

**ANTIQUITY AND THE AVANT-GARDE:
TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE CLASSICAL
THEATRE**

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My aim is to show how important the connection with the classics for the Russian avant-garde at the beginning of the XX century was. Of all the subjects that the avant-garde readily provides for scholars, I choose but one: to explore how the avant-garde spatial experiments illuminate us about the classical theatre space.

For me as a classical scholar by origin, it is only natural to find the avant-garde inside the classics: Euripides was rather an avant-garde theatre person for his epoch, but in far less than a century after his death, he became the brightest diamond within the classical diadem. The classics was the theory to proclaim that creation of art must always be new: therefore, it is only natural to find the roots of the avant-garde in the classics.

Let's check these connections from the avant-garde part.

Key words:

Avant-garde, Classical Theatre, Meyerhold, Tairov

When in 1911 Max Reinhardt brought to Saint Petersburg his famous „Oedipus” and showed it on the arena of Circus Ciniselli, the symbolists wrote enthusiastic articles to prove that only this kind of theatre could let revive the Dionysiac enthusiasm, as it showed how the 3-hundred numbered chorus could visually and emotionally be united with the audience.

The image of circus arena was interpreted by the symbolists as the only contemporary embodiment of the ancient orchestra that kept its magic power for the modern spectators. In 1918 Iury Iuriev founded a new theatre in the Circus Cini-celli and named it “Theatre of Tragedy”. The stage sets for Reinhardt’s “Oedipus” were not dismantled, and Iuriev used them to produce his “Oedipus”.

But after the October Revolution of 1917, theatre people were not satisfied with mere contemplations of contemporary circus as orchestra; they tried more radical spatial experiments. They started to work with open spaces in mass performances, developing the idea of Russian or Slavic renaissance through the ancient classics by means of choral performances.

Two persons should be named as the originators of the idea of Slavic renaissance: Viacheslav Ivanov – a symbolist poet and theorist and Thaddeus Zelinsky – a classical scholar rather famous in Europe. This idea was adopted by many artists, scholars and theatre people: among them Piotrovsky, Radlov, Soloviov and others.

Ivanov, in his dreams of “Russian artistic soul”, saw the country covered with *orchestras*, altars, dancing choruses. At the same time, the directors of mass performances tried to widen the boundaries of the performance space to the horizon to include all visible city space; they also wanted to unite those who act with those who watch. For an artistic frame, they preferred big city facades in the neo-classicist style with columns and stairways, like the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow or the building of Stock Exchange on the Vassilievsky island in Saint Petersburg. These places in different ways represented the idea of spatial unity: the square was separated by surrounding buildings, and the island was surrounded by water from nearly three sides.

These are, indeed, very impressive spaces, but too gigantic to be taken as direct inferences from the ancient theatre space; some of them most obviously expressed the archaic idea of a city square as a performance space which is not characteristic of the Greek classical orchestra. Here, we have the attempts to employ the ancient open theatre space for the needs of a contemporary ideology.

But there was something illuminating in these experiments: the classical theatre space was understood not as a building, but as an environment, or natural space, interpreted and visually transformed into the performance space. The environment is always there as the natural scenery; artificial scenography cannot overshadow it.

There was also an amazing example of how the natural environment was used to build a Roman-like theatre with a semi-circular *cavea* and a podium for contemporary festivals.

In July 1920, there was a festival at the opening of the Island of Rest near Saint Petersburg. For this festival, a wooden *cavea* was built. In front of it there was a tiny island surrounded by water of a small lake, and a bridge to link it with the

surrounding soil. We can imagine the quality of the acoustics in this theatre. The same architect built arches, columns, and rostra in ancient style to decorate all the surrounding places, and the directors filled these with choruses, orchestras, trumpeters, guitarists, small troupes of actors, and puppet performances.

2)

The early companions of Meyerhold often repeated his saying: “only ancient theatre is able to revive modern theatre”. In Meyerhold’s notebooks there was found a conspectus of Viacheslav Ivanov’s writings on tragedy; in the article “On the History and Technique of Theatre” (1913) Meyerhold also quotes him extensively. However, Meyerhold never left a roofed theatre, never produced any mass performance himself and never demonstrated any interest in the amateur theatre productions – contrary to his former studio colleagues. How did he work with the classics?

In the conspectus of Meyerhold’s public lecture written by Sergey Eisenstein, there is a short quotation. “Ancient theatre is the ideal theatre space because it provides the right angle of view to meet the main requirement: you must see only the acting ground and the actor. Proscenium arch, coulisses, fly-lofts etc. are not at all elements of theatre, but a sad necessity”.

