characterized the most successful ballets to this point. On this point, Christina Ezrahi’s analysis is quite correct. She explains the phenomenon:

As a genre, [drambalet] reflected Sollertinsky’s call for the dramatization of dance and rejected Petipa’s model for ballet productions that combined drama and lavish stage effects with masterly composed, complex dance compositions in opulent evening filling ballets. In Petipa’s ballet, pantomimic scenes driving the plot forward alternated with long sections of pure dance divertissements, but in the 1930s and 1940s the merging Soviet paradigm for ballet production condemned the most important achievement of Petipa’s model as mindless, empty entertainment: long, complex classical dance segments involving a large corps de ballet, soloists, and principal dancers that did not advance a narrative plot were rejected as formalism.<sup>3</sup>

It was in precisely this fashion that classical dance was diminished and deemphasized in dramatic ballets. On the other hand, in precisely the same way that a focus on socialist narratives had turned the discussion away from technique, and by extension “protected” it from extensive and nuanced explicit criticism. Formalist displays of ballet technique became banned on the stage, but dancers were not banned from learning and practicing them. Furthermore, classical dance did not vanish from the stage entirely with the advent of Socialist Realism. Classical works continued to be staged, even if modified to varying degrees. *The Red Poppy* also

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<sup>3</sup> Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 48-49.

continued to appear on the stage at the Bolshoi Theater and eventually on other stages in the Soviet Union as well. Ezrahi attributes this fact to “the inertia of tradition.”<sup>4</sup>

The heretofore discussion has, I hope, demonstrated that it was not *merely* the inertia of tradition that allowed classical ballet to continue on in the early Soviet Union, and therefore cannot be the sole cause of its persistence after 1934. It was not merely that the state lacked the will or ability to directly combat tradition. Ballet had aesthetic power that gave it more than just the benefit of tradition. That aesthetic power was rooted in the past, but it had also been well established at the Bolshoi Theater during the 1920s. Despite Gorsky’s displeasure with the 1917 season and the conspicuous lack of new work in the early years, the tumultuous years of the Civil War actually established ballet’s place in the new political and cultural order. This was seen both in the consistent performance of classical ballets and in the re-establishment of the ballet school at the Bolshoi Theater. Together, these two important factors formed the basis of ballet at the Bolshoi Theater in the 1920s and were in place well before the formal establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922.

Furthermore, the struggle over the direction for ballet in the 1920s was often as much a generational struggle as it was an explicitly political or even artistic struggle. While it is impossible to draw clear lines between generation, politics and art – in many cases they overlapped as discussed in chapter three – the generational undertone of the debate about ballet has been largely overlooked. Put otherwise, the debate often took on a very social character, even when not framed in Marxist terminology. Tikhomirov’s ascendancy to the head of the Bolshoi Ballet after Gorsky’s death in 1924 set the stage for the youth’s claim that the old guard retained too much power at the Bolshoi Theater. The artists used the language and avenues of protest available to them, often invoking what appear to be socialist arguments in support of their desire

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<sup>4</sup> Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 50.



for power within the institution. This mirrors trends in countless other areas of early Soviet life, in which people from all stripes of life invoked Bolshevik terminology in an attempt to garner support. Here I am referring to the idea of “speaking Bolshevik.” Since this idea first appeared Stephen Kotkin’s *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*, it has become a common feature in conversations about the interaction between individuals and the state in the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> Kotkin argues that these words were not merely a cynical manipulation of a political discourse that they believed could be bent in their favor, but that many Soviet people in fact internalized the values that they invoked.<sup>6</sup> Jochen Hellbeck had also made this point in his study of Soviet diary writing in *Revolution on my Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin*.<sup>7</sup> Hellbeck takes the idea even further, arguing that his analysis of diaries suggests that the internalization of Communist social and political ideology went very deep. People were not merely mimicking Bolshevism for personal benefit, Bolshevism was actually transforming them. That being said, by such standards the youth at the Bolshoi Theater did not have an especially Bolshevik, revolutionary character.

