

The Perfect Production: Les Kurbas's Analysis of the Early Soviet Audience¹

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Because the Communist Party of the USSR recognized the effectiveness of theater in influencing the masses and inculcating a socialist consciousness, it made strenuous efforts to control all aspects of theatrical activity. Theater directors were open to attack, dismissal, arrest, and execution. It was imperative for the literal survival of their companies that their productions be supported by a strong proletarian audience base and that they demonstrate their clear ideological positions. One way in which directors could negotiate the treacherous political terrain and prove that they were, in fact, presenting comprehensible productions well-received by workers was by seeking solid empirical evidence confirming their claims. One of the few who did so was Les Kurbas (1887-1937), Artistic Director of the Berezhil Artistic Association. His use of a broad spectrum of tools and approaches, including behaviorist analyses and questionnaires, remains to date still one of the most forward-thinking and all-encompassing methods of studying the audience.

Audiences mattered in the Soviet period.² Recognizing the effectiveness of theater above all other arts in its ability to influence the masses and inculcate a socialist consciousness, the Bolsheviks (later, the Communists) made planned, strenuous efforts from the very begin-

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1. An earlier version of this paper was first presented at the symposium "Ukrainian Modern Art: Modernity, Identity, Tradition," University of Toronto, March 16, 2007.
 2. The Soviet period was initiated in 1922 with the creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and was dissolved in 1991. Initially, it consisted of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Transcaucasia (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) but gradually encompassed fifteen republics. The USSR was often incorrectly used as a synonym for Russia, which was the largest and dominant constituent state of the federation.

ning to “regulate the theatrical market”—as censorship and control were euphemistically and commonly described. By the 1930s, they achieved a stranglehold on all aspects of theatrical activity, including repertoire, personnel, and artistic style. Theater directors were open to attack, dismissal, arrest, and execution. It was imperative for the literal survival of their companies that their productions be supported by a strong proletarian audience base and that they demonstrate their clear ideological positions. A firm understanding of the audience and its needs was thus a serious issue that went far beyond concerns with box office receipts.

One way in which theater directors could negotiate the treacherous political terrain and prove that they were, in fact, presenting comprehensible productions well-received by workers was by seeking solid empirical evidence confirming their claims. Few, however, appear to have done so. Indeed, Willmar Sauter laments the fact that neither today nor during the early Soviet period was “even the question of who visited the theaters . . . empirically surveyed” (116). As this paper will show, however, audiences were indeed empirically and thoroughly studied by the Soviet Ukrainian director Les Kurbas (1887-1937). His use of a broad spectrum of tools and approaches, including behaviorist analyses and questionnaires, remains, to date, still one of the most forward-thinking and all-encompassing methods of studying the process of creating theater.

Shakespeare and the Early Soviet Stage

One of the most frequently reiterated laments of the early Soviet period was that there was “a crisis in the theater.” This did not mean the absence of theater. On the contrary, theater groups sprang up everywhere like mushrooms, including and especially in the villages. The “crisis” was, rather, located in the fact that the pre-revolutionary drama and theater hardly seemed equipped to speak to the new era just emerging from the Brueghelesque crucible of world war, civil war, and revolution.

In this context, there was small interest in Shakespeare in Russia. The turn away from staging his works was already noticeable in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and continued well into the Soviet period with only a few notable exceptions. Instead, throughout the 1920s, the place of the world classics in the new Soviet order was continually and hotly debated,³ with

3. For a detailed account of these debates, see my *Shakespeare in the Undiscovered Bourn* (*passim*, but especially ch. 4, pp. 144-64).

some demanding that they be discarded as useless relics of a bourgeois past, others that they be "rehabilitated" to suit the contemporary moment and in the absence of contemporary Soviet "Shakespeares."

It was in another, formerly provincial territory of the Russian empire that the most remarkable *Macbeth* of the whole Soviet period was produced. In Ukraine, all performances and translations of Shakespeare into the Ukrainian language had been banned by nineteenth-century tsarist decrees and circulars (in 1863, 1876, 1881), thus turning Shakespeare into secretly-circulating literature well before the Soviet period. After the reforms following the 1905 Revolution, the first Ukrainian stationary theater was permitted in Kyiv,⁴ a momentous event in importance not unlike the creation of the Abbey Theatre in Ireland. Since Shakespeare and other foreign writers had hitherto been prohibited, Ukrainian directors and actors were, unlike their Russian counterparts, eager to perform them.

The great Soviet Ukrainian stage and film director Les Kurbas intended to produce the whole Shakespearean canon, although, for a variety of reasons, he was able to prepare only four plays (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*) and do preliminary work on five others (*Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *Timon of Athens*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*). In the process, he laid the foundations for modern Ukrainian theater and film, educating and influencing hundreds of actors, visual artists, musicians, directors, and scene designers. Kurbas was convinced that the Ukrainian theater urgently first needed to acquire mastery of the world classics along with the stylistic variety they represented; this "catch up" stage of acquisition would eventually lead to the creation of a distinct theatrical Ukrainian "voice" or idiom. What he admired most about writers such as Sophocles and Shakespeare was their "good bones," their dramaturgical effectiveness. As he observed, "Classical dramaturgy is at base important and still useful to the present day in its structural aspects, which have arisen out of a certain understanding of the laws of human reception. It is maximally educative" (Kurbas, "Suspil'ne pryznachennia" 91).