As early as the 1900s, Meyerhold tried to destroy the footlights and proscenium arch in traditional theatres. In 1904 he covered the orchestra pit with wooden boards to move actors as close as possible to audience.

During the 1910s, Meyerhold and Golovin, a famous theatre artist, built a round proscenium with two side-wings and a roundish backdrop; a construction which in 1930s was used by Ohlopkov, Meyerhold’s student and even in 1940–1950s in Europe was called the “Russian round stage”.

The round stage was taken as the most obvious sign of “theatre traditionalism” within the avant-garde. For this style it is characteristic that actors should be moved forward to the edge of the proscenium being unusually close to the audience. All *mise en scenes* are stretched along the front line of the proscenium (Meyerhold called them “bas-relief *mise en scenes*”), and generally, nearly all stage action was put on it, while the stage sets were collected close to the backdrop: all the environment was most lavishly decorated, and all things were gorgeous.

Interestingly, the image of such space gives us some idea of the Roman theatre with great *scaenae frons*. If we just imagine the great façade of the Theatre of

Pompey, we will easily understand how impossibly difficult it is to act on the lavish background which is tens of times bigger than you and more beautiful, grandiose, exotic and original than you could ever be. It's nearly impossible for the actor to keep his significance if he is included in the visual plan of the *scaenae frons* to become one of the statues or images that decorated it; an actor can't do anything with his hands or the whole body to such a great phenomenon of theatre attraction, it's impossible to stimulate, by means of an actor's body, theatre functionality of any of all these miraculous things collected on this extremely attractive stage façade.

This leads to the idea that *scaenae frons* is not a backdrop in strict sense; it is a unique architectural means to create an imaginative, inexhaustibly rich theatre environment; and you have to create sets inside it – using the edge of proscenium (as in tragedies and comedies) or orchestra (as possibly in dances).

Anyway, to make an actor interact with this kind of environment, there must be a distance between the façade and a place of action – only then the actor will get additional significance, exactly as when the single actor talks or interacts with the chorus, but doesn't join with it, his figure gets visually bigger on the stage than when he is alone. That's why Meyerhold felt it necessary to make his proscenium wider than the niche at rear to create an impression that the space near the niche and the space for the action are two different spaces.

In 1914, Meyerhold started his experiments with the orchestra. He worked in the Komissarzhevsky Theatre in Moscow then, and suggested to remove the stalls and transpose the action of his productions right on the floor in front of the proscenium arch. The director blankly denied this: of course it was impossible to imagine an imperial-type theatre without the stalls. But he made it build such space in one of the smaller halls of Saint Petersburg and produced, again, not a Greek tragedy, but a symbolist drama “Balagantchik” by Alexander Block in it.

That was essential for him: he explored classics not by producing classical texts, but by using classical space and technique to produce modern plays. The starting point for biomechanics is to be searched in his work on the traditional techniques of acting, with his “ancient class” and “commedia dell' arte class” at his Borodinskaya Studio at St. Petersburg. It is due to this kind of experiments he was named a “traditionalist” by some critics.

From his “Balanchink” he proclaimed that modern theatre needed a 3-dimensional space for actors and theatre things, and, starting from 1918, he absolutely ceased any proscenium arch and any visual illusionism of painted scenography in his GosTIM theatre.

It would be too long to show in detail how he developed the idea of 3 dimensions in all his productions. Let's get right to the end of this process. In 1931, the Theatre of Meyerhold left their building because there started a big reconstruction. Meyerhold and two architects – Barhin and Vahtangov – created a plan of this theatre. Its Hellenistic-like shape speaks for itself: this is what he thought the contemporary theatre must look like – only three-dimensional space in the form of the ancient theatre – but with two orchestras that created an ellipsis; this is what he thought must be the most contemporary shape of space to show all the variety of the theatre from ancient to modern times, and the future.

The theatre was finished, but Meyerhold was taken to prison in 1938 and then killed. The building with slight transformations is still used in Moscow as Tchaikovsky concert hall.

3)

Alexander Tairov – the other flagship of the avant-garde in the Russian theatre (though some scholars prefer to call him modernist rather than avant-garde – it's more a discussion of terms, I would like to avoid it) – stood in the opposition to Meyerhold's experiments and mass performances, as much as to the traditional theatre. However, in his book "Notes of Director" (1921) he showed that the scope of his work with actors and set designers was much the same as that of early Meyerhold: to make modern theatre be able to revive ancient theatre, to show that actor's work is more than just recitations of words combined with impressive poses, to make the stage space 3-dimensional, to learn to produce choral scenes and so on. But they were opposite, as opposite are the right and the left hands when they are doing the same.