However, in a cultural environment with a radical movement that prominently featured young artists, it is possible to draw a line between the youth at the Bolshoi Ballet and radical movements like Proletkult. The line is not ideological, or even artistic, but rather generational and the fact that both were intentionally forward looking. The Bolshoi’s youth, like others that were chiming in about ballet in the mid-1920s, had few solutions to the question of creating socialist ballet. Whatever the solution, it argued that it would have to be done by a group of

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<sup>5</sup> In addition see, Sheila Fitzpatrick “Making the Self for the Times: Impersonation and Imposture in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russia,” *Kritika* Vol. 2 No. 3 (2001) 469-487. Fitzpatrick, however, emphasizes the importance of proving one’s social character in order to garner favor or avoid persecution.

<sup>6</sup> See chapter five of Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995), 198-237.

<sup>7</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 11-12.

motivated young artists. However, the youths' failure to achieve real change within the Theater as a result of their protest in 1925 speaks, again, to the entrenched nature of classical dance and its artists. Tikhomirov and Geltser kept their leadership roles at the Bolshoi Theater because they had proven themselves to be masters of the art form.

Furthermore, the practical application of Socialist Realism sometimes created an environment that was nearly as unclear as the period that had preceded it. Far from being a simple, codified set of rules with which a work of art had to comply, Socialist Realism in practice was provisional, dynamic and usually in the eye of the beholder. As Katerina Clark notes in the realm of literature even "among the various canonical accounts of it there is no one that is incontrovertible or in any sense comprehensive." Therefore, she argues "it is no in theoretical writings but in practical examples that one should look for an answer to the question What is Socialist Realism?"<sup>8</sup> The practice of Socialist Realism in ballet is beyond this study, but the point is clear and one that I have tried to apply in my study of early Soviet ballet. Art ultimately exists as it is practiced. That is not to say there is nothing that can be gained from studying the way people, from artists to audiences, talk about art. Such matters have featured in every chapter of this study. Rather, examining practice opens up analysis that can be missed when talking *only or mainly* about other discourses surrounding an art form. Despite the still unclear nature of that artistic theory, it led to a different uncertainty than had existed for ballet since the revolution. Rather than defining the terms of socialist ballet from scratch, it became about a (unequal) negotiation between artist and censor.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>9</sup> This point is well made in Leah Goldman "Art of Intransigence: Soviet Composers and Art Music Censorship, 1945-1957" Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Chicago, 2015. See Goldman's chapter on Iuri Schaporin's *The Decemberists* for an example of just how long and complex the censorship process could be.

The 1934 adoption of Socialist Realism was an important moment in the shift to dramatic ballet, but like 1917 it is better understood not as a complete break from the past. Rather, it introduced new political and cultural imperatives towards dramatization in ballet into an environment where such discussions had already been going on for years. Sollertinsky had explicitly called for the dramatization of ballet in 1928. However, even prior to this period the importance of drama had become more and more prominent throughout the 1920s. Despite the enduring influence of modernism in the early Soviet Union, Tikhomirov and the Bolshoi Theater had turned to Romanticism and its appealing melodramatic qualities within Galperin's libretto for *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People* in 1924, a full decade prior to Socialist Realism's official codification.

It was not until the 1930s that it began to become a firmly entrenched idea, and it was not until 1936 that it became the official standard for new ballets.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, *drambalet* was neither a (excuse the following word choice) dramatic shift nor a simple progression from the ballet of the 1920s. If we understand *drambalet* as promoting narrative and deemphasizing dance divertissements, then the former was entirely in line with the focus on using story elements to give a socialist message to ballets and the latter was at least partially at odds with the fact that even early "socialist" ballets at the Bolshoi Theater had featured such divertissements. For example, *The Red Poppy* contained an unambiguously socialist narrative, but even in 1927 had come under a small amount of fire for Geltser's very Romantic solo in act two. Was *drambalet*, then, the extension and intensification of a cultural discourse that began to emphasize narrative in ballet during the early 1920s? Yes and no. Consider, first of all, the intervening eight years between 1928 when dramatic ballet first explicitly entered into the cultural discussion and 1936 when it was officially adopted alongside socialist realism. Falling as they did from the onset of

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<sup>10</sup> Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 46.