If the unwritten rules of human response could be catalogued, analyzed, and understood, then it might be possible to create great contemporary plays and productions which would resonate with the same kind of power as the classics. Expressionism, Cubism, and Constructivism were among the then current "isms" of great appeal. All of these, however, were alien and unknown

4. Kyiv is the currently accepted and official English spelling of the capital of Ukraine. Until 1991 it was known as Kiev.

to many in the audiences Kurbas faced in the 1920s. These were a heterogeneous group that reflected Kyiv's multicultural and class realities and included the intelligentsia, peasants, and workers; literates and illiterates; Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, Germans, Poles, Georgians, Armenians, and others. Some of these had never seen any theater before. How could the "perfect production" be created that satisfied, moved, and enchanted such a mixed group?

Les Kurbas and the Audience

As a true man of the theater (actor, director, playwright, translator, fundraiser, sometime composer, and costume designer), Kurbas paid serious attention to what we would call "affect" and the resulting bond it creates among spectator, actor, and the work. Rejecting the idea that art is merely the union of form and content, he observed that, rather, it consists of content, form, material, creativity, and reception (*sprymannia*)—a clear reference to the observer's role in art (Kurbas, "Rezhysers'kyi shchodennyk" 11). Later, he went further by describing art as a communal activity: it was, he noted, that special form of a relationship among people in which they are made to feel, share, and experience one single worldview (Kurbas, "Pro vykhovannia" 69). Such a definition anticipates and chimes with the concept of "theater event" introduced into Western performance criticism in the 1980s: the idea that the actor and the audience constitute an "inseparable entity, and have to be understood and analyzed as a mutual relationship" (Sauter 127-28).

From his earliest days in the Young (*Molodyi*) Theater, his first theater collective, Kurbas set out to inform, shape, and understand spectators' reactions to his productions. He is unusual in the history of theater in his all-encompassing efforts to do so. We may see this on one level in his sometimes mocked practice of appearing before the curtain dressed as Harlequin to explain the aims of the production and, more generally, the goals of his theater company. The choice of costume may not simply be an attempt to present an instantly recognizable theatrical figure. As the recent exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada "The Great Parade: Portrait of the Artist as Clown" (2004) has shown, Harlequin was also a trickster who, like his diabolical progenitor, Hermes Trismegistus, linked the rational with the irrational world.⁵ In this earlier period of creativity, Kurbas frequently referred to theater as a temple, to the importance of a return to its ritual origins, to

5. Exhibition organized by Pierre Théberge. Also see the exhibition catalogue of the same name and the connections between Harlequin and "the thrice-great" Hermes (Clair 336).

the necessity of presenting both the diabolical and the beautiful on stage, and to the joy of playing.⁶ He invited the spectators to be receptive to transformation, to be drawn into the action, to forget the self, and become co-creators of the production.

By the time that he founded the Berezil Artistic Association⁷ in 1922, however, Kurbas had given way to a more intellectual and sophisticated apprehension of the theatrical event and, consequently, of the relationship among actor, audience, and work. His engagement with the question of the audience is also reflected in a broader range of attempts to reach out to them and, in turn, to attempt to understand and analyze their response. On the most basic level, we may see his attempt to inform and shape opinion by his careful placement of production "puffs" and interviews in both the Soviet Ukrainian and Russian press, most notably on the eve of his radical production of *Macbeth* in 1924, a clear indication of Kurbas's jitteriness about a possibly negative audience response. His nervousness obviously continued up to the very moment of the premiere on April 2, when he decided to send out actor-manager Stepan Bondarchuk to justify to the spectators the radical tampering with a world classic.

Another level of engagement may be seen in his common practice of sitting in the audience, observing their expressions at first hand and listening to their comments. Such a custom permitted him to assess the spectators' immediate and unreflective response. He also had members of the Berezil take turns as note-takers. A copy of the play-text was brought to each performance and the reactions of the spectators were noted in the margins of the text. According to actress Iryna Avdieva, who occasionally served in this capacity, the following categories were employed: active attention, passive attention, disengagement, indifference, coughing, movement, noise, laughter, applause. Occasionally, when things didn't go as planned and the audience laughed at a point where they shouldn't, Kurbas could be seen rubbing his forehead in annoyance and mumbling, "Not this, not this" (Avdieva 150).

