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COSTUME AND STAGE DESIGN IN RUSSIAN THEATRE BETWEEN 1900-1920

BY

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INTRODUCTION

The more research in the history of the twentieth-century Russian theatre design is done, the more it is recognised how much creativity and experimentation was involved, especially in the period 1900 - 1920.

Throughout this time runs an idea of a renewal of art as a social activity 'Realism' [The Moscow Arts Theatre], and 'rebuilding' [The Constructivists] are the two major concepts of artists in Russia between 1889 and 1920.

To understand and appreciate the achievements of twentieth-century Russian designers such as Leon Bakst, Alexandre Benois, Alexandra Exter, Natalia Gontcharova, Mikhail Larionov, Liubov Popova, Alexander Rodchenko, Georgii Yakulov, we must be aware of the social and traumatic events of Russia and Europe during the beginning of the twentieth-century.

In my first chapter I discuss Russia socially and politically from the start of the twentieth-century to the beginning of the Russian Revolution of 1917. In this chapter the different changes theatre and art movements went through and how influential society was on artists are looked at.

In my second chapter I explain the changes Russia went through after the October Revolution of 1917, how people's ideas changed, using theatre as their main source of information and expression.

In my third chapter I focus particularly on two designers of the time, Liubov Popova and Alexandra Exter. I have chosen these two designers because of the contribution they made to theatrical design.

My conclusion sums up the ideas each art movement wanted to convey to the Russian society and their achievements in Russia at the time and how Popova and Exter's designs are still remembered.

CHAPTER 1

Theatre at the turn of the twentieth-century in Russia changed dramatically due to the influences of art movements primarily from western Europe.

In this first chapter I intend to explain briefly the art movements and artists involved who contributed to these changes and why theatre became so important as a way of expression.

1895 has usually been regarded as the turning point in Russian art. It was a period for new and original ideas in art. The beginning of the century saw painter Mikhail Urubel experimenting with different compositions, styles and colours.

Before the twentieth-century Russian art, painting, literature and theatre were not accepted socially. Gradually it was realised that art could contribute to the country. Politically involved artists were bringing reality into theatres, literature and paintings.

Realism lasted longer in Russia than any other country. The 'World of Art' group based in St. Petersburg in 1890 encouraged the Russian people to attend art-theatres and painting exhibitions. It was founded by painters, Alexander Benois, Leon Bakst, Lansere, Konstantin Somov and Sergei Diaghilev. The 'World of Art' group was broken into two parts. Artists in St. Petersburg were developing their concept of line and in Moscow the group were experimenting with colour.

The most exciting development from the group in the rediscovery of Russian art was the development in graphics and decorative arts. It was the support of Bakst and other artists who followed this development.

It is in the theatre particularly ballet that the most creative work of the 'World of Art' was achieved. Here their idea of complete realisation of life and art was made possible. In a medium where every gesture could connect with a pattern, where costume, decor and dance became integrated allowing the whole visual illusion completing a world of perfect harmony.

Benois led the group and it was the starting point for the avant-garde. By 1905, the 'World of Art' group became successful in achieving their aim, wanting to restore Russia's culture but still keeping in touch with the western side of the world. They wanted to create their own style.

The school in St. Petersburg was led by Benois who was trying to find a way to render space without relying on perspective. They arrived with an idea with the use of wings to create depth in planes or using overhanging frontal panels. The latter often represented leaves creating an atmosphere of an enclosed world guarded by mother nature. Another technique, derived from the Renaissance painters, was the depiction of a window at the back of a painting showing another scene or a comment on it from another angle, achieved through reflections in a mirror. Another characteristic from theatre to easel painting was silhouette. Often the figures with high powdered wigs would look more like dolls.

This technique in painting was a new method of picture construction. Their main stylistic characteristic was to reduce the human figure to a decorative shape which emphasised the two dimensioned quality of the picture from colour to shape. This technique emphasised the quality of paintings as visual impressions of a certain moment by the use of costume they reduced the figure to a certain type of figure e.g. doll-like, generalising a definition [Fig. 1] Konstantin Somov, The Kiss 1902 is a good example of a silhouette painted backdrop.

The second half of the 'World of Art' group in Moscow followed 'flatness' on canvas but using colour. Dynamic forms were brought about by the rejection of modelling and using all over colour.

A technique often used by the painters is an unbroken foreground leading small figures half way up the canvas and a light leading the eye back over the sky. This device was later found in the work of painter Pavel Kisnetsov.

The influence of the Impressionist painter Korovin reflected Golovin and Vrubel's experimental and decorative stage set designs. Korovin used a continuous all over

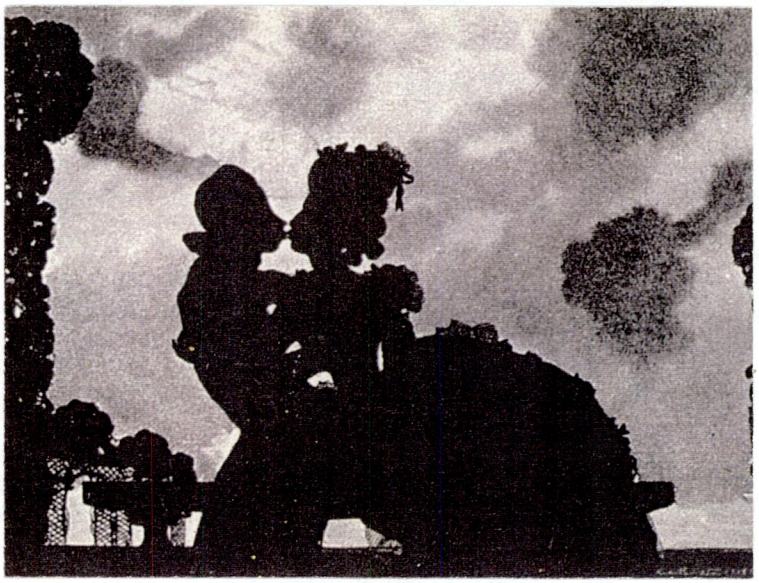


Fig. 1 **Konstantin Somov**
'The Kiss', 1902

brush stroke and the rhythm brought together each element with his objects relating to the background tonely so his objects becomes an area of colour rather than standing out at you.

In [Fig. 2] is a set design for Masquerade by Alexander Golovin, Golovin weaves his motifs together with reduces the whole vibrating unity of colour rhythms. These designs are essentially for theatre and cannot be compromised for anything else. His sets create an atmosphere which the audience are drawn into. Discovering a new window curtain, human figure etc.

The only painter to unite the costumes and paintings of the Petersburg artists which were inspired by the eighteenth century and the Moscow artists experimenting in colour, was Victor Borissov-Mussatov (1870-1905). After Vrubel, Borissov-Mussatov was the most significant painter in Russia at this time.

After the first revolution of 1905 in Russia the recovery was rapid. Expansion of industry brought Russia into the economy of Western Europe between 1905 and 1910. During these 5 years Russia became the meeting point for progressive ideas from Munich, Vienna and Paris. A style began in the development of an independent Russian art in the following decade. It was the World of Art group exchanging ideas with the western artists and building an inner relationship who contributed to the events of Russian art.

The artists role in theatre became very important in Russia. Artists wanted to contemporise theatre, but still refer to the old style of mediaeval and ancient plays as they felt it would be more acceptable to the audience. Combining the artists theatrical ideas and ancient plays they arrived at their own performing style 'collective action'.

The term 'collective action' was borrowed from the Russian Slavophiles of the last century it inspired Nietzsche's famous work 'The Birth of Tragedy'.

Art critic, Vyacheslav Ivanov defined 'collective action' as showing 'the good and the true' of theatre. He believed theatre should not only show beauty and the

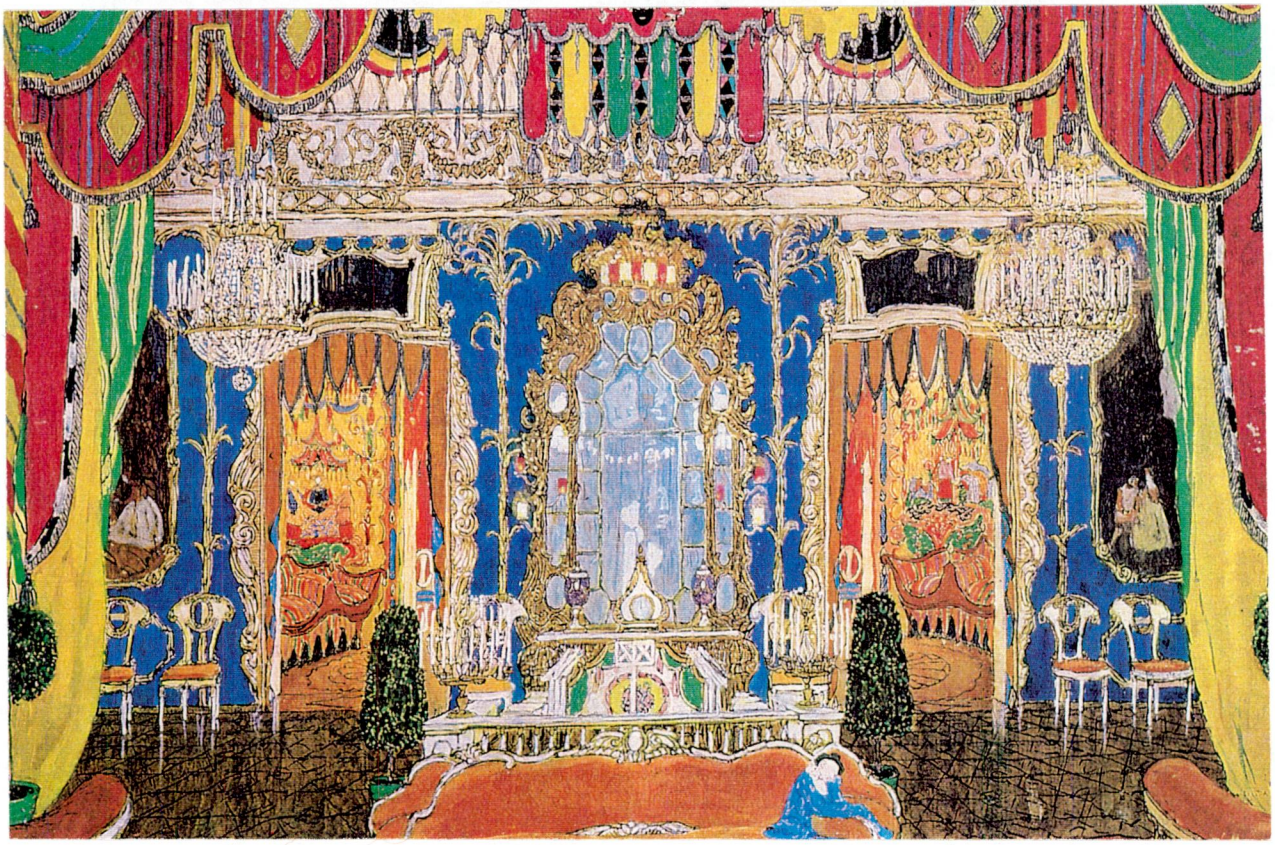


Fig. 2 **Alexander Golovin**
Set Design from 'Masquerade'

people of Russia no longer wanted a spectacle and were tired of a theatrical illusion. They wanted true action'
(Rudnitsky, K. 1988, p.9)

In order to begin the understanding of 'collective action' Ivanov proposed to eliminate the box stage and all the footlights and create a completely open stage. There was to be no division between the audience and the actors. A community spirit was created affecting upon the involvement of both parties, audience and actors.