the “Cultural Revolution” until the middle of the 1930s, it is easy to perceive these years as somewhat compressed. Knowing, as we do, that Socialist Realism became official policy and *drambalet* its expression in ballet, we can see 1928 and 1936 as important dates in the transition to Socialist Realism in ballet. On the other hand, it had also been eight years between 1920 and 1928, a time that saw numerous attempts at solving the riddle of Soviet ballet. Taking the two examples in this work that came after the 1928 reorganization of the Bolshoi Theater, *The Footballer* and the ballet competition, we can see the much of that same exploratory spirit remained intact. The focus on narrative that had informed much of the discussion about ballet from the early 1920s through to the ballet rules for the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ballet competition at the Bolshoi Theater continued to be present alongside a genuine desire to make new ballets. Therefore, it might seem like a relatively straight-forward path from 1924 to 1928 to 1934 and finally to 1936. However, it was by no means clear at any given moment on that timeline that ballet and its artists were on a path that was leading anywhere particular at all. Ballet at the Bolshoi before the advent of Socialist Realism in 1934, then, can be conceived of in two periods. First, the early years of uncertainty between 1917 and 1922. During this era, the Bolshoi continued to perform classics and lacked the resources to muster the creation of new works, but established a crucial tradition of performing classical ballet under Soviet rule. Second, the period between 1923 and 1934, which can be seen as an unbroken series of attempts to define and create socialist ballets. Even the 1928 reorganization of the Bolshoi Theater, which stands out in hindsight due its concurrence with what historians often refer to as cultural revolution, changed the character and intensity of the Bolshoi’s strategy rather than its underlying goals.

Second, consider again the importance of the distinction between the discourse about bodies and the discourse of bodies. Socialist Realism and by extension *drambalet* addressed the

discourse about bodies, but did much less to influence the ultimate direction discourse of bodies. Certainly, by minimizing the acceptability of classical dance on stage it did influence the latter to some degree, but much of this influence did not take hold until the late 1930s and 1940s.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in limiting the classical dance on stage *drambalet* mainly served to influence to whom that discourse of bodies was presented. This was by no means a trivial impact on the discourse of bodies, but the discourse itself was alive and being endlessly reproduced at the Bolshoi Theater in training and rehearsal. The Bolshoi Theater's Ballet School continued to produce highly skilled dancers straight through the period of *drambalet*. Likewise, the persistence of classical work *even through* the period when Socialist Realism dominated suggests that ballet's aesthetic power continued to exert its influence on the discourse of bodies in the Soviet Union even under these circumstances. Although the ballet competition at the Bolshoi Theater took place before the official adoption of Socialist Realism, the judging of works perhaps most clearly shows how artistic virtuosity and professionalism in the realm of ballet – defined still by the standards of classical ballet – remained of paramount importance. Formalism may have been bad, but it was still preferable to amateurism.

And so, we return now to the original contradiction that pulled the art form in two directions. Even within a Soviet culture that felt compelled to reject ballet for its historical and artistic elitism, ballet was understood as aesthetically beautiful. This contradiction does not remain to be reconciled or explained away, it simply was. If one were to, for a moment, try to evaluate the success of ballet reforms in achieving a new, socialist art form either in the 1920s or after the advent of Socialist Realism, he or she would be helpless to conclude that such reforms were a failure. They were not an aesthetic failure, an artistic failure, or even necessarily a political failure. They were a failure because, in the end, very little was changed or reformed at

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<sup>11</sup> Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 103.

all. But even this must be tempered with the understanding that the reform only needed to make sense in the context of the Soviet Union. When looking broadly at ballet as an art form, *drambalet* seems like an unfortunate or irrelevant subgenre at best and an outright waste of time at worst. And yet, as this study shows, the dramatization of ballet was not a policy simply handed down from a political elite that sought to destroy ballet. It emerged from genuine attempts to combine ballet and socialism. Such attempts, I have argued, were born of contradiction and resulted in contradiction. It is for this reason that those attempts are, in fact, so useful in attempting to understand and the place of ballet in the early Soviet Union.

