Post-Perestroika Challenges in Russian Political Drama

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Abstract

The essay deals with the development of Russian political drama, which actually came into being after perestroika. During the years of the Soviet rule Russian theatres used Aesopian language to allude to topical political issues. The situation changed radically after perestroika when many sharply critical plays appeared and it became possible to depict and criticize not only political figures of the past but the living politicians as well, including the president. This led to the development of political drama as a specific genre, formerly absent in Russia, and Theatre.doc, which uses verbatim technique to voice most challenging topics. Although it testifies to the general democratization of society, many of the plays in question lack real artistic value and young playwrights often cash in on sore problems to gain recognition. The aim of this essay is to give an overview of this process and analyze its aesthetic and ideological consequences.

Keywords: Russian theatre, perestroika, new drama, verbatim, political drama, Soviet rule.
1. Introduction

In Russia theatre has always been highly politicized and performed different functions at different times: it was a means of emancipation of the internal energy of the masses during the first years following October revolution 1917, a mouthpiece of ideological dictatorship during the period of Stalin’s rule, a voice of forbidden truth in the years of “stagnation” and eventually a school for democracy, teaching people to think and speak freely thus preparing the acquisition of internal freedom [Prokhorova, Shamina, 2014]. The genre of political drama as such appeared actually only after perestroika with the emergence of the so called Russian “new drama” in the 1990s. This drama has not been so far properly studied, and its place in the general context of recent Russian theatre has not been defined as it has mostly attracted the attention of journalists rather than scholars, so in this essay will try partly to fill this gap. However there are several critical studies on Russian “new drama” at large, which have been taken into account in this paper [The Latest Drama of the turn of the XX-th –XXI-st Centuries, 2011], [Beumers, Lipovetsky, 2012], [Freedman, 2014], [Russian and European Drama and Theatre, 2014].

2. Methods and Materials

The direct predecessor of political drama in Russia was documentary historic drama of the 1980s, which featured the events of the October revolution 1917 and first years of the Soviet rule. It was the first attempt to destroy ideological stereotypes and give a new interpretation of the Soviet history. This is directly connected with the problem of conceptualization of history in literature, which has been taken into consideration in our research [Breeva, 2014]. As far as the authors of recent political drama are concerned many of them have been influenced by the traumatic experience of the turn of the 20-th century, which has been often addressed in modern fiction [Karasik, Nesmelova, 2014]. In our essay we shall focus on the pressure points that have recently attracted the attention of Russian community and found its reflection in political drama, written in the first decades of the 21-st century.

3. Results

More than 20 years have passed since perestroika. The disappointment in the results of perestroika urged the playwrights to look for new ways and forms of addressing reality which was found in the new type of theatre based on facts and documents where fictitious characters and situations were replaced by real people articulating their problems and live political figures. And as a result, a new type of drama, based mostly on verbatim technique and directly addressing the most burning problems of the new Russia came into being.

In 2004 the first collection of documentary plays was published, which demonstrated the possibilities of this genre. The collection comprises 12 plays based on the interviews with Kuzbas miners, soldiers’ mothers, internet users, polit-technologists, Nord-Ost hostages, teenage fans and creators of talk shows. Life texture, the voice of the crowd, snapshots of modern Russia, the reality in which people live, but often prefer to ignore – all this turned out to be more exciting than most bold fantasies. [Balotyan, 2004].

Documentary theatre promoted the development of Russian political drama, which being based both on real and fictive situations, using both real and fictive characters extensively incorporates factional, documentary material, bringing together art and politics. Here we would like to specify what is meant by the term political drama. We side with Barbara Olazec, who sticks to a broad understanding of politics in this genre, which means the exposure of the events and mode of action connected with the activity of state authority [Olazec, 2012].