Every Wednesday philosophers, poets and critics gathered at Ivanov's flat on Tverskaya Street in St. Petersburg. New poetry was read and everyday issues were discussed and most importantly how 'collective action;' could be brought about more quickly.

Ivanov, proposed that furniture in the theatre should be scattered about and the stage would be hidden behind a curtain. Suddenly the curtain would open, the actors performing from the stage would then mingle with the audience, exhibiting their costumers and masks, involving the audience who wanted to be part of the show.

In 1908 Ivanov's ideal theatre sounded exciting but was he living in a different ideal world? The Russian society could not get to grips with the involvement of actors and audience as a whole. Sudden new artistic ideas were looked upon as strange, moving too fast. Society believed Ivanov was living in an Utopian world. Acting ended up remaining acting.

Between the first Russian Revolution 1905 and World War I, Russian society changed. The theatre turned away from politics, writers, actors and the audience were frightened of getting too involved with political action knowing what the consequences were. Contemporary drama began to loose interest. Before the troubles, playwright, Maxim Gorky's plays were a huge social event. In 1906 he was still writing plays. 'The Barbarian and Enemies' 1908, 'The Last Ones', and continued writing until 1913 , but none of these plays were as popular as the previous ones. They were too political.

Painting had been the most popular form of art for many centuries throughout the world. But the beginning of the 20th century in Russia saw a huge interest in stage sets and costume designs.

By the end of the 19th century, the Moscow painters had developed a common style, in painting. In 1903 a group was formed calling themselves 'Union of Russian Painters'. In 1904 they joined together with the 'World of Art' group. It did not last for very long and the 'Union' Painters were still influenced by Impressionism and the 'World of Art' group were moving towards a 'modern' style. By 1910 they all had gone their separate ways. The 'World of Art' Group continued until 1924 but were beginning to fade by 1910.

From the 'World of Art' Group, Benois, Bakst and Diaghilev were successful in theatre design. Between 1900-1910, Leon Bakst (1866-1924) designed the costumes and stage for Diaghilev's company, the 'Ballet Russes'.

He was influenced by Oriental and ancient Greek themes, in his: 'Salome (1908-09) [Fig. 3), Cleopatra' (1909), 'Sheherezade' (1910), 'Narcissus' (1911) [Fig. 4] and 'L'Apres-Midi-d'une faune' (1912).

Alexander Golovin joined the group before it merged with the 'Union of Russian Painters. He painted murals and was an interior designer. His best success was in theatre design. He was a very decorative painter with a constructed composition using line, figure and colour. His style was different to other theatre designers. He designed for Ostrousky's, 'Thunderstorm' (1916), Gluck's, 'Orpheus and Euryade' (1911) and Lermontou's, 'Masquerade' (1916-17).

1910 saw another turning point in the development in Russian art and culture. The 'World of Art' group with the 'Union of Youth' and the "Knave of Diamonds' (two groups emerging from the avant-garde movement in Moscow in 1910), showed their first exhibition. They only lasted five years before the Revolution, re-joined after the war and continued for a while under different names. They invited different foreign artists to exhibit with them such as Picasso, Matisse and Braque. Russian avant-garde artists had the opportunity to show the public their new experiments with art.

Fig. 3 **Leon Bakst**
Costume Design from 'Salome' 1908

Fig. 4 **Leon Bakst**
Costume Design from 'Narcissi' 1911.

From 1910 onwards, mime, a new style of acting, was developing.

'Wordless action was attractive because it created the possibility of proving the autonomy and intrinsic value of theatrical art, its complete independence from literature" (Rudnitsky, K. 1988, p. 10).

Vsevolod Meyerhold and Alexander Tairov, directors and artists of theatre in Russia, both experimented with mime. They staged the same mime by Artur Schnitzler set to music by Ernst Dohnany. Meyerhold called his interpretation "Columbine's Scarf' and Tairov called his 'The Veil of Pierrette'. They were done in different styles.

Meyerhold and Tairov both wanted to prove that theatre can succeed without spoken text. It was Meyerhold who put the show on first in 1910. It was a great success. To spite Meyerhold, Tairov chose the same play but wanted to avoid the buffoonery and mischievousness of Meyerhold's production. 'The Veil of Pierrette' created a mystery to the plot.

The background of 'The Veil of Pierrette' had silver columns giving a sense of coldness. The stage was designed by Nikola Sapunov. The designs were dramatic. Not only were the designs different but the portrayal of the characters were also dramatically different. Meyerhold's Pierrot was confident and Tairov's Pierrot was so in love, gentle and floated around the stage.

Two years later Tairov put 'The Veil of Pierrette' on stage again at the Kamerny Theatre. Vera Mukhina, a sculptor, was commissioned to design costumers for (Alisa Koonan) Pierrette. Instead of the traditional ballgown she designed a starched stiff white costume, geometrically shaped and pointed out in all directions. It was an unusually shaped costume for its time, 1916. The sharp-edges changed the appearance of the Pierrete's body shape and the costume seemed to change its shape with each movement of the body [Fig. 5]. Picture in Russian and Soviet Theatre by (Rudinitsky, K. 1988 p.16.)

(Sketch by Vera Mukhina of the costume for Pierrette (Alisa Koonan) in Schnitzler's 'The Veil of Pierrette' directed by Tairov at the Kamerny Theatre 1916).

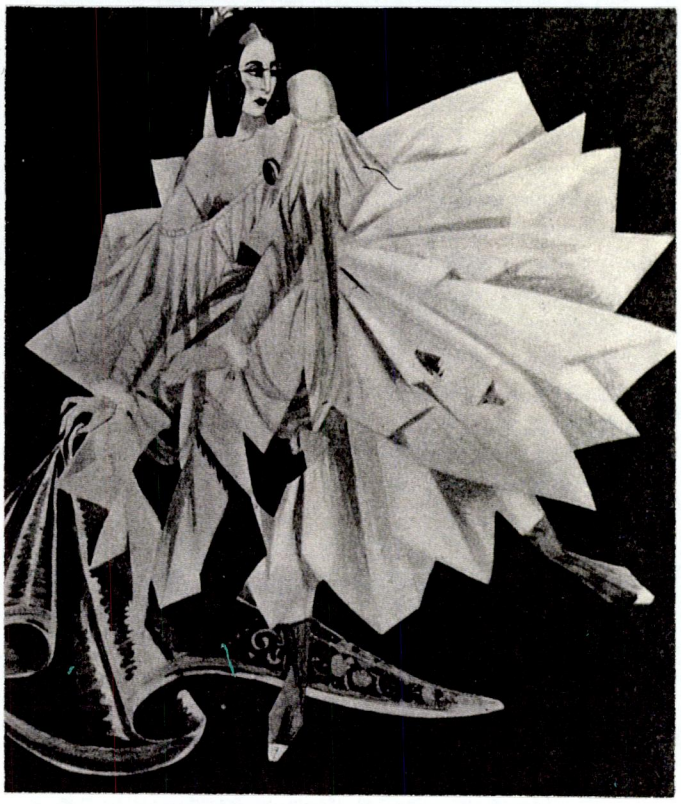


Fig. 5 **Vera Mulkina**
Sketch of Costume from 'The Veil of Pierrette' 1916

(Russian and Soviet Theatres, Rudnitsky, K. Thames and Hudson Ltd. London 1988)

It is probably the nearest example of 'constructed costume' before the 1917 Revolution, before Alexandra Exter elaborated on the style and later by Alexander Vesin in "Phedre".

Around the same time in France, French couturier designer Paul Poivet was also designing costumes for theatre. In [Fig. 6]
(Costume designed by Paul Poiret, the eleventh courtesan in Act 2 of 'Afgar'} shows a similarity to the costume for Pierrette in 'The Veil of Pierrette'. It shows how each country was influenced by each other, following the same trends e.g. cubism, but still searching for their own styles.

Poiret's design is notable three-dimensional geometrical shaped. The skirt is layered with two different fabrics, simple shaped top and the head piece is dramatically pointing out in all directions with sheer fabrics hanging to the floor from the tips of the spikes.

In Poiret's and Vera Mukhina's costumes, the multi-directional shapes are the most important aspects.

Tairov had been experimenting with different ideas for theatre ever since he had become director of the Kamerny Theatre in 1914. The critics began calling it the Futurist Theatre soon after its first performance of "Sakuntala" by Calidassa in December 1914.

With the success of the theatre Tairov was able to experiment even more. Unlike 'collective action' Tairov believed actors should not merge with the audience. The stage was only for performers, allowing the full impact of the expression of art. His theatre became a very stylized world of its own. It became, geometric, linear and solid.

Tairov became very interested in the movement of the actor's body. He believed it was "the main material of the theatre". (Rudnitsky, K. 1988, p. 17).

Fig. 6 Paul Poiret
Costume Design: The Eleventh Courtesan in Act 2 of 'Afgar'

He began studying the balletic method and how they used the space on the stage. The balletic method left the entire stage floor clear. Tairov saw this style as a way to bring drama onto stage for one main character, the heroine/hero.

He experimented more with dancers and actors' bodies. Instead of making costumes giving them different shapes to the body he wanted to show off the natural human body. He painted the bodies using a large palette of colours.

The Russian country was beginning to loose control of their economy and state. The Russian army were retreating and the once powerful Russian state was loosing its strength. But the art in the Kamerny Theatre continued to perform . It avoided showing the reality of life. Tairov believed in providing a retreat to go to, to remove yourself from reality.

Two years later in 1916 Tairov staged "Famira Kifared (Thamyras Cythared) by Innokenty Annensky. He moved away again to form an unstylisied form on stage. The text was untouched but different emphasis were put on different acts. It was the first time Alexandra Exter, professional, young painter, costume and stage designer, joined with Tairov.