Regine Robin's delightfully titled *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic* argues that "to understand the culture of the 1930s, to comprehend the rise of cultural Stalinism, we have to know the nature of the debates in which that culture was immersed. As soon as we begin to look closely at the structure of those debate and the questions that were being asked at the time, as soon as we penetrate the thickets of the Soviet cultural discourse on aesthetic issues of the late 1920s, we cannot fail to observe redundancies, recurrences, repetitions, a virtual obsession with one particular artistic convention: realism."<sup>12</sup> Even though "realism" can be reduced to a single word, Robin acknowledges, critically, that it was far from an uncontested, unified convention. At the First Soviet Writer's Congress, where Socialist Realism was first established, various conceptions of realism were put on offer: "thinking via images versus think via concepts; form versus content; idea versus artistic image; art for art's sake versus the social function of art; pure art versus social utility; critical realism, new realism, proletarian, partisan, artistic, monumental realism, the new hero, the new man, the hero of our age, the positive hero, romanticism, revolutionary romanticism, heroism, naturalism, modernism..."<sup>13</sup> Socialist Realism, provisional

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<sup>12</sup> Regine Robin *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), xix.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

as it often was much like “socialist ballet” in the 1920s, would ultimately be defined not by the Writer’s Congress in 1934, but by its practice in the coming decades.

Nonetheless, already beginning in the mid-1920s we can see the trend towards realism in ballet. However, “realism” was only rarely explicitly mentioned as such. Instead, the most common call for “realism” in ballet came as a focus on “themes.” In order to consider a ballet socialist, it had to have a socialist theme. In fact, the idea of a socialist “technique” was simply not part of the discussion, even in the early years after the revolution. With *Esmeralda: Daughter of the People*, the theme could be as general as an emphasis on the relationship on the group and the individual. In *The Red Poppy* the theme took on an explicitly socialist, revolutionary character. *The Footballer* attempted to show “real life” under socialism by turning to a narrative about a football player. Although *The Red Poppy* had become the most successful attempt at socialist ballet in the early Soviet Union, its model had failed to produce any follow up successes and by 1932 the Bolshoi Theater’s competition in ballet stressed the importance of its theme – The Brigade of the World Proletariat – in producing satisfactory works.

One can certainly draw a line from the importance of the group in *Esmeralda* to the competition’s “World Proletariat.” However, we can make that connection only with the benefit of hindsight. The aforementioned steps towards Socialist Realism in ballet were not understood to be “steps” in their moment, but attempts at fully realized socialist ballet. This is centrally important to understanding the importance of narrative and the consequential emergence of *drambalet* as Socialist Realism in ballet. Although artists like Riabtsev understood that creating socialist ballet might take any number of attempts before succeeding, each of those attempts *could have been* the answer that worked. Individual attempts were not consciously incremental. When *drambalet* emerged as the answer, it did not necessarily satisfy everyone. Nonetheless,

artists at the Bolshoi Theater *had* been searching for an answer. In this respect, the usual narrative of an experimental 1920s, followed by a “retreat” and codification of formalized rules in the 1930s is only in the broadest sense correct. While one can see the Bolshoi Ballet’s 1920s ballets as “experiments” in one respect, they can also be seen as trying to find the same answer that artists were looking for in 1934 when Socialist Realism emerged as the dominant aesthetic.

In part, ballet’s relatively small changes resulting from Socialist Realism can again be traced back to the technical nature of the art. The kind of popular experiments that were possible in other media were simply not possible in ballet because it was an art form inherently cut off from mass participation. Ballet was, therefore, in the hands of a very small group of artists and critics. Tikhomirov and Geltser, for example, had a disproportionate influence over the direction of the first socialist ballets at the Bolshoi Theater in the mid-1920s. This was a direct result of their central roles as principal dancers in the Bolshoi Theater and their proven excellence in classical dance. Even though the youth pushed back against their conservative influence, they ultimately kept exerting power and influence over ballet in a way that simply not possible in more widely accessible or participatory art forms. When Tikhomirov and Geltser ended their tenure, they were not replaced by the democratic or collective rule of the troupe, but by a newer, younger artistic elite featuring names like Moiseev and Messerer.