A deeper analysis of audience response, however, would require something more than general notations about audience laughter, puzzlement, or tears. In the pursuit of such a more empirical understanding of affect, Kur-

6. For example, see Les Kurbas's Director's Diary ("Rezhysers'kyi shchodennyk").

7. Berezil is the archaic Ukrainian term for "March," the first month of spring and the beginning of the year in the old calendar. In choosing this name, Kurbas was inspired by a poem of the Norwegian writer Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson.

bas made a practice of distributing detailed questionnaires after every performance. This practice is generally in tune with the significant scholarly aspect of the Berezil which needs underscoring. Not simply a theater company but rather closer to a theater university, the Berezil produced dramatic and musical shows (including opera), carried out theater research, experimented with stage design, performance, and audience response, published a journal (*Barykady teatru*; “Theater Barricades”), and set up a theater museum. At its height when it had a membership of around 600, the Berezil embraced six studios: three in Kyiv, one each in Bila Tserkva, Boryspil, and Odesa, as well branches in villages and towns within Kyiv’s perimeter. Its widely experimental and ambitious range also encompassed a children’s theater, a touring model peasants’ theater, as well as a Jewish section (“B”; Desniak 116-17).

On the more scholarly side and in addition to an extraordinary variety of lecture topics covered in the classroom (e.g. world history, art, music, theater, rhetoric, aesthetics, literature, philosophy, biology, medicine, psychology, fencing, classical ballet, juggling, tightrope-walking, acrobatics), Kurbas created a number of research committees, such as the “psycho-technical” committee studying applied psychology in order to develop new teaching methods in the theater. The creation and distribution of detailed questionnaires conforms to this sustained interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research, the results of which would have been discussed and analysed in research committees and in the directors’ lab.

It is a little known fact that there are hundreds of extant questionnaires from Kurbas’s productions in the archives of the Ukrainian State Museum of Theater, Music, and Film Arts in Kyiv. We know from published accounts and archival sources that this can be only a miniscule number of the many thousands of questionnaires which the Berezil distributed. In an article published in 1924, for instance, “S.B.” (probably Stepan Bondarchuk) reported that over 40,000 questionnaires had been distributed by the Berezil during the previous theater season. None of the extant questionnaires have received any scholarly attention, although they provide a fascinating snapshot of the early Soviet Ukrainian audience, their sense of identity, their understanding of theatrical forms, their preferences, and their thoughts about theater’s relationship to ideology.

During my last visit to the archives in 2000, I transcribed 37 extant questionnaires which had been distributed on November 14, 1924 after a revival of one of the performances of Kurbas’s *Macbeth*; that is, at a performance given seven months after the premiere of what was considered a

scandalous production.⁸ The responses offer a glimpse both of the kind of remarkably detailed analysis in which the Berezil was engaged, and a lively picture of the mixed audience that attended. From our twenty-first century point of view, inundated as we are by telemarketers, opinion polls, and other sorts of surveys, we might be astounded by the scope and detail of this early practice, as well as by the willingness of the audience to respond, often in great and critical detail.

History of Theater Questionnaires

Before turning to a discussion of the questionnaires and in order to contextualize and assess Kurbas's achievement in this area of audience analysis, a brief sally into the history and practice of distributing theater surveys is required.

A cousin of Darwin's, Sir Francis Galton (1822-1911), is generally considered the inventor of the survey/questionnaire, first using this form of information gathering in 1874 for a work on heredity (Simonton 619). It seems logical to assume that the more widespread practice of distributing questionnaires is linked to the rise of sociology as a scientific discipline (it was first taught at universities in the early 1890s). When, exactly, the practice was transferred to the realm of theater has not yet been discovered.

In imperial Russia, the earliest documented example of the distribution of theater surveys was undertaken by the Nevsky Society, formed to produce a cheap but "morally healthy" alternative (i.e. non-alcoholic) entertainment for workers. The Society eventually designed basic questionnaires in 1896 "to make the theater more responsive to its public's needs" (Thurston, "Theater and Acculturation" 10).⁹ Although some of the excerpts from respondents were published in the Russian press (Thurston, *The Popular Theater* 136), it is unlikely that the young Kurbas (nine years old and living

8. Details about this production are provided below. For a full reconstruction, see chapter 2 of my *Shakespeare in the Undiscovered Bourn*. The complete questionnaire was first reproduced and briefly discussed by actor-director Vasyl Vasylko in his diary (Vasylko "Dodatok"). A member of the director's lab, Vasylko also appears to have been responsible for tabulating the results or at least for publishing them (Vasylko "Pidsumky").

9. The questions posed were: Did the audience understand the plays? Were they satisfied with the entertainment? What did they understand to be the moral significance of the show?

in far-away Western Ukraine, then under Austro-Hungarian rule) would know about this practice.¹⁰

It is also unlikely that Kurbas knew about two other examples of the uses of theatrical questionnaires, one carried out by the Mobile Public Theater from Petrograd (led by Pavel Pavlovich Gaydeburov and Nadezhda Fedorovna Skarskaya) which toured the front and distributed questionnaires there in September and October of 1917 (Kleberg, "Nature" 191, n. 15). Nor would it have been likely that he knew about the director Alexander Bardovsky's use of behaviorist studies carried out at the Leningrad Youth Theater in 1917 which, observing the reactions of so-called typical children, compiled them into a "general survey" (Kleberg, "Nature" 181).¹¹

A better known example of such a practice was that of Vasily Fyodorov, the assistant director of Vsevolod Meyerhold, whose distribution of questionnaires is recorded as having taken place during the 1924-1925 season, but after it was established by the Berezil.¹² Fyodorov was interested in analyzing the reactions of spectators and, in order to do so, created a chart encompassing twenty possible reactions of the audience from silence to coughing to laughter. He published some of his findings in 1924 to some lively and critical debate,¹³ particularly from Mikhail Zagorsky who attacked the behaviorist approach as sociologically useless (141-51).