It was during this time of 1916 that the avant-garde movement was broken into different groups: 'Cubism', 'Futurism', 'Expressionism' and 'Cubo-Constructivism'. Exter was involved with Cubism, as were many progressive artists in Europe, but she shied away from being associated with French Cubism. Exter was Russian and did not want to upset her artistic companions in Russia. It was in 'Famira' Exter designed the stage using geometric shapes and breaking them up:

"Cubes and cones - - - 'large, densely, coloured, blue and black masses, rose and fell along the steps of the stage - - - where harmony of blocks dominated - - - the forms and rhythmic arrangement of steps were finely regulated. This was a triumphal parade of Cubism". (Teatra & Suoem Tvorchestve, Moscow) 1973, p. 211 - 212). It became the first success of Cubism in theatre.

Stanislavsky and Usevolod Meyerhold also directed plays during this period. They were completely different to Tairov in that they were more traditional and less

dramatic. Even though they only directed a small amount of plays their success in theatre was great.

Before the Revolution of 1917 both Stanislavsky and Meyerhold were running experimental studies working with young actors. The first studio of the Moscow Art Theatre was organised by Stanislavsky and the second studio organised by Meyerhold in St. Petersburg was called the 'Studio on Borodinskaya. Both theatres were completely different, and their teaching methods had a different approach.

In 1906-07 Stanislavsky arrived with an idea of a 'system'. He wanted to combined different techniques to allow the actors to move in a natural and creative way.

The First Studio continued to follow the 'system'. The studio was purely for experimental purposes. "Stanislavsky was determined to achieve what the principal MAT (Moscow Art Theatre) company obstinately resisted - to conduct a series of consistent, carefully conceived experiments on the application and realisation of new methods of working with actors". (Rudnitsky, K. 1920, p. 20)

Meyerhold's Studio on Borodinskaya in St. Petersburg was completely different to Stanislavsky's creation. They gave very few public performances. Meyerhold was interested in visual, aural, sculptural and musical theatre. He enjoyed tradition. 'The Storm and Masquerade' of 1917, one of his very few productions shows was a success.

Theatre at this time was in between stages, experimental and traditional. It was the beginning of the war and the Russian's were concentrating on their lives rather than the arts.

Studying theatre from the turn of the twentieth century until 1917 before the Revolution it is interesting to see how theatre went through experimental and traditional styles. New developments of mime, stage sets, acting techniques and costume design. It was a beginning of what theatres today can look back upon, inspired by and further develop their own interpretations.

CHAPTER 2

After the 1917 October Revolution in Russia and the end of World War 1, there was an economic depression. Poverty set in and the arts suffered. People became more politicised.

Chapter 2 sets out to explain the changes theatre and the Russian state went through after the war, the improvements and re-building of the state, and the changes in costume designs went through due to the lack of materials used in stage design.

The October Revolution which took place in Russia in 1917 changed the whole structure of society. In turn, there was a new approach to literature, painting, poetry and theatre.

During the years following the Revolution the new Bolshevism government was in financial crisis, so that industry and the arts suffered during the re-building of Russia. The state had broken down after the war and they were trying to re-build the towns and cities so they could once again produce products for everyday living.

The changes were slow but the new government tried to guarantee people a right to clothing, food and jobs were possible. Artists were also allowed to express themselves more, experiment with different materials and adapt theatrical plays to their surroundings. There was a new social role in art amongst the people of Russia.

After the Revolution public interest in theatre immediately intensified. Theatrical performances became an unusual part of daily life of the people of Russia. It was strange to find a great importance for theatre in Russia compared to other types of art, such as music or painting.

In my reading about Russian culture, I have noticed during this time of hardship for the Russians, only approximately twenty per cent of the people could read and write. Theatre became a school for the people, educating them through the spoken word and movement. Theatre became a source of information and knowledge.

The use of simple language enable the peasants, workers and soldiers to understand clearly what was being conveyed. As Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first Narkom (People's Commissioner) once said "Theatre served the people, as a helper, as a searchlight, as an advisor".
(Rudnitsky, K. 1988. p. 41)

Before the Revolution it was unusual to see a peasant or worker in a theatre auditorium. Theatre was only for the upper and middle class of society, the educated. But after 1917 in Russia theatre became an event for news and anniversary revolution celebrations performances gathered political mass meetings.

There was a great interest in various forms of art. Political posters, newspapers and magazine graphics, oratorical poetry and heroic theatre, mass dramatisations and street processions, mural decorations for streets during Revolutionary anniversaries. The Winter Palace, the Smolny Institute, the Field of Mars, the Tauride Palace in Petrograd or Red Square will always be remembered as historical peaces for the artistically expressive street carnivals.
(Bibikova, I. Cooke, C., Tolstoy, V. 1990. p12)

The street carnivals catered for the huge masses of people who wanted to take part and see political experimental, traditional and comic strip performances. They were usually performed to celebrate a historical event or a special occasion.

Mass festivals represented the most successful of propagandist theatre. The festivals became a huge trend in the theatrical life of the first Revolutionary years. Not only actors took part in the carnivals but hundreds of everyday people, workers, soldiers, sailors participated. There was no division between spectators and actors. Vyacheslav Ivanov's idea of performing 'collective action' came through subconsciously in these carnivals. But they did not borrow his idea of an Utopian world. The workers of Russia were angered by the wealth of the middle and especially upper class society. Their anger came through in the placard demonstrations on the city square and streets. The trams, lorries and anything else they could stand on above eye level became the stage.

It was from this point that mass festivals seemed unusual to the government. In 1918, critic and theoretician Platon Kerzhentsev's book, Tvorcheski, teatr (Creative Theatre) was issued. Kerzhentser believed that Revolutionary theatre must unite spectators and actors, turn spectators into actors.
(Gray, C. 1962, p.65)

The blocks of buildings on the streets were transformed by dramatic and exciting decor and they were used for the backdrops of performances. The planned decoration for the 'Struggle and Victory' street carnival (which was never actually held, no evidence shows why) was designed for a huge space in the Khodinka field of Moscow. It had two enormous models of the 'Old City; and the 'City of the Future' and posters attached to ropes and balloons floating above. Some directors of theatres, such as A. Gan believed these new street performances would take the place of the traditional theatres.

The first real project for the artists was to decorate the towns celebrating the first anniversary of the Revolution - May Day. It was to be a carnival outdoors. The artists had to design banners, posters, stands and flags. Artists decorated their designs using red, the colour of communism, as their main colour. Even the military were called the 'Red Army'. The colour followed through to theatre, sets and costume designs. The government actively promoted the use of red because it symbolised communism.

In April 1918 a contest was put to the artists in Russia to design a new uniform for the army. It was artist S. Arkadievsky who won and he took particular interest in the comfort and durability of the uniform. Quite similar to the costume designs that will be discussed in Chapter 3, it can be noted now the beginning of durability, comfort and simple designs followed through from the Red Army uniform to street clothes and theatre costumes.

It also can be noted here the simple geometric shapes and the use of a block colour is used for the decorative design of the greatcoat, [Fig. 7] (Red Army overcoat) which was also used in Liubov Popova's and Alexandra Exter's costume designs, which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Fig. 7 Red Army Uniform 1919

Fig. 8 Woman Worker's Clothes 1920 - 1921

In [Fig. 8] Actune of Russian (Woman Workers Clothes) also has similarities to the Red Army uniform. The skirt is three quarter length, simple plain blouse but the extra length collar adds to the atheistic value. The blouse only has five small buttons down the front of the garment. The scarf around the shoulders brings the elegance across decorated in delicate blue and pink flowers. The colour red is brought across with the ladies head scarf, very simple but very effective in design.

The Red Army uniform is associated today with the figure of a heroic Red Army soldier in a greatcoat with razovory and a Budenovka helmet with a red star - this shows how clothing design could work with government propaganda.

The artist's role became increasingly important in Russian society especially in theatre, which was regarded as the most powerful art form in Russia at the turn of the century. Even though it was the year of the Civil war, plays were performed not only in Moscow and Petrograd but all around the country. Amateur theatre companies were as successful as the professional theatres. In the early 1920s there were ninety five theatres in Moscow. Theatres allowed artists to express themselves, experiment with new ideas.

The Soviet State took great interest in theatres after the October Revolution. The Government wanted to preserve the theatres for their own financial benefit . Due to the poor economy in Russia the Government were trying everything to gain money back into their power. The Government decided they would help to re-build the theatres and help finance them. Having the power over theatres they decided what productions were shown and raised the price of the tickets. Keeping out the poorer people, bringing back the traditional plays was intended not to disturb the people again towards another war. The theatre performances were getting too political for the Government so they stepped in, pretending to have an interest in theatre. The Government took the most interest in the 'Moscow Art Theatre (MAT)'.

In 1919, the Soviet government added the word 'academic' to the theatres. The theatres was banned from showing any political plays, portraying demonstrations against the way the State was running the country, freedom of speech. Because eighty per cent of Russian people were illiterate, they could not read the

newspapers, their only source of information was theatre, now they were unable to express their views as they did not know what was happening around them.

'Academic; theatres meant they only performed classical plays e.g. by Shakespeare. There was also a professional approach towards acting. Actors were to act as they were taught in a classical way and not experiment in their own styles.

Together with MAT, other theatres were supported financially by the Government, 'Kamerny' and two opera theatres - the Bolshi in Moscow and the Mariinsky in Petrograd.

Many other theatres at the time followed closely the productions of these 'academic' theatres, particularly the former Korsh Theatre in Moscow, as well as companies followed by Nikolai Sinelnikov, Nicolai Sobolschiko Samarin, Alexander Kanin and others.

The amateur and semi-professional theatres enthusiastically performed the classical plays as well as they could, but their productions were usually of a propagandist character. Theatres were primarily propagandist, and the classics did not always suit the spoken out performances. As Lunacharsky explained 'by propagandist theatre I mean placard theatre, a theatre of bright, witty images and situations, which issues specific appeals, sheds light on events and fights against prejudices and counter-Revolutionary propaganda'.
(Strizhenova, T. 1991 p. 30).

In March 1921 the Soviet Government introduced a 'New Economic Policy' (NEP) to allow private trade and ownership of theatres.

The new theatres did not require permanent companies or professional actors. The workers themselves created the productions. The workers believed the outcome of these mass festivals would create a harmony amongst their own class and the rich.

During 1900-1920 Cabarets became popular with theatrical companies performing in cafes and restaurants. These lower theatres played an important part in the development of Russian stage design. Artists involved were Alexandra Exter, Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Wassily Kandimsky and many more later became interested. Many of the directors involved with the 'high' theatre companies were also involved with the circus and cabarets such as Nikita Baliev, Sergei Diaghilev, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Alexander Tairov.