Still, Tikhomirov and Geltser’s influence on the first socialist ballets, given the makeup of the pre-revolutionary ballet, had not been inevitable. The confluence of events resulting from the persistence of pre-revolution artists in the Bolshoi Ballet, Gorsky’s death in 1924 and the emerging drive to find socialist ballet in the mid-1920s meant that the first real attempts to create socialism in ballet coincided with the ascendancy of a particularly Romantic duo. Perhaps most striking of all is not even the fact that Romanticism and socialism became blended in the



choreographic and narrative tensions of *The Red Poppy*, but that the ballet endured and was even fondly remembered as the “first Soviet ballet.” Well after the official acceptance of *drambalet* as Socialist Realism in ballet, *The Red Poppy* stood as a popular and often-performed example of socialist ballet. By creating a socialist ballet that was defined first and foremost by socialist narrative, Tikhomirov and Geltser were not skillfully predicting the direction of ballet in the Soviet Union. They were simply doing what they knew best, creating a Romantic ballet with a narrative a bit more appropriate to their historical moment than the other ballets, like *Swan Lake*, that were still being performed contemporaneously. In this way, they did *not* exert influence over the theory of Socialist Realism that eventually emerged in ballet in spite of the fact that one of their creations became one of the few ballets created in the 1920s that stood the test of time through ballet’s mingling with Socialist Realism.

Therefore, Socialist Realism was not so much a new aesthetic for ballet or even a radical change when it came to a focus on socialist narratives. Instead, it was more of an inversion of priorities. In the 1920s, ballet at the Bolshoi Theater had, ultimately, been about classical ballet with a socialist story. Socialist Realism demanded that ballet be about socialist stories done in the style of classical ballets. The discourse about ballet and about bodies was often contentious, with entirely unclear “rules” for the creation of socialist ballet. However, the discourse of bodies remained surprisingly consistent between 1917 and 1934. It can be argued that Socialist Realism’s inversion of priority did diminish the role of classical dance in the discourse of bodies on the Bolshoi Theater’s stage in the mid-1930s until the 1950s. Nonetheless, much like earlier anti-formalism, it attacked *ballets* rather than *ballet*.

So to return to this work’s very first paragraph, “how *did* that work?” A glib answer might be that it simply did not. The 1920s never saw a socialist ballet that truly and completely

satisfied the artists themselves, the Bolshoi Theater's administration, representatives of the state, or cultural critics. *The Red Poppy* came closest, but its popular success came as much due to the controversy surrounding it as to its satisfying portrayal of socialism in a ballet. While it endured as a popular ballet in the Soviet Union, it did not live on as a model for Soviet ballets. However, another way to answer that question is to that socialist ballet worked not by resolving its contradictions, but by dancing them. Many critics, politicians and dancers alike understood that that the Bolshoi Theater represented Russia's imperial past. It was precisely this fact that made funding it difficult to justify after the revolution. And yet, it was funded. It was precisely this fact that provided the initial impetus to create ballets with themes more relatable to the average person, and that had a socialist character. And yet, classical and Romantic influences remained.

However, it was *not* this fact that led to anti-formalism in ballet, at least not directly. In the late 1920s, anti-formalism swept in as a movement in opposition to bourgeois, rather than aristocratic aesthetics. With the focus on socialist themes already becoming the dominant mode for searching for socialism in ballet, anti-formalism found a relatively comfortable home in the discourse that had already emerged surrounding ballet. Therefore, ballet in the early Soviet Union did find its expression in both pre- and post-revolutionary cultures. Ballet existed in the same cultural climate as theater, literature and film. That cultural climate *did* influence ballet. But its pre-revolution choreography and technique also, in addition to artists, continued to play an important role in the development of socialist ballet. In this way, the Bolshoi Ballet's story in the 1920s was about the blending of tradition and socialism from the very beginning. It is not so vital to ask which prevailed, but rather to acknowledge the importance of both in tracing the art form's direction inside the Bolshoi.