Tairov energetically denied the thesis that the border between the stage and the audience must be destroyed. If the theatre is professional, actors and audience cannot be united – they are all too different in their attitude to the dramatic event, in their physical constitution, abilities and expectations.

What was positive in his understanding of ancient theatre is that audience, in fact, can't conjoin with the masked character. The mask and the costume of the classical Greek tragedy and particularly late Greek and Roman tragedy make the actor's presence ever alienated. The tragic costume combined elements that could not be combined in real life in any sense and any way. The mask could simultaneously show the presence and the absence of a live character, being, perhaps, the most striking instrument of alienation.

So the theatre dynamics of the open space is to be searched in terms of dividing the world in two parts: you have to create alienation in the open space. Recently a lot of research has been done on the phenomenon of alienation in the performances of classical tragedy: the use of exotic Asian – cultural realities, attention to marginal figures in the ancient society, and so on.

For Tairov, theatre alienation and independence of the stage event is created by professionalism in acting and non-naturalistic aesthetics which doesn't let any doubts in the artistic nature of the event. That's why there's no need to brake the proscenium arch. What we really need to brake – is the floor as, for instance, in Tairov's "Phaedra" of 1922.

Tairov wrote: if the actor is the body that moves in 3-dimensional space, then the basis for spatial transformations is not the backdrop, but the place where he moves – the floor. Again, it illuminates us about the classical theatre: if we activate 3-dimensional optics the backdrop doesn't work any more; the floor becomes the basis for any scenic environment.

From this point, Tairov started his work (with designers, such as A. Vesnin and others) on the new system of set design. He decided to create different uneven levels and sectors on the floor and not to use at all a painted backdrop to place all stage sets and painted parts right on the floor. This was the sign of the Kamerny Theatre scenography – uneven, broken floor with cubist-style sets on it; which Kamerny Theatre was the first to introduce among Russian theatres.

Tairov's experiments surely illuminate us about the classical space: the earlier *skene* (stage building) with its doors and a roof was a function of the orchestra – not a backdrop, but a set within a natural environment. the orchestra must not necessarily be empty; it can be filled with big and small things and can contain a few spatial levels which would only stress a striking 3-dimensional optics of the orchestra theatre.

By the way, if we compare the costumes of Tairov's tragedy with those of classical theatre, we shall find nearly the same mixture of elements, cultures, epochs that very well fits to ancient poetic theatre.

Tairov also used the uneven floor for interesting arrangements of the choral action. Chorus and single actors must be taken in spatial opposition – that is, placed on two different spatial levels. He used this principle for the first time in 1914, and in "Antigone" (1927) he proved, as earlier Meyerhold in "Government Inspector", that small space is enough to build an intensive interaction between a big chorus and a single performer.

Meyerhold and Tairov showed the most impressive attempts to explore the vertical dimension of an open space. Usually we don't think of any use of a vertical axis in classical space. The question of the vertical axis is still one of the most intriguing in the interpretation of the ancient space; and it's the theatre of the XXth century that opened it with its practice, because set designers at one point couldn't imagine themselves any more without a significant visual embodiment of the vertical – stairways, cubist panels, Meyerhold sets etc.

This should be enough to show how deeply the avant-garde was inspired by the classical theatre and changed our idea of the ancient theatre practice.

The avant-garde not only reminded us that to be able to brake the tradition, you must feel and understand it; it also showed that the best attitude towards classics starts from the feeling of a distance between us and the classics, from the feeling that classics is unfamiliar to us, that we need a new language, a new way of thinking to understand and use it.

To me, this has been one of the most impressive lessons of the Russian avant-garde at the beginning of XX century.

Dmitrij Trubočkin

KLASIKA I AVANGARDA: TRANSFORMACIJE KLASIČNOG TEATRA

Rezime

Cilj mog rada je da ukaže na značaj povezanosti klasike i ruskog avangardnog pozorišta s početka 20.veka. Od svih tema koje se odnose na avangardu, a već su dostupne studentima na proučavanje, izabrao sam baš ovu: istražiti avangardne eksperimente sa prostorom i načine na koje oni osvetljavaju klasični teatarski prostor.

Za mene kao klasičara po poreklu, bilo je sasvim prirodno da avangardu tražim upravo u klasici: još je Euripid, za svoju epohu, po mnogo čemu bio avangardna pozorišna osoba, da bi za manje od jednog veka nakon svoje smrti postao najsvetliji dijamant unutar klasične dijademe. Klasika je kao teorija proklamovala da umetnost mora biti nova, zbog čega je sasvim razumljivo i prirodno upustiti se u pronalaženje avangardnih korena avangarde unutar same klasične umetnosti.