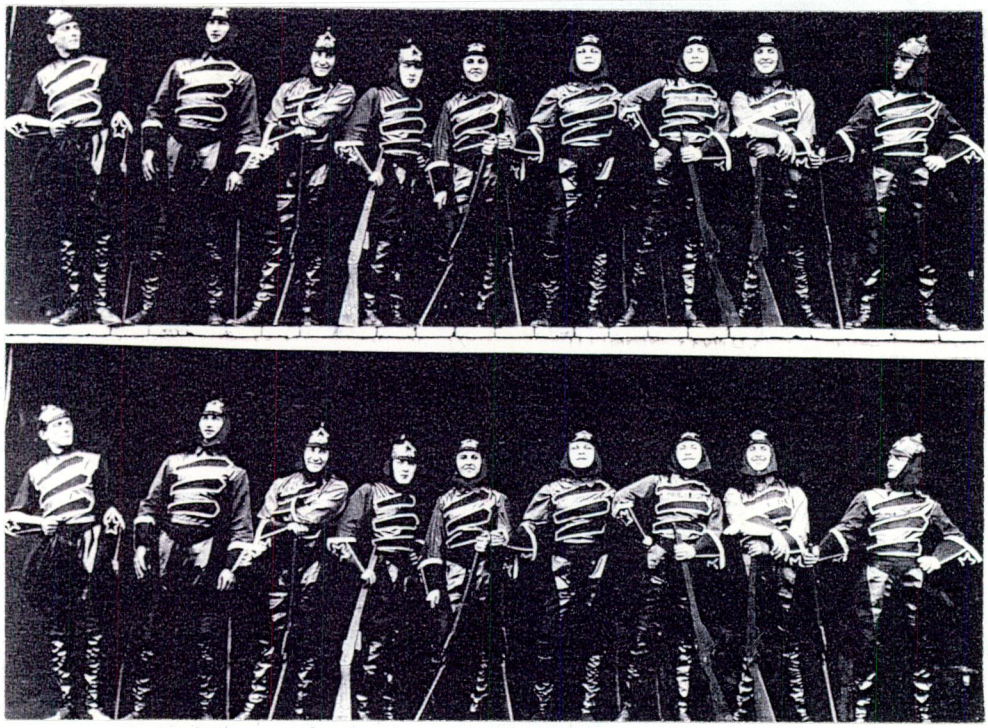
Cabarets and intimate theatres were forming around St. Petersburg, Moscow and other cities before 1910. The avant-garde artists wanted to create a special theatre, a place where they could express and explore their ideas. They achieved their own ideas in the famous cabarets, 'Crooked Mirror' and 'Spray Dog' in St. Petersburg. The ideas for the plays came from the Western theatres mainly Paris and Munich in 1890. It was a starting point for the Russians and they used their new ideas to make the plays more personal to them.

The most popular night spot of the time was 'The Spray Dog'. The avant-garde artists and the business class attended 'The Spray Dog' on a regular basis. It was a place to be seen by the intellectuals and the elite. The cabaret would run for hours, starting at 10 p.m. and finishing at 5 a.m. listening to travelling stories, poetry readings and exchanging notes on art movements around the world.

'Cafe Pittoresque' was another club built in Moscow in the summer of 1917 that involved artists, architects, playwrights, poets and actors to express and convey 'new ideas' over coffee. The owner Nikolai Filippov invited avant-garde artist Georgii Yakulov to design the interior. He painted with bright colours, red, yellow and orange on a glass roof and decorated the walls with scenes from the play 'The Unknown Woman'. It was a dramatic interior using geometric shapes, plywood, fabric, circles creating a constructivist environment. Unfortunately the cafe only lasted from January to June of 1918 due to the impact of the Revolution.

The cabarets continued on despite the depression. They became very politicised after 1918. The 'Blue Blouse' was formed in 1923 by Boris Yazhanin. They were a group who travelling from cafes to restaurants performing shows dealing with political and domestic issues in the Soviet factories. They called themselves the

Fig. 9 & 9a **Blue Blouse Performances 1920s**



'Blue Blouses' because of the blue overalls worn by the factory workers [Fig. 9] [Fig. 9a]

Even though cabarets, the circus and the movies were regarded as low art, they played a high role in free expression, socialism and propaganda. It was a break through for the more unknown actors and artists to become part of the new developments in art. However, some productions were banned because they criticised the government.

The term 'Constructivism' was first used by Alekseigan, who published his book 'Konstruktivizm' (Constructivism) in 1922. The artists wanted to use abstract, geometric forms with new industrial materials in projects.

(Guggenheum Museum, New York, 1992 p. 32)

Vladimir Tatlin was the artist who first used Constructivism. He saw it as 'real materials in real space'. The idea was to show objects as they really were. 'The fundamental basis of art must rest on solid ground, real life'.

Artists theory of construction art was to begin with colour and form, not in order to express an inner need, but rather to stimulate an emotional reaction - - - the work of art is a construction of concrete elements of form and colour which become expressive in the process of synthesis or arrangement - - - and whatever expressiveness there is in the work of art originates with the form.
(Read H. 1968, p. 194, 195)

Constructivists declared their love for figures, business and document quotations.

'We the Constructivists, renounce art because it is not useful. Art by its very nature is passive, it only reflects reality. Constructivism is active, it not only reflects reality it creates a social role'.
(Frankel, T. 1972. p.38)

The artists Tretyzkov, Sergei Eisenstein, Ivan Axenov, Ilya Selvinsky and Liubov Popova all worked in constructivist theatre at some stage.

Arvator tried to justify his change of ideas. He expressed that theatre would be turned into 'a factory turning out people qualified for life and the results achieved in the theatrical laboratory could be transferred into life, recreating our real everyday social life'.

(Garnier, G. 1986, p. 90)

A social function was now found for theatre. The Constructivists believed it taught the workers/actors how to control their bodies and how to conduct themselves. It became know as 'Biomechanics' (Fig. 10) but it was not a great success.

Vsevolod Meyerhold encouraged Constructivists to re-design buildings. It took a long time for the re-construction of buildings in Russia. The Constructivist artist designed buildings but these could not be built due to the lack of industrial materials (e.g. Viadimir Tatlin's Monument, to the Third International Tatlin's Tower 1920). This is one main reason why Constructivists designs succeeded in theatre. They could compromise with material, for example, using plywood instead of metal. Stages only lasted for a few performances each time so there was no need for durable materials.

In the autumn of 1921 Meyerhold became director of the newly formed State Higher Theatre Workshop in Moscow. In April 1922 Meyerhold's production of 'The Magnanimous Cuckold' brought pure Constructivism into theatre. Popova joined Meyerhold in the Theatre Workshop and constructed the stage for the production. Popova followed the ideas of Constructivism and the actors portrayed biomechanics.

The stage was constructed with platforms joined together with steps, chutes and catwalks. On stage there was two wheels, one had 'CR-ML'NK' painted in bold letters and the other wheel had windmill sails attached to it. The actors wore loose fitted garments. They wore blue overalls, similar to the 'Blue-Blouse' company already mentioned, and only had little decoration on their costumes. Some costumes had red pom-poms dangling from the collar or an eye-glass or a riding crop from the pockets. [Fig. 11].