Decades later during the Cold War, the Bolshoi Ballet emerged as a world renowned ballet company. In the 1960s and 1970s, ballet became a front in the Cold War as high profile dancers like Nureyev (in 1961) and Baryshnikov (in 1974) defected. This story has been told, and is relatively well known compared to the history of the early Soviet period.<sup>14</sup> However, the relationship between the 1920s and the 1960s and 1970s has been little explored, with the gulf of Stalinism seemingly separating the two. Whether or not one wants to judge the period between 1934 and the 1950s, the roots of the classical dance that again emerged as prominent in the fifth decade of the century has its roots in the 1920s. Whatever influence *drambalet* and Socialist Realism had on the ballets at the Bolshoi Theater and elsewhere, it did not substantially subvert or undermine the classical training of a generation of dancers, Nureyev and Baryshnikov among them, brought up in a culture defined by Socialist Realism. Although the Bolshoi Ballet's school cannot take full credit for the carrying on of classical technique through the 1920s and 1930s, schools in Petrograd/Leningrad continued to teach a generation of dancers as well, it is not an exaggeration to say that the reopening of the school in 1920 had a far reaching impact on the longevity of classical dance in the Soviet Union. This speaks to the efficacy of education in practice at the Bolshoi Theater's Ballet School. That neither the anti-formalism of the 1920s or the Socialist Realism of the 1930s and 40s ever truly challenged that curriculum meant that underlying the increasingly restricted choreographic vocabulary was the same technical prowess that had always been there. As I have argued, the hostility that led to the seeming impossibility

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<sup>14</sup> Several recent works have been written on precisely this topic. See: Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), in particular chapter five "Ballet and Soviet-American Exchange" and Cadra Peterson McDaniel, *American-Soviet Cultural Diplomacy: The Bolshoi Ballet's American Premiere* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015). The cultural tension and conflict between "the West" and the Soviet Union was not, however, only a feature of the Cold War. Even in the 1920s and 30s tension over cultural dominance. See, for example: Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

of dealing with classical technique on this fundamental level actually helped to create the environment that allowed it to continue, and eventually flourish.

It would be a conceit of historical hindsight to assume, because we now know that 1920s Soviet ballets have not become mainstays in the repertory of twentieth and twenty-first century ballet companies, that these works did not have meaning in their time, or perhaps worse yet, that they do not have any meaning to us as historians studying them today. Some thirty-five years ago, Katerina Clark wrote “Soviet Socialist Realism is virtually a taboo topic in Western Slavic scholarship. It is not entirely taboo, for it can be discussed, but preferably on in tones of outrage, bemusement, derision, or elegy.”<sup>15</sup> To bring us, finally, full circle to where we began, I find myself in quite the same position when discussing the early Soviet ballet, although not necessarily in the context of Socialist Realism, or even in Western Slavic scholarship. In the larger scholarship of ballet, however, the early Soviet period has largely been treated precisely the way that Clark describes scholarly reception of Socialism Realism in the early 1980s. Clark identifies three arguments that were made against the study of Socialist Realism.

“First, it is felt to be intellectually suspect – or simply a waste of time – to analyze what is patently bad literature... Second, it is argued that it is virtually immoral to devote attention to a tradition that has developed at the cost of so many violations of intellectual freedom and integrity, of so much human suffering...[Third], it is felt that Socialist Realism is itself so lifeless and dull that any study of it would of necessity be hopelessly pedestrian (unless, of course, enlivened by tales of infamy or by acerbic comments).”<sup>16</sup>

While many of these arguments have faded, or at least receded, in the discourse about the study of Socialist Realism, precisely these three assumptions have still largely been made in the study of early Soviet ballet, to the extent that it has been studied at all. It is tempting to make the artists

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<sup>15</sup> Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, ix.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, ix - x.

the heroes of this story by portraying them as dissidents who resisted, consciously or not, a system built on oppression. I have argued, however, that it does not take anything away from the artists to examine their works and their meaning in the context of the early Soviet Union. If I have only demonstrated one thing in preceding pages, I hope it is that seriously and carefully studying the works that come out of this relatively maligned period of ballet history are worthwhile both to the study of Soviet history and to the study of ballet history.

## **APPENDIX**

## **Ballet Synopses**

### *Esmeralda, Daughter of the People*

The prologue establishes the setting of medieval Paris as a gloomy, harsh city filled with gothic architecture and questionable characters. The questionable characters are at once victims of their conditions and perpetrators of crimes themselves. The gypsy king attempts to kill Pierre Gringoire, but he is saved when Esmeralda marries him in order to save him from his fate. Gringoire falls completely for Esmeralda, but she insists that the marriage was a kindness, not based on her love for him.