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10. As a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Kurbas would also have had access to information about questionnaires in journals or from other sources; however, so far, an exploration of both German and Polish sources has not yielded any results.
 11. Lars Kleberg has shown that audience research seems to have been more firmly established in children's and youth theater, and speculates that it was probably only later transferred to adult theater. The methods employed were mostly observation, but simple questionnaires were also sometimes distributed to teachers or parents. It was an informal and loosely-constructed practice whose aim was to ensure that the entertainment provided was not just satisfying to its young audience, but also morally and ethically educative (Kleberg, "Nature" 184). In that sense, the aims of the surveys of both the Nevsky Society and the children's theaters appear to have served similar functions.
 12. We should note that Meyerhold was in Kyiv in 1923, where a famous "face-off" occurred: three productions by Meyerhold, three by Kurbas. The partisan Kyivan press pronounced Kurbas the "winner." Meyerhold, impressed with Kurbas's *Jimmie Higgins*, invited him to bring the show to Moscow. For press coverage, see, for example, Boim, Panfuturyst-ekstruktor [Mykola Bazhan], and "Ia. F": "Meyerhold has heroes; Kurbas has masses . . . their movements are organized into harmonious music-like waves . . . not a photographic but a deeply artistic impression of the struggle of the proletariat" (3).
 13. See Kleberg's "The Audience as Myth and Reality" in *Theatre as Action: Soviet*

Rather than treating the audience as an *object*, Zagorsky called for more rigorous, empirical studies that considered the audience as *subject*. The alternative he proposed was questionnaires, a practice he himself had briefly undertaken during the theatrical season of 1920-1921, and whose 186 extant surveys he analyzed and first made more generally public in his article-rebuttal to Fyodorov. The unavoidable conclusion he came to in that essay was that there was no single performance and no single spectator (Zagorsky 151); the auditorium, in other words, is not formed of a homogeneous group but, rather, it is constructed of a variety of constituents, a conclusion “rediscovered” by Western scholars in the late twentieth century.¹⁴ Opining that there was an absence of empirical audience research, Zagorsky underlined the importance of asking questions about the social composition of the audience, its class groupings and their distinct responses to this or that play, theater, and approach, to “academic” or to “left” shows (141-42). What Zagorsky proposed as an ideal—the union of the separate fields of audience reception (essentially demographic questions) and reception research (behaviorist questions)—was, in fact, already a well-established practice at the Berezil. Indeed, Kurbas's synthetic, broad-based, and sustained efforts at empirically understanding the audience both outside and inside the auditorium were unique and innovative, though apparently as unknown to his Russian counterparts as to scholars writing today.

The Berezil Questionnaires

Let us now turn to the questionnaires and recall their purpose, which, for Kurbas, was to understand the nature of his audience, its composition, responses, and preferences. By analyzing the results, he hoped to grasp the underlying “rules” of audience reception intuited by the great writers of the past. In turn, this would enable him to create contemporary equivalents of classical masterpieces that would have the power to move his audiences. At the same time, the responses to the questionnaires could furnish the director

Russian Avant-Garde Aesthetics (ch. 9, 93-102). In his article “The Nature of the Soviet Audience” Kleberg observes that, in 1925, Meyerhold's theater also used “objective” research questions for evaluating guest performances in towns outside of Moscow (192, n. 28).

14. Parenthetically, we may note the continuing problem of terminology: the collective noun “audience” implies homogeneity and connotes a passive listening mode; the alternative term, “spectators,” is equally unsatisfactory in focusing on the act of looking, again, with a passive connotation.

with empirical evidence of a supportive proletarian base and thus justify his theatrical experimentation in the face of Party charges of “incomprehensibility” and ideological deviation.

The 24 questions of the Berezil questionnaire were divided into four parts: 1) Who are you? 2) Our production; 3) Our theater; and 4) Theater in general. The first set of questions (Who are you?) address seemingly straightforward demographic issues:

1. Your social status (worker, peasant, worker-*intelligent*, etc.)
2. Your profession
3. Your age
4. Nationality
5. Your education (what level you’ve completed)
6. Do you act or have you acted on stage?
7. Do you often attend the theater?