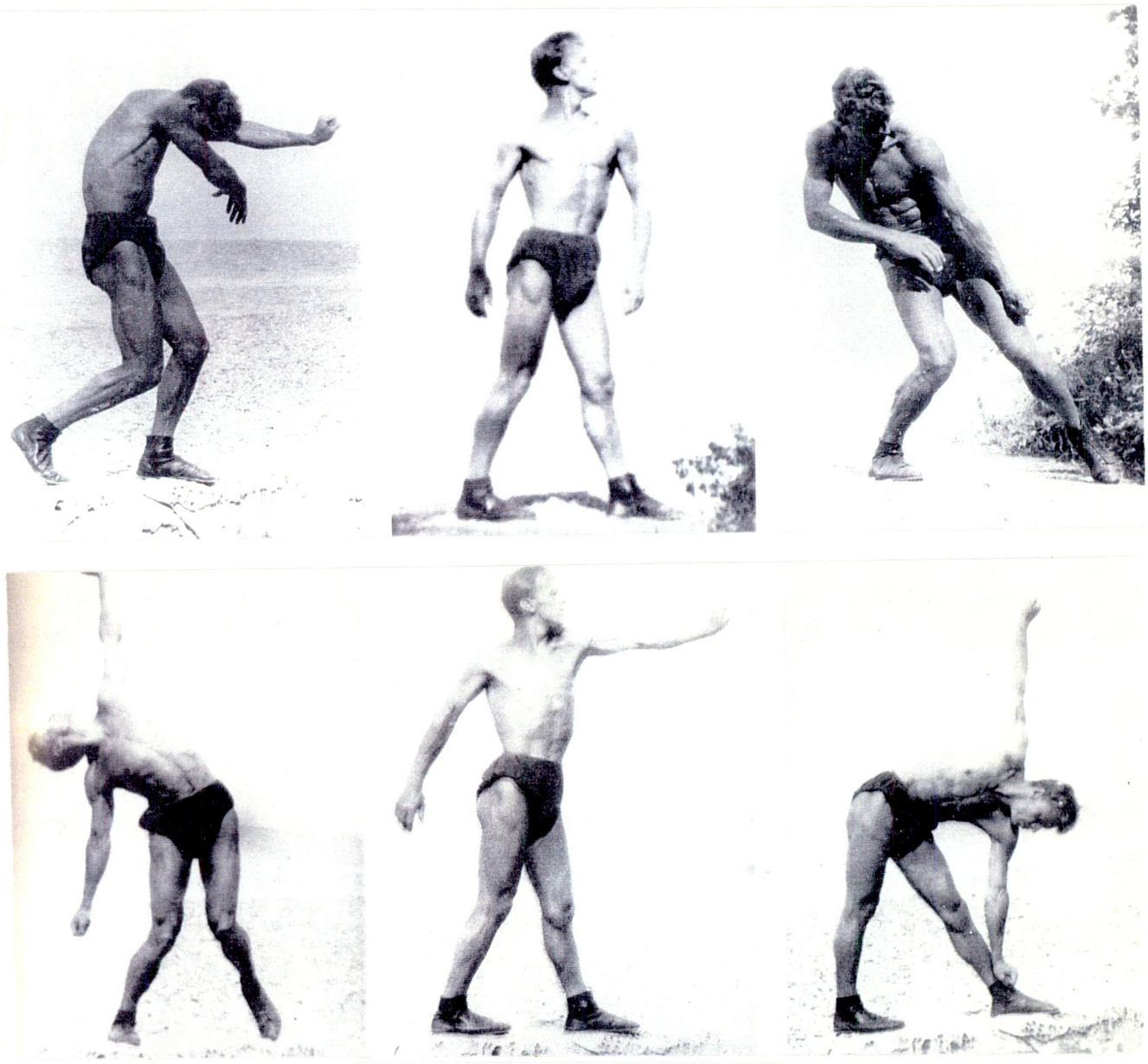


Fig. 10 Biomechanics

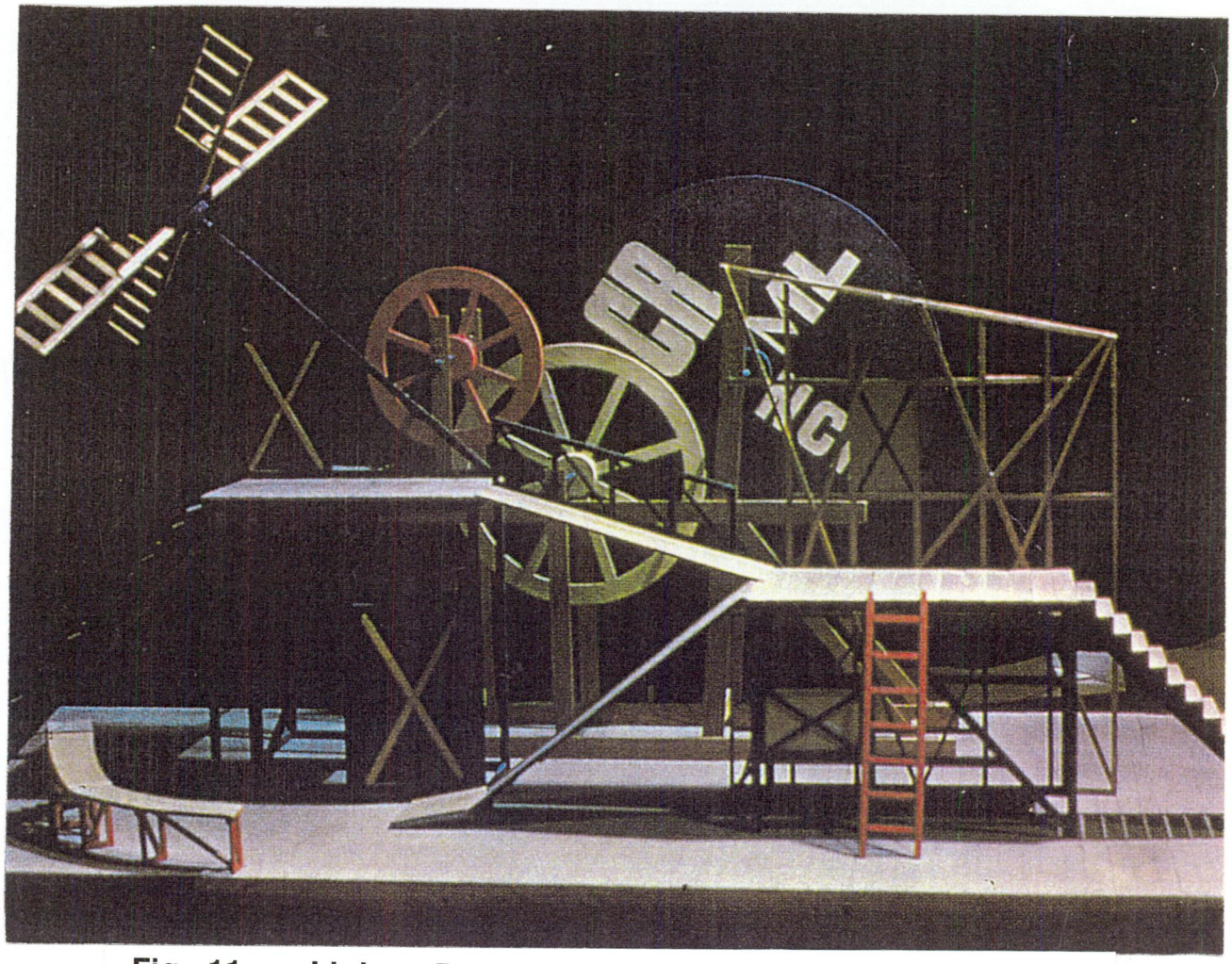


Fig. 11 Liubov Popova
Set for Meyerhold's 'The Magnanimous Cuckold'
1922

'The Magnanimous Cuckold' was the first real showing of theatrical Constructivism in Moscow to the public. Earlier it had always been experimental performances. Now Meyerhold and Popova felt they had the confidence to show Constructivism to its full.

The 'Magnanimous Cuckold' will later be described in depth in Chapter 3 describing how Popova designed the costume and stages comparing the production with 'Earth of Turmoil').

Many painters and designers followed Popova's ideas and abandoned easel painting. Constructivism became the dominant trend in stage design for the next few years.

In November 1922, following 'The Magnanimous Cuckold's success, the production 'Tarelkin' Death' was staged. This adaption of Sukhova-Kobylin's nineteenth century satire on Tsarist police methods was designed by Varvara Stepanova.

This production was playful, full of tricks, encouraging clowns and the circus. Stepanova designed baggy costumes decorated with stripes, patches and chevrons [Fig. 12).

The stage was bare but the geometric acting instuments were painted in white, striking against a black background. The props could be moved quickly and easily. The shape of one of the props was like a giant trap. Each department had a trap door. The base had little legs that could fall off. Watching the actors move about in the lookalike prison cells was exciting to the audience but they were shocked to see a gun being fired into the audience shouting 'ENTRRRR-ACTEI'. It was part of the act. Old women were played by male actors and at the end of the show Tarelkin (the lead part) escaped by swinging across the stage on a trapeze.

Unfortunately 'Tarelkin's Death' head little success compared to 'The Magnanimous Cuckold'. If the costumes and set design from 'The Magnanimous Cuckold' are compared with 'Tarelkin's Death' you can notice the different in experience, expense and thought put into each performance. The actors success

Fig. 12 V. Stepanova
Stage Design from 'The Death of Tarelkin'
1922

in 'The Magnanimous Cuckold' was due to biomechanics, the audience's ability to see the body movements. 'Tarelkin's Deaths' costumes were too baggy and hid the figurative movements. The spectators in 'Tarelkin's Death' watched part of the show in poor light due to the low budget available for the show.

Even though the shape of the costumes and stage design was not as exciting in 'Tarelkin's Death' as it had been in 'The Magnanimous Cuckold' the performance was still looked upon as a celebrated production of the movements known as 'Eccentrism'. It restored pure clowning to the stage and encouraged the comic style of the new Soviet cinema.
(Braun, E. p. 72)
('Eccentrism' was exploited for the purpose of political satire).

Theatrical Constructivism continued for a few years. It began to exploit theatres. It became decorative in stage and costume design and had little regard to the play itself. It expressed the big city life and the dehumanising effects of the machine age.
(Braun, E. 1979, p. 72 - 73)

After the Revolution the development of theatrical art had flourished. The artists were excited with the opportunities they were given to explore different methods and styles in different art subjects. Besides the traditional and experimental theatre, new productions and performances were also born: open-air plays for the masses of Russian people, the topical political theatre of the 'Blue-Blouse' group on stages of clubs, the different travelling theatres, etc.

The years after the Revolution between 1917-1926 saw a great and exciting time for the Russian artists.

CHAPTER 3

In my third chapter I focus on stage and costume design of Liubov Popova and Alexandra Exter. I have chosen these two artists because of their exploration of art, and the contrast between the two as Popova received acclaim in her lifetime whereas Exter has only recently become famous.

Amongst all the designers of theatre in Russia, Liubov Popova and Alexandra Exter stand out to me as having achieved the most. Their styles, creativity, ambitions and colour interested me the most as I researched Russian theatre. They both brought a lot of new ideas to theatre, stage and costume design and also helped directors bring their ideas across in plays and carnivals.

In this chapter I discuss Popova and Exter in depth describing their influences, styles and particular costumes they designed. I have already described in brief in my first two chapters the changes that came about in Russia and Russian theatre in the first two decades of the twentieth century and now I will apply what I have learnt about the changes in design to analysing two particular designers.

Liubov Popova's (1889-1924} [Fig. 13] success in design was between 1912-1924. She had her own distinctive style of painting and designing and from Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko (all painters) Popova, to me proved to be the most accomplished artist of the Russian avant-garde. She stood out on the basis of her quality and originality.

Popova was a committed Constructivist. She always worked with paint and loved the idea of working with a broad range of mixed media and disciplines, including relief working on paper, designing for theatre, textiles and typography. He styles changed from early pre-Cubism (1908-12) to Cubism-Futurism (1913-15) and Supermatism to early Constructivism (1916-19) following through to the later stages of Constructivism (1920-22) and finally with production art, such as, textile and fashion design (1922-1924).

Popova herself believed her mature work started in 1913. During 1908-1912 her works included still life, landscapes, paintings and studies of trees and the human

Fig. 13 Liubov Popova, 1924

figure.

In the earlier part of the second decade Popova's influences for her later techniques and styles came from her travels, visiting old Russian cities and Italy between 1909-11. She was also influenced by ancient Russian art and religious paintings by Mikhail Vrubel. In her visits to Italy she was amazed by the work of the fourteenth and fifteenth century painters such as Grotto and Pintoricchia. As a result, Popova looked upon perception of form and colour in a different way.

Popova felt she had to explore her own style. She joined with another painter, Liudmila A. Prudkovskaya and together they had a studio in Moscow. During this time, Popova was introduced to the new French movement started by Picasso and Broque: Cubism.

It must be remembered that throughout Popova's stylistic changes in her work, she always remained dedicated to painted.

Comparing Popova's work of 1912 before she travelled to Paris and when she returned in 1913, her work changed dramatically. She used the Cubist methods, fragmenting objects into geometric shapes. Her work was more expressive. If two paintings of Popova's are compared [Fig. 14] 'Female Model' c 1912 and [Fig. 14a] Female Model, (Standing), (1913-14) it can be noted how quickly Popova's style changed.

Popova became very interested in the human figure and now she could re-construct it breaking each fundamental element of the figure.

However influential Cubism and Futurism were to Popova, she wanted to develop her own stylistic principles. After her return from France in 1913, upon working in Tatlin's studio, she came up with her own way of depicting objects in space and started making Constructivist works.