Meanwhile, Claude Frollo, the Archdeacon, has also fallen for Esmeralda and attempts to have her kidnapped. Frollo's agent Quasimodo is apprehended when attempting to kidnap Esmeralda and the crowd demands he pay for his attempted crime. They revel in his punishment. Enchanted by Esmeralda's beauty, Phoebus too falls in love with her.

Esmeralda and Phoebus meet again the following day at a ball celebrating Phoebus's engagement to Fleur de Lys. The ball begins joyously, but when Fleur de Lys realizes that her fiancé has fallen for Esmeralda, she is outraged. Esmeralda and Phoebus quickly retreat from the ball. He formally declares his love for her. No sooner has he done so than Frollo himself arrives and stabs Phoebus. While Phoebus lies unconscious on the ground, Frollo blames the apparent murder on Esmeralda, the last person with whom Phoebus was seen. She is taken and to be executed the next day.

The following day Phoebus, realizing what has transpired, rushes to save Esmeralda. Even though Esmeralda is saved, the crowd is furious with Frollo for trying to frame her for his crime. A final confrontation occurs and Esmeralda is knocked unconscious. The crowd begins

rioting and when Frolo retreats to the cathedral, they begin to physically assault the building. The crowd retrieves Esmeralda and carries her to safety.

### *The Red Poppy*

The opening establishes the setting for the ballet as a port city in 1920s China, where dock workers are being exploited for their physical labor without recourse. The port is busy with many foreign ships coming and going. A Soviet ship is among them. The Soviet captain and his sailors are appalled by the treatment of the workers and attempt to save them.

Tao-Khao, a local woman, sees the rescue attempt from afar. At first she is not sure how to react to the intervention of the Soviet captain, but is ultimately taken in by his apparent compassion. She meets with the captain and professes her love. Li-Chaun-Fou then conspires to murder the captain for his actions. The captain realizes the plot against him at the last minute and manages to get away with the help of the other Soviet sailors.

Tao-Khao returns home, where she falls into a deep sleep. She has a dark and fantastic dream in which she comes upon a large statue of Buddha. The scene then transforms, and Tao-Khao sees a vision of the captain. She takes the dream as evidence of the Captain's rightness and affirms her support of him when she awakes.

In the final act, the captain attends an extravagant ball. There, Li-Chaun-Fou hatches another plot to kill him. This time the weapon is poisoned tea. Having discovered Tao-Khao's affinity for the captain, he demands that she deliver the tea to him personally as repentance for allowing his intervention with the dock workers. She intentionally spills the tea to save the captain. Li-Chaun-Fou is furious and decides to take matters into his own hands by pulling out a pistol and shooting him. He misses, but the shot results in the ball breaking out in panic. In the



resulting pandemonium, Tao-Khao is shot and killed. Meanwhile, out in the streets the dock workers have taken up arms against their oppressors and have begun a revolt.

### *The Footballer*

The ballet opens at a stadium, outside which a variety of athletes and spectators have gathered, including the footballer. The athletes put on a show for their audience, impressing them with their athletic ability in tennis, discus throwing, sprinting and, of course, football. One bourgeois-looking woman is particularly taken in by the footballer's performance and rushes to him and shakes his hand, while a humble cleaning woman looks on, also enthralled. The footballer finds himself attracted to the cleaning woman.

Together, they go to a department store to buy a new football. Meanwhile, the buffoonish bourgeois woman and her husband go shopping for tennis shoes. The cleaning woman, footballer in tow, finds her way into another clothing department where she tries on a fancy gown and mocks the movements of the bourgeois woman. The bourgeois woman follows the footballer through the store. He tries to evade her by posing as a mannequin. Meanwhile, the bourgeois man grows jealous of his wife's interest in the footballer and resolves to frame him for theft. The four characters continue with this game of cat and mouse as the man eventually plants a tin of caviar in the footballer's bag when he thinks no one is looking and calls the police.

The cleaning woman, however, sees everything. The police arrive and chaos reigns as they attempt to apprehend the footballer. However, the cleaning woman tells the police the story of what has transpired and, together with the footballer, she convinces them to arrest the bourgeois man who framed him instead. After the tension between the characters is resolved,

they attend a parade featuring tractors carrying a new harvest and coal miners celebrating industry. The parade concludes as the story began, with athletes putting on a show for the crowd.

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