The difficulty of assessing and subsequently responding to the audience and its preferences becomes apparent when we begin to analyze the responses. To the first question (social status), one third identified themselves as “workers”: their professions included plumbers (the largest number represented), itinerant workers, a hemp-worker, lathe-operator, telegraph operator, stage electrician, hotel-worker, former baker, and two students. A few either refused to record their status or were unsure of it, leaving blanks and, instead, permitted their response to the second question, their profession, to stand as a response to the first.

The second largest group, 18%, identified themselves as “*trud-intelligent*” —“workers-intelligentsia,” a label which included teachers and students. One wag avoided the “*trud*” (work) part and identified himself as an “*intelligent*,” and, by profession, as a “poet dilettante.” Twelve percent identified themselves as peasants, although in this category many seemed to have acquired a surprising degree of literacy: one, who identified himself as an agricultural worker had completed a secondary education, while another with the same educational background and who considered himself of the same class, was, by profession, a teacher. On the other side of the scale were two peasants who had completed only a few lower grades of schooling, yet listed their professions as copyists or clerks.

The respondents varied in age from 17 to 45, though nearly half were in their 20s. A number of them, however, refrained from indicating their age, including a group of five friends who responded all together on one form.

Not surprisingly, nearly 62% identified their nationality as Ukrainian;

10 % Russian, 5% Jewish, 2% Greek, and 2% "Slavic." The group of five answered this question by responding, in Ukrainian, that they were five people "of different [but unspecified] nations." It should be noted the language of response was not always identical with the claim to nationality (the "Slav" wrote in Ukrainian, a number of Ukrainians in *surzhyk*—a mixture of Russian and Ukrainian—or Russian). As has already been suggested, the educational background was variable: from a few grades of trade school, to secondary schooling, to a claim of a "high" education.

To question 6 (Do you or did you ever act?) 62% responded negatively although one respondent was clearly tempted by the siren call of the stage, since he observed that although he had never acted, he might. Of the 27% who had experience with the stage, one identified himself as the director of a drama group; another, pointedly, as a member of a *Ukrainian* drama group. Also in this group were a plumber, a stage-electrician who "occasionally" acted, and a hotel-worker who claimed that he "acted and went to the theater every day." Were these bit parts that were performed on a daily basis? False claims? Responses made to annoy the survey analysts? In any case, correlating these responses to acting experience with their status yields no truly satisfying generalities: worker-plumbers were as likely to have had some acting experience (or claim to it) as *trud-intelligents*, Ukrainians as often as Russians.

To question 7 (Do you often attend the theater?) 51% said "yes" (though this affirmative response was qualified in some cases by financial constraints). Thirty two percent indicated that they attended infrequently. Two percent of the respondents were in the theater for the first time in their lives, and 2% for the first time in the Ukrainian theater. Interestingly, there seems to have been no necessary correlation between educational background and frequency of attendance at the theater; peasants with little or no education as well as the intelligentsia were as likely to attend.

Two general conclusions may be drawn from these responses to the first series of questions: one, that the Berezil appeared to have a core of youthful Ukrainian supporters of various backgrounds, status, and professions, something which confirms the claims that Kurbas himself made throughout the 1920s; and two, that the Berezil productions drew a very mixed audience, a fact which would make it difficult (and increasingly so) to create a production that would be comprehensible and satisfying to all.

The second series of questions centered on the production of *Macbeth* and asked the following long list of questions:

1. Did you understand and like the content of today's play?
2. What parts of the content of today's play were not comprehensible?

3. What did you like about the actors' performances?
4. What did you not like about the actors' performances?
5. What is your opinion about the constructions (stage decorations)?
6. What is your opinion about the costumes?
7. What is your opinion about the music?
8. What is your opinion about the dances?
9. What is your opinion about the lighting?
10. What did you like best about today's show?

A brief synopsis of Kurbas's remarkable production of *Macbeth* is in order here. Produced two months after the death of Lenin, Shakespeare's Scottish play in Berezil garb was (Kurbas explained) "fractured by the prism of the contemporary revolutionary world-view," that is, it became a totally modern, tragic-farcical, blood-soaked Cubist-Expressionist Shakespeare—one unlike any other seen before anywhere (East or West) at that time. In Yuri Boboshko's words, this was "not a 'costume' drama, but a national tragedy full of contemporary meaning" (63). The production interrogated every single theatrical convention, from props to the idea of the tragic hero. The designer, Vadym Meller, created enormous bright green screens of stretched canvas on which giant modernist red block letters announced the locality of each scene. Raised or lowered when needed at the sound of a gong, the screens served a variety of functions. Lowered at the same time, they indicated the simultaneity of the action in different parts of Scotland. At other times, they moved in slow, stately rhythm to underscore the emotions of the lead actors, to emphasize tension, or even to interfere in the action. Fragments of furniture, chairs, and a throne were, like the screens, lowered and raised when needed.