In late 1921 Popova was searching for a new creative object. She had already explored easel painting, three dimensional art, cubism, constructivism and so on. It

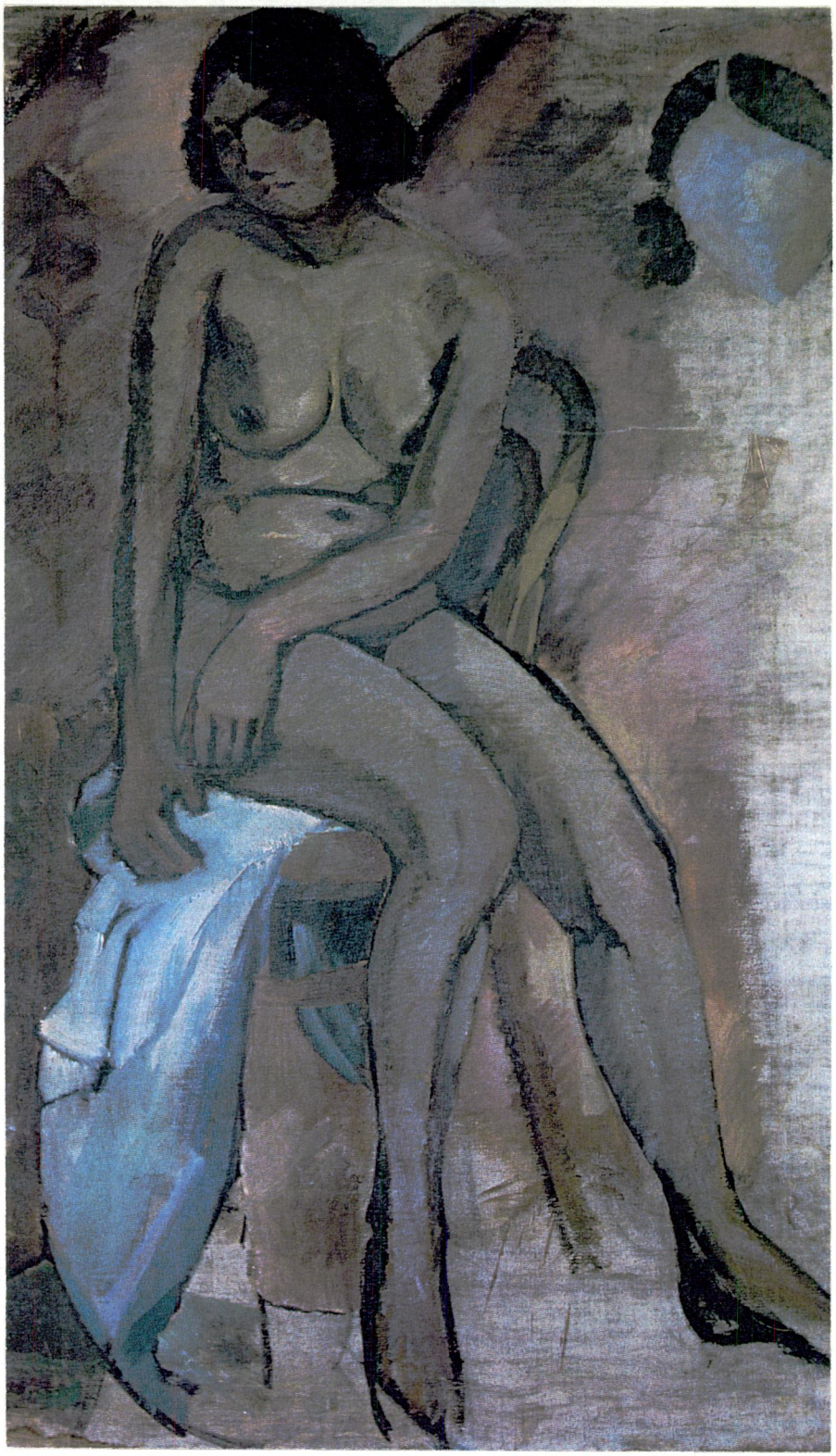


Fig. 14 Liubov Popova
'Female Model'
ca 1912, Oil on Canvas

Fig. 14a **Liubov Popova**
'Female Model' (Standing)
1913, oil on canvas

was a time to change, to explore other disciplines to translate her ideas. She became involved in theatre.

Meyerhold became the best known in theatrical constructivism.

Popova and Meyerhold had a great relationship working together. Popova's work with Meyerhold became the best known in theatrical constructivism.

They both understood theatre and knew how to excite the audience. They changed the rules of theatre, making two dimensional sets three dimensional. Traditional stage sets were flat painted backdrops resembling country scenes, interiors etc. but now stage sets and props had a greater function in plays.

Popova's first theatrical work was for 'Romeo and Juliet (1921) for the Chamber (Kamernyi) Theatre. (Later it was directed by Alexander Tairov and the sets were designed by Alexandra Exter). Because 'Romeo and Juliet' was Popova's first theatrical job, a lot of research on sets designs and the movement of actors bodies was done. It goes back to Popova's interest in the human figure and space from her Cubist period. She always had a passion for Italian Renaissance painting which she had seen as a young woman and wanted to reproduce this on stage [Fig. 15] Study for a set for 'Romeo and Juliet [Fig. 15a] Costume design for 'Romeo and Juliet'.

Due to Popova's inexperience in theatre design Alexander Tairov (who commissioned her to design the sets and costumes in the first place) decided she had failed to bring the whole visual performances together. Tairov chose instead to use the set and costume designs by Alexandra Exter. Popova's theatre designs for Vsevolod Meyerhold were more successful. In 1922 she designed sets and costumes for Tairov's production of 'The Magnanimous Cuckold' by Ternand Crommelynk as already mentioned in Chapter 2 [Fig. 11] and in 1923 for Emla Dybom (Earth in Turmoil) an adaptation of Marcel Martinet's drama 'La Nuit' [Fig. 16].

The sets for 'The Magnanimous Cuckold' were considered as Constructivist ideas. The sets were based on verticals and horizontals and the three-dimensional use of

Fig. 15 Liubov Popova
Study of set for 'Romeo and Juliet', 1920

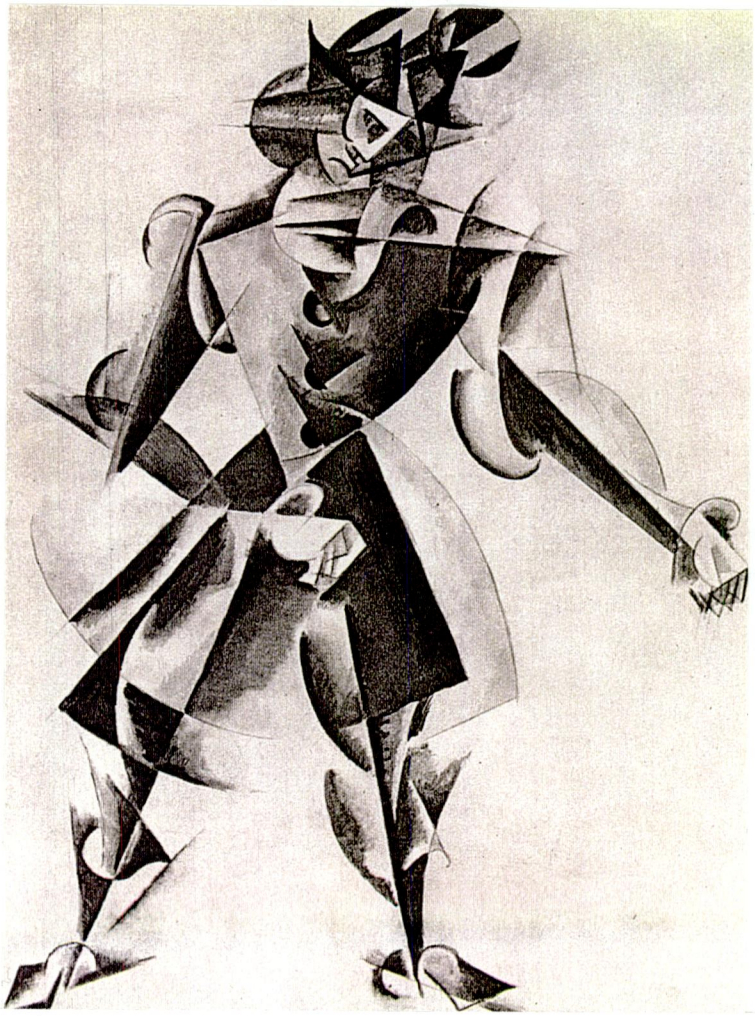


Fig. 15a **Liubov Popova**
Costume Design for 'Romeo & Juliet' 1920

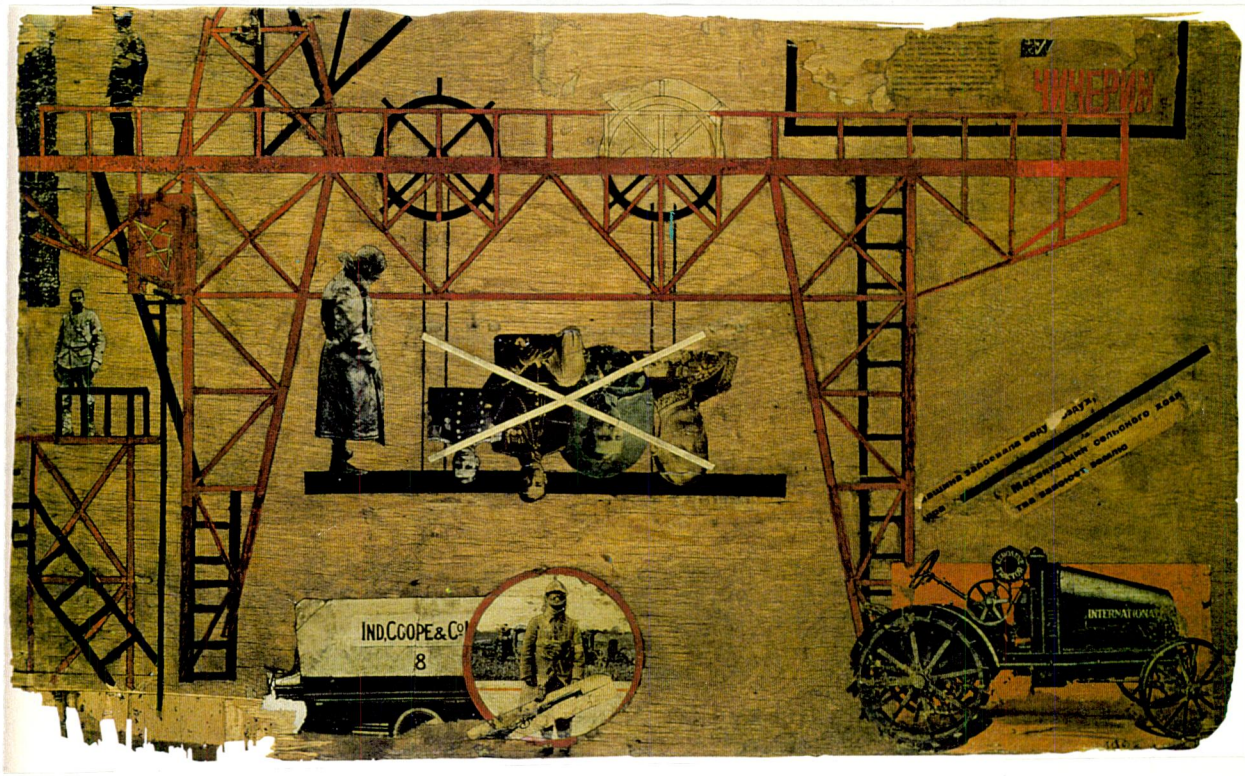


Fig. 16 **Zemla Dybon**
Set design for 'Earth in Turmoil', 1923

Fig. 17 &
17a

Liubov Popova
Working Clothes for Actors
No. 5 and No. 6 in
'The Magnanimous Cuckold' 1921

planes and rotating platforms, which were made from plywood. The exploration of lights manipulated the use of space which Popova already explored in her techniques of Space-Force Constructions in 1920 and 1921 that involved linear structure. The costume designs are made up of simple geometric shapes, referring back to the workmans clothes - Prozodezhda [Fig. 17] and [Fig. 17a]. They were designed to allow the actors to move easily and emphasise the biomechanical rhythms already explored by Meyerhold. Popova's sets and costume designs brought together the whole theatrical production concentrating on gesture, movement, music, light and architecture; the interaction of forms, materials and space.

Thus production marks a radical change in stage design. It showed the importance of sets and costumes rather than relating them to a backdrop and bringing them into real living art.

The set designs for 'Earth in Turmoil' are very different to 'The Magnanimous Cuckhold', even though there is only one year between the productions. Once again Popova designed the stage but with a different concept with art materials. The costumes were on the same principle as 'The Magnanimous Cuckold' simplicity, but against a different setting they appeared different. Popova used real everyday props, such as cranes, machines, and guns which gave the character of "agit-performance".
(Dabrowshi, W. 1991, p. 25).

In Popova's sketches for Romeo and Juliet, 'The Square' [Fig. 18] she reproduced the terraces of palaces, a marbled church, towers, gates and stairs that would be seen in an Italian tower. This information had to be translated into theatre surroundings. Once again, cubism was the influential technique, using collage as her technique compositions with collages period borrowed from easel.

As in her paintings of 1914-15, Popova concentrated on abstraction, building forms through colour and fragmented shapes.

In the study of 'The Garden' [Fig. 15] in 'Romeo and Juliet' the twisting curling trees gives an impression of an architectural-decoration rather than real life trees.

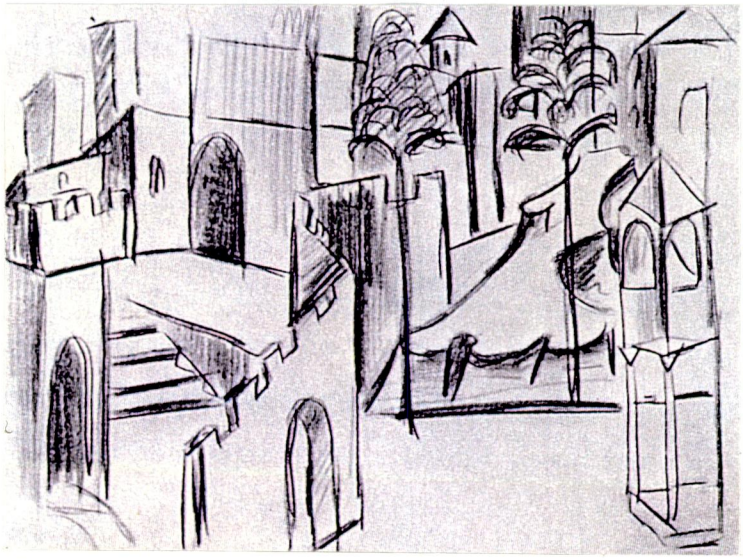


Fig. 18 **Liubov Popova**
Study of set for 'Romeo and Juliet'
'The Square'
Moscow Chamber Theatre, 1920

It is interesting the compare Popova's costume designs for 'Romeo and Juliet' and abstract landscape with the work of Exter, who I will discuss in the second part of this chapter.

Alexandra Alexandrovna Exter (1882-1949) [Fig. 19] like Popova was a professional painter. She was known as a great colourist in the early part of her career. Her work in fashion borrowed the style of cubism, playing special attention to colour. Colour became the main importance in Exter's dynamic decorations for theatre.

Exter attended art school in Kiev until 1907 and in 1908-1914 continued her studies at the Heni Caraux-Deluai studio of the Grande Chaumiere Academy in Paris. It was during this time that she also, like Popova, because acquainted with the painters Pablo Picasso and George Braque. In 1919 she took part in the cubist arts exhibition in Moscow. This as the beginning of Exter's exploration of cubism and she later brought it to her stage and costume designs. [Fig. 20] Abstract Composition, 1917.

At the beginning of 1916, Exter was drawn to the excitement of theatre. She found it was something new and she knew she could combine her knowledge of colour and easel painting into theatre design.

In 1916-1922 Exter made innovative sketches of costumes and stage sets for the Moscow Chamber Theatre and the Moscow Art Theatre productions of 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'Salome' among others [Fig. 21].

In 1921 Exter worked with a group of constructivist artists designing 'Prozodezhda' (work man clothes) and a new contemporary fashionable costume at the Atelier of Fashions.

Exter's stage costumes were dynamic. Her sketches were finished pieces in themselves, bringing personalities into the sketches using colour and the Cubist style, as did Popova. Her knowledge of easel painting was brought through with her stage sets and costume designs. She used bright, strong colours in her sketches. Yakov Tugendkhold (analysing Exter as a designer) once said:

Fig. 19 Alexandra Exter 1910

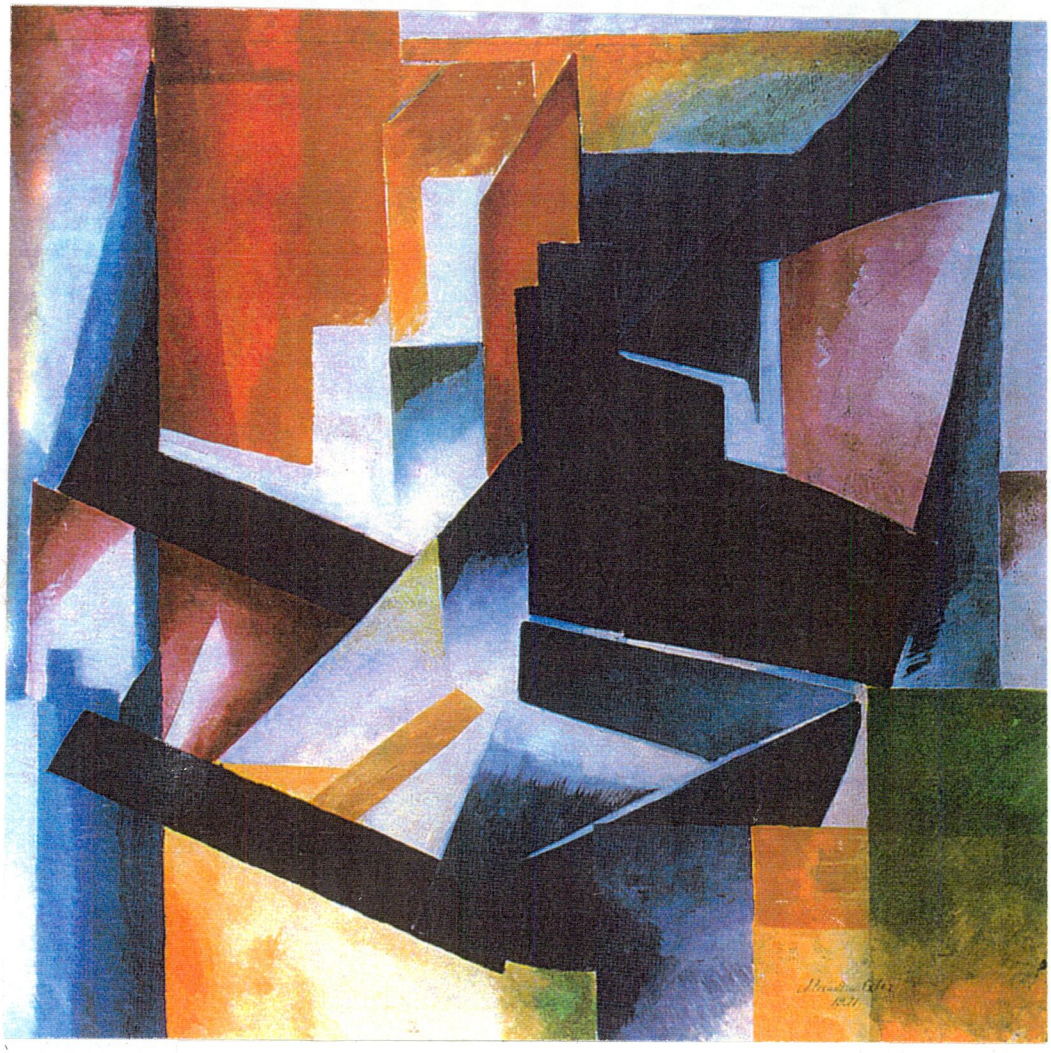


Fig. 20 Alexandra Exter
Abstract Composition, 1917

Fig. 21 **Alexandra Exter**
Costume Design for Oscar Wilde's 'Salome', 1917

'She sees costumes as make up for the body as a mask for the figure; each of her costumes are conceived as coherent and complete from head (or even from the feather in her cap) to toe ..... (Strizhenova. T. 1991, p. 109).

Exter's designs for stage costume were practical, for everyday wear, yet elegant. She believed costume should be practical, versatile and comfortable. She followed her ideas through geometric shapes, rectangles, squares, triangles and the use of colour moved around her simple shapes.

The materials used in her costumers were also simple fabrics, canvas, sateen, loose-weave cloth, homespun silk, raw silk and woollen cloth.

Exter used certain fabrics for different uses on stage. Elastic fabrics were used for dancers so they could move easily on stage. This was necessary because biomechanics depended on body rhythms. Wool or silk was used for more complex silhouettes.

Exter believed 'Clothes must be adapted to their needs and the type of work they are doing'.
(Rudnitsky, K. 1988. p. 115)

Popova and Exter both designed for 'Romeo and Juliet' but it was Exter's designs that were chosen [Fig. 22] and [Fig. 22a].