The most radical experiment of this production involved the creation of character. In Renaissance fashion and with similar effect, actors' roles were doubled or tripled, contributing to the spreading of guilt in the realm, and limiting the audience's habit of dividing the characters into easy categories of good and evil. Kurbas's real challenge to the actors was to display the perfection of their technique by turning their roles "on" and "off" at will. The mechanism of acting itself was openly displayed: each actor came on stage at his or her own pace, sometimes greeting the audience, and assuming a role only when properly positioned. Similarly, after "working" (performing his part), the actor exited as "himself." This repeated tactic isolated and drew attention to key moments in the play (in effect, making them resemble operatic arias which are set apart from the rest of the action).

While the production intellectualized and distanced the play from the

audience by stressing the omnipresence of evil, it also simultaneously used various devices to draw it in. For example, by lighting the witches from behind, large shadows were cast on the spectators. It was directly to these that Banquo and Macbeth spoke, an effect which seemed to extend the evil heath world into the reality of the spectators. The closest link between actor and audience was provided by a major textual addition: three mimed interludes interspersed between the acts of the play and involving the figure of The Porter (renamed the Fool in Kurbas's production). The Fool's last appearance, which occurred in the final moments of the play (when Macduff comes out carrying the head of Macbeth) caused a major scandal. Still wearing his Fool's makeup (the mocking, grinning face) actor Ambvrosy Buchma came in costumed as a bishop and proceeded to crown Malcolm to the solemn music of an organ made rather ironic through the addition of the delicate sounds of the piccolo and the rougher harmonium. Just as he did so, a new pretender approached, killed the kneeling Malcolm, and took the crown. Without pause, the bishop once again intoned the same words, "There is no power, but from God." As the new king was about to arise, a new pretender murdered him, and the ritual was repeated once again.

Keeping in mind the extraordinary departure from traditional ways of staging Shakespeare and (as we have seen) the demographic range of spectators, it is astonishing that over 62% responded positively to the play and understood it. Despite the transformation of this classic, one respondent commented that of course he liked the production and, anyway, how could one not like Shakespeare? The group of five (mentioned earlier) took this opportunity to solemnly and formally greet the Berezil with its success and to wish the Association the determination to continue along its courageous path. Eight percent admitted to only partly understanding the production; of these one noted that, in any case, he didn't understand the Ukrainian language. Others left blanks, but 24% complained: some that this was an old play and that new contemporary texts were needed; another regretted the absence of the *narod* (the people) on stage; yet another that the production was too "mystical," and, in perhaps the harshest critique, one remarked that the production was about as alien as a piece of junk at a Jewish bazaar.

Among the favourite parts of the play the most frequently cited were the Fool, the mass scenes, the witches, the killing of Duncan, the elasticity of the actors' expressions, the coronation scene, and the scenes with the ghosts and spirits. These positive responses, we may guess, came from those who enjoyed the theatricality of the production, while those who responded negatively to many of the same elements appeared to have been proponents of

realism: in this regard, they negatively cited the actors' grimaces, their "weird" acting, ponderous gestures, and characterization of their roles.

The austerity of the stage décor, the costumes, and the music received a similarly divided response along with some expressions of genuine puzzlement. A few partisan voices were heard ("The music was wonderful because our rector—Butsky—composed it.") One of the few questions which elicited near unanimity was in response to the dances carried out by the witches. The contemporary abstract movements à la Bronislava Nijinska¹⁵ elicited many blanks. Of the only eight responses to this question, most categorized the dances "very bad" while some even disputed that there were any. By comparison, most responded positively, and with enthusiasm to the lighting effects, even when criticizing the sustained level of stage darkness.

The majority were very knowledgeable about past productions of the Berezil. Nearly half had seen at least two of their other shows, while one enthusiast had seen "almost all." *Jimmie Higgins* and *Macbeth* were both cited as favourites; the former because of its "clear illumination of the class struggle" and its lifelikeness; the latter, because it was more comprehensible; both, for their "working class spirit." Two, however, held the opposite view: the Shakespearean production was far removed from workers' understanding.

In response to the last question of this section of the survey—how does the Berezil differ from other theaters?—some responded by noting the "new pathways in art" that the Berezil was carving out; others, that proletarian audiences attended this theater and that it was closer in spirit to the masses; still others cited clarity (of purpose, one assumes); ideology; simplicity; stage sets; originality, freshness, untiringly revolutionary work on the development of form; new productions; absence of kitsch; and richness of representation. One irritably responded: "I've answered this question many times before and you yourselves know the answer." Only one peasant claimed not to find any difference among theaters.

The bewildering variety of responses, the range of audience constituencies, preferences, and critique doubtlessly made interesting fodder for discussion at the research committees and theatrical labs. There was, however, one more and final part of the questionnaire: three questions about theater in general which could more specifically help shape the Berezil's choice of repertoire for the immediate future. These were:

15. Bronislava Nijinska, the choreographer, dancer, and sister of Vaclav Nijinsky, founded a School of Movement (École de mouvement) in 1919 in Kyiv where she created the first non-representational dances and also taught movement to Kurbas's actors.

1. Which kinds of theatrical productions do you like best (opera, drama, theater of the pre-revolutionary type, drama of the revolutionary type, the circus, film, etc.)?
2. Based on what kind of life would you like to see a play?
3. What else would you like to tell us about our theater?

Nearly half of the respondents made film either their first choice of preferred production or one of their preferences. This was followed by 37% who chose theater of the revolutionary type. Another 18% made opera their first choice but, surprisingly, only two of the same people who did so also chose pre-revolutionary theater as a second choice. The status of those who made opera their first choice reveals another interesting detail: three were peasants with little education, two were plumbers, and two were young students. Anyone attempting to make simplistic ideological connections between higher education, class status, and the high art of opera would have been stymied by such results.

One conclusion to be drawn from this part of the survey was that film appealed to the widest constituency, being either the first choice or one of the top preferences of Ukrainians, Russians, and Jews (the Greeks didn't specify any preference), peasants and plumbers, students, migrant workers, teenagers, and adults. In future, the majority of respondents wanted to see shows taken from contemporary life, from the class struggle of the proletariat, from the period of the civil war, from revolutionary life, from real, everyday life, from the life of the Ukrainian people.

The final question of the whole survey presented the general rubric of "what else would you like to tell us about our theater," a catch-all question that after an already lengthy survey often leads to a lot of blanks. In this case, it resulted in an outpouring of commentary. A sampling:

- "Go away"; "You destroyed the old theater and gave us nothing nice in return."
- "Wonderfully organized mass scenes."
- "In the current atmosphere, it's not necessary to repeat 'O God' so often. Although you use it [the phrase] ironically, the Red Army masses and the workers don't understand. The plays [reflect] the contemporary spirit. The acting superb—especially Macbeth and his wife, and others."
- "Obviously, your theater is not yet fully formed. Your theater is a questing theater. As a quest, it pretty much satisfies me. A complete rupture with the old methods, original treatment of plays, method of collectivization—all that is good."

- “Your theater is far removed from the understanding of the worker and in many plays you jump ahead by many decades and by doing so you disconnect yourself from the worker; but sometimes, for example, with *Macbeth*, you go too far back and that is not understood [either]. Give us contemporary workers and workers’ understanding.”
- “Either I understood nothing, or you will understand nothing.”
- “Your theater wouldn’t be so bad if you had sets, [and] the curtain came down after every part. There’s nothing more to say, I don’t feel like saying anything more, but I will say more next time. For now, this is enough.”
- “A couple of questions. I don’t know how you will answer them. Maybe in the newspaper: 1) What do you achieve by and what do you mean by the absence of decorations and 2) What are your next projects? [Scribbled at the top of the page:] Provide an answer in the press.”
- “More mass scenes, more from the life of the revolutionary civil war”;
- “I have nothing more to say about this play. Except for one scene, the lighting should be brighter. Not enough music in the *entr’acte*, which in my view is indispensable, and that’s why I beg you to do trouble yourself about this.”
- “In today’s show the clown was pointless. It doesn’t harmonize with the whole character of the play.”
- “I like your theater but our audience still hasn’t lost the habits of the old theater and doesn’t understand [your theater], for which purpose, in my opinion, you should organize lectures in workers’ clubs and explain what your theater is trying to do.”

The deeply engaged, even when negative, response of the audience brings the theater event of November 14, 1924 curiously alive. We hear the audience’s directly expressed advice, their sincere comments (sometimes technical, sometimes homespun), their harangues, their critique, their hopes. Above all, we see their expectation of a real response from the Berezil. If Kurbas wanted a thinking and co-creating audience, he got one.

The Consequences

The publication of the results of the season’s questionnaires was eagerly and anxiously awaited. Writing about the pre-publication hype, Oleksander Kysil emphasized the broader significance of such surveys: theater, he noted, more than all the other arts, was intimately tied to communal life and thus it

was imperative that its effect on the audience be understood (44). Supporting this view, the young theater inspector Yuri Smolych also urged all theaters to follow the example of the Berezil in employing both behaviorist studies and questionnaires to study their audiences ("Pro vyvchannia" 4-5).¹⁶

The questionnaires offered both the promise of a convincing refutation of the Communist Party's charges against the Berezil of being too experimental and thus inaccessible to the masses, as well as the means of securing the theater's survival. This was threatened by the Party's major decision that same year (1924) to "systematically regulate the chaos of the theater market" by limiting the burgeoning number of theaters throughout Ukraine to only nine (Kruchynin 1).

When the analysis of the season's 55,552 questionnaires¹⁷ was finally published, it confirmed the results indicated by the meager sampling analyzed above: the Berezil attracted a predominately youthful, vocal audience that represented a broad social spectrum, though with a considerable, and growing, proletarian base. Divisions between those who supported the new, experimental approaches and those who continued to prefer the old ethnographic theater remained, a fact well noted both by the Berezil detractors ("Ia. Ia") and its supporters.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the evidence of the questionnaires doubtless assisted in more than just prolonging the existence of the Association. Its place as an exemplary theater supporting communist ideals with innovative methods and techniques was acknowledged by Party officials, and it was soon moved to the recently-established new capital of Ukraine, Kharkiv, to become its premiere model theater. Kurbas was decorated as People's Artist of the Republic and the Berezil was to participate in the prestigious Paris *Exposition des arts décoratifs et industriels* in 1925 as well as at the New York International Theater Exposition in 1926. The Berezil was at its zenith.