Examining the numerous studies of Popova;s stage designs of 'Romeo and Juliet' and Exter's studies it is quite clear the similar approach they both took. The studies of both artists are similar to their easel compositions. In [Fig. 23] set design for 'Romeo and Juliet' by Exter is fragmented in vertical and horizontal lines forming on continuous pattern formally and structurally. Your eye follows a definite line around the steps to the next level. The actors on stage could hid from the audience. Similar to Exter's stage design Popova;'s study of one of her ideal stages for 'Romeo and Juliet' [Fig. 24] is also geometrical fragmented in a large scale setting. Each panel is flat but through shading each shape is given a form, either curving or a sense of perspective. Popova's design has less levels but still has a sense of mystery.

Fig. 22 Liubov Popova
Costume Design for 'Romeo and Juliet'

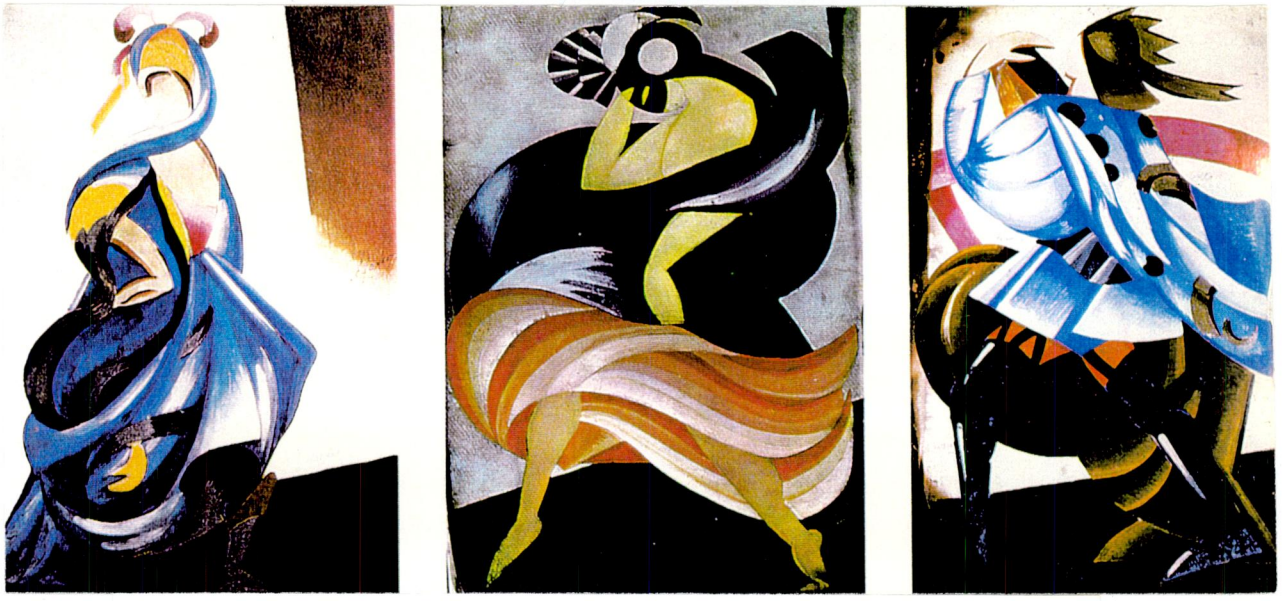


Fig. 22a Alexandra Exter
Costume Design for 'Romeo and Juliet, 1921

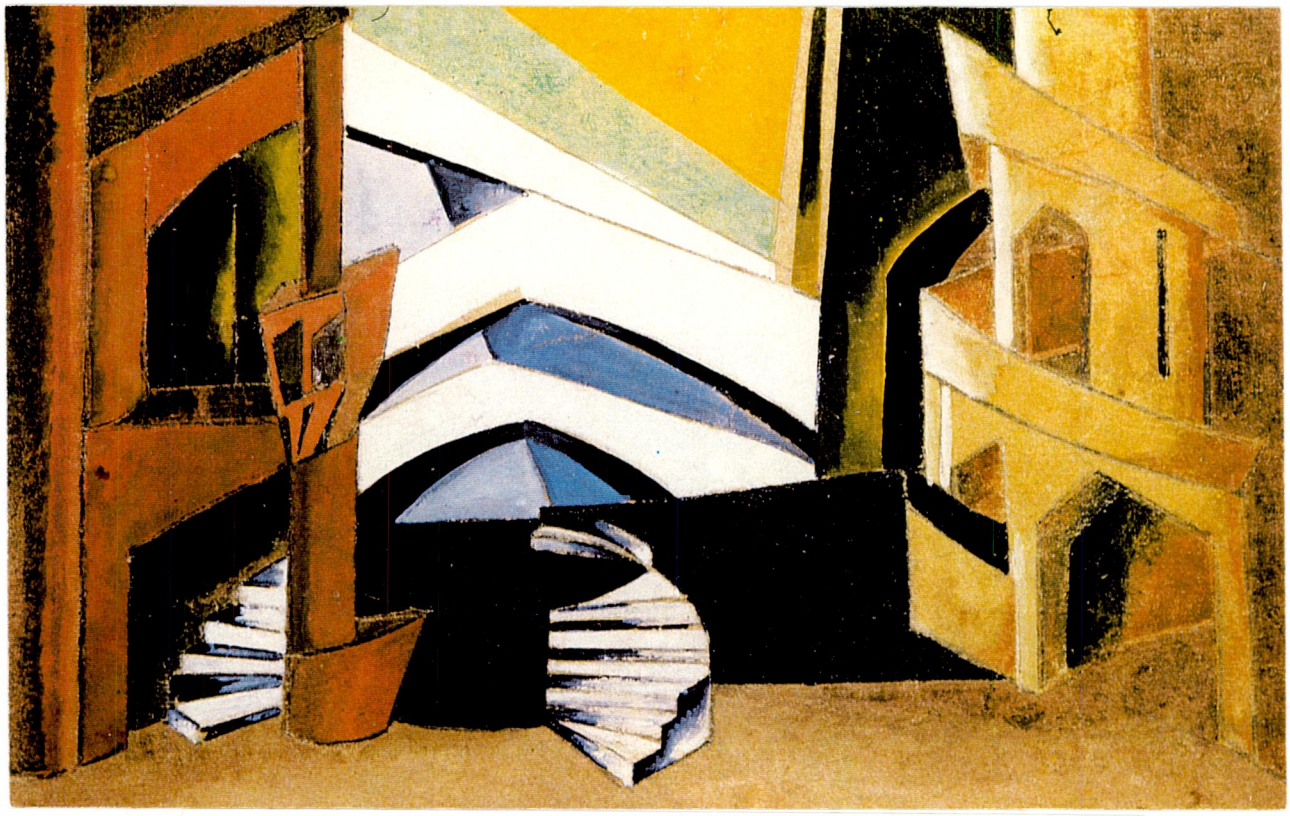


Fig. 23 Alexandra Exter
Stage design for 'Romeo and Juliet', 1917

Fig. 24 Liubov Popova
Study of set for 'Romeo and Juliet'
'The Garden in Front of the House'
Moscow Chamber Theatre, 1920

Fig. 25 Alexandra Exter,
Costume Design for 'Romeo and Juliet'

Fig. 25a Liubov Popova
Costume Design for 'Romeo and Juliet'

Also examining costume designs from Popova and Exter from 'Romeo and Juliet' both used a fluid line, change in direction of line and form. In [Fig. 25] Exter and [Fig. 25a] Popova show a great skill in their combination of panels in costume designs, diamond shaped, rectangular, or triangular, each differing in texture, pattern and colour. Diagonal lines cross the dress creating "interconnecting geometric shapes, rhytme and changes. the colours through light falling on the shapes. Exter wanted to stun the audience with her costumers.

These two designs are very similar. Each shape is broken down into individual shapes, giving a three-dimensional costume. Both costumes are decorated with hats with an impression of a feather pointing outwards. Each part of the costume is constructed so that each panel is important. The colour of the garment changes totally.

Both costumes have leggings to emphasise the body, and enable the audience to see the movement of the figure. The only differences I can see in the two costumes is that the upper part of Popova's costume is fuller than Exter's costume and Romeo has a mask covering his eyes.

Each figure draws similar emphasis on fragmentation of the body into geometric connecting shapes. Given these similarities it is now hard to see why Popova's designs were rejected.

Both Popova and Exter were excited by the possibilities of the new theatre. They were glad to leave behind easel painting as they felt they explored different techniques. They believed that revolutionary easel painting had less meaning than socially useful work in theatre. Now at the beginning of the 1920s they were creating new costumes where they could apply their talent and knowledge as truly revolutionary artists, stressing the importance of creativity and exploration in a new project. The two artists applied their knowledge of art to costume design, creating ornaments based on geometric forms, sharply contrasting colours, and complex criss-crossing lines giving the impression of excitement and imagination. For both artists, the principle of collective action and biomechanics affected how their costumes were designed.

I have already said the reason for choosing both these artists primarily the theatrical recognition Popova received and Exter did not. None of the books I have read explains why this is the case. Perhaps Popova was already recognised as a great painter and being complicated politics as they were at the time, some artists were popular. Personally I prefer Exter's theatrical work to Popova's but perhaps at the time knowing the right people added to your success.

Popova died at a young age of thirty five making room for other artists for success. Exter lived to the age of sixty seven experimented with other disciplines, fashion and textile design, as did Popova, Exter always remained dedicated to easel painting.

CONCLUSION

In between Russian Revolution of 1905 and 1917 the Russian theatre had been through successful and unsuccessful periods. Theatre during the first decade of the twentieth-century was faced with the social role of reality bringing with it a new and larger size audience. Lenin proclaimed that theatre had to be greater than a spectacle, and directors, designers, playwrights and artists rose to the challenge. (Rudnifsky, K. 1988, p.8).

This challenge shocked the theatrical world, to this day it provides inspiration for theatrical productions around the world.

After the disturbing October Revolution of 1917 every industry and arts suffered. Poverty set in among the different classes of society. Theatre became the communication of everyday life as radio and television is to us today. Leading traditional directors, e.g. Stanislavsky, became involved with avant-gardists such as Meyerhold, Futurists, lead by Mayakovsky and Constructivists, who designed sets and costumes bringing colour and form together for an emotional atmosphere.

Amongst the successful artists, Popova and Exter to me explored and developed theatrical designs to the full. Each artists using their knowledge of colour and painting, influences from Europe their designs for theatre were similar. Unfortunately, Exter's acclaimed success was later in her career and after her death. Findings of her sketches for theatre (now owned by private collectors and Moscow;s Theatrical Museum) after her death showed how interested she was in theatre design and the movement of the human figure. Popova's success as a professional painter gave her the advantage over many artists in theatre to become well known amongst directors.

Exter and Popova's designs for theatre and many other artists of the first two decades of the twentieth-century still remain as a guidance and inspiration for theatre stage and costume designs for today's theatrical productions.

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