16. In another article, "Teatral'na nauka," Smolych urged the Berezil to commit their theory to paper because of the dearth of work on the sociology and theory of theater.

17. In the 1923-1924 season, 43,436 spectators had attended 94 performances of 8 plays (of these, 30% were workers, 15% peasants, 17% students, 30% workers-*intelligentsia*, and 8% military). In the 1924-1925 season, the numbers rose by over 12,000: 55,552 had seen their production. Of these, 42% were workers, 22% peasants, 36% workers-*intelligentsia* who attended 68 performances of 6 plays (Vasylko "Pidsumky"). Vasylko's figures were cited by D. Usenko who, analyzing this information, argued that the Berezil had entered a new creative phase and that it had successfully attracted a large and mixed audience.

18. Such a division was also felt by actors like Iryna Avdieva, who commented about the division between those who supported the new theater and those who still preferred theater of the old ethnographic variety (Avdieva 150).

Below the level of officialdom and in the directorial labs and research committees where there was the usual ongoing critical assessment of productions, first principles, and ideas, the questionnaires received especially close scrutiny. Since the stakes were high, it was imperative that future productions continue to attract proletarian audiences. Shortly after the publication of the findings, the detailed “platform” of the Association was published, outlining its basic principles and intentions, and laying claim to creating theater on the basis of the “new scholarship” (which, one assumes, included audience analysis) (Kurbas, “Berezil” 118; Bereza-Kudrytsky 89-90).

On the individual level and perhaps swayed by the respondents’ comments, by his continuing quest for new creative challenges, and by his desire to reach a wide audience, Kurbas decided to turn his efforts for the next two years almost exclusively to film.¹⁹ When he returned to stage direction, it was to forge a strong relationship with the writer Mykola Kulish whose plays focused precisely on the topics which the majority of the respondents to the questionnaires most desired: contemporary plays about everyday life, about life in the revolutionary period, about civil war, and about Ukrainian life.

Kurbas’s return to the theater, however, coincided with stricter controls, embodied by the proclamation of the “Theses about Theater Criticism,”²⁰ which urged the proletariat to take over leading roles in the cultural revolution, to take command of as well as critically to rework all of the classical heritage of the past and to destroy all “harmful” works of the bourgeois-feudal period. Works which were saturated with the spirit of the class struggle were to be actively promoted. Experimental productions were implicitly condemned on the basis of incomprehensibility. Evidence of poorly digested cultural politics in the theater was to be followed up to its source, “uprooted,” and “persecuted.” Content was henceforth all-important: only socially significant works were to be permitted. So-called “academic” (formerly imperial) theaters were to be responsive to Party directives, and private theaters and collectives were exhorted to “democratize” their work by getting rid of “recidivism” (“Tezy”). Because theater “was an important factor in popular education, an active weapon in the cultivation of a socialist consciousness of the popular masses” the Party resolved that, above all else,

19. Kurbas produced three films: *Arsenal*, *Vendetta*, and *Macdonald*. They were all destroyed, probably after Kurbas was removed from his post as Artistic Director of the Berezil and then shot in the far north in 1937.

20. The Theses had been confirmed by the Central Committee of the Party on December 29, 1926 and published in the Ukrainian press in early January 1927 (“Tezy”).

it had to be accessible, which meant comprehensible and “realistic not avant-garde” (Piskun 9).

Attacks on the Berezil and on Kurbas in particular continued in tandem with praise throughout the 1920s. At the officially-organized lengthy debates, the “Theatrical Discussions” of 1927 and 1929, which marked the culmination of the decade’s polemical, sometimes vitriolic, disputes about the purpose and function of theatrical art and its relationship to the audience, the shift in power from directors and theater companies to their audiences was made evident. It was confirmed at the end of the decade with the creation of repertoire committees that cemented audience control over all aspects of productions, including choice of repertoire, personnel, and style.

After a rehearsal literally at gunpoint, Kurbas was relieved of his post as Artistic Director of the Berezil in 1933. A few months after moving to Moscow to direct Solomon Mikhoels in *King Lear* at the State Jewish Theater, he was arrested, imprisoned, exiled, and finally shot, on Stalin’s express orders, in 1937, the same year that “Uncle Joe” ordered 30,000 other executions and the “cleansing” of all Ukrainian educational, cultural, and scientific institutions. Kurbas’s papers, films, maquettes, and diaries were destroyed and even his name prohibited from being mentioned until Stalin’s death. His full “rehabilitation” came only in the late 1980s with glasnost and the disintegration of the USSR. His legacy of innovative productions, theoretical articles, and audience analyses is only now beginning to receive long-overdue attention.

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