A most emblematic example of this kind of drama is a collection of plays published in 2005 under the title Putin.doc. Nine Revolutionary Plays. Being very different in style and form they
have one distinct feature in common – all of them are highly politically committed and provide a vivid picture of the new concerns of the post-perestroika playwrights. Critic Pavel Rudnev calls these playwrights “Russian angry young men”, stating that new generations of playwrights usually ripen in the periods of social clashes, as it is theatre that is most capable of “feeling the very “nerve of the time” reflecting the “tension of the world outlook in the marginal epochs” [Rudnev, 2005]. Having read the plays enclosed one is introduced to the most burning issues of the time and the topics Russian public is mostly concerned with.

The collection opens with the titular play by Victor Teterin Putin.doc, a satirical farce, which ridicules traditional Russian servility. The plot is quite simple: it features two fans of president Putin, quite recognizable figures – Piotr Ivanov, a high ranking officer, and Ivan Petrov, a representative of local administration, who decide to compete in their worship of the president. As the action unfolds the situation grows more and more absurd: one changes his name for Vladimir Putin, the other – has plastic surgery and becomes Putin’s double. Still it is not the limit. The friends cannot decide whose worship is stronger, so they come out into Red Square and while one is praying to Putin’s portrait, the other is masturbating in front of it. Eventually both are rewarded – they get high posts in president’s administration, as according to the play the latter appreciated the subject of their competition.

The theme of people at power is developed by Andrei Malgin, who wrote a sequel of his satirical novel Advisor to President featuring the adventures of the main character in his play Prisiadkin in the Other World. In this play Ignatii Prisiadkin, an aging advisor and a former human rights defender (a kind of career not altogether impossible), starts losing his memory and is getting more and more confused: thus he denounces government policy speaking to foreign journalists and ardently supports it among the Kremlin authorities. His wife and his daughter are mostly concerned about losing governmental privileges. His wife takes close to heart that their status started to decrease, it is comically shown in the scene when instead of BMW, which used to take their daughter Masha to school a Volga is sent [Malgin, 2005]. Therefore when Prisiadkin finally dies, to keep the benefits his wife pretends that he is alive: she has his corpse embalmed and gives interviews instead of him. But in the long run the corpse returns to life in quite a good shape and with completely “improved” mentality: now Prisiadkin is an unconditional supporter of the ruling party and its leader, regaining his position in the corridors of power. He feels quite happy: “What do I need blood for? What do I need heart for? What for do I, a government authority, need all this for? I, a member of Russian President’s Administration?!?” [ibid, p.24].The end is symbolic. Having regained his post Prisiadkin finds out that he is not unique and all the other members of Administration are zombies like him.

The comedy Meat by Olga Pogodina is dedicated to the state of rural economics: Tsar orders his Oprichnik to find meat produced in Russia. Oprichnik sends Soldier into a distant Siberian province, where the latter finds a family owning a She-goat, which he brings to Moscow. On the way he meets Devil who speaks with a heavy Caucasian accent and is trying to ruin Tsar’s plan. Eventually She-goat turns out to be an American spy Jane, and Devil blows up everybody.

Grotesque as they are, all characters and situations in the aforementioned plays are quite recognizable and some names are just slightly changed. President himself appears in two of the plays, and extracts of his speeches are inserted into the text. Olga Pogodina, the author of Meat used materials of the report of the Department of Agriculture titled The Updated Forecast of Social and Industrial Development of the Agroindustrial Complex for 2004 - 2006.

If the theme of power and government authorities is mostly treated in a farcical way with the elements of the theatre of the absurd, the other recurrent theme – the war in Chechnya and its
consequences are represented in a different key leaving little space for fun or mockery. Still such plays are also not uniform and involve different elements of theatrical conventions. The play by Piotr Filimonov Shapito-jurt is subtitled Circus Parade with a Machinegun. In it two former clown-partners who used to work together for many years in the same circus meet during the war in Chechnya. “Hi, Bim!” – says the Russian, “Hi, Bom!” – retorts the Chechen fighter. Thus from the very beginning the war is viewed as a bloody circus parade where both Russian and Chechen soldiers are nothing but clowns, manipulated by the “directors”. The dialogue of these two people reveals the absurdity of the war, which stirs hatred among former friends and colleagues; each of them has his truth and his delusions that the war can only intensify.

The other pacifist play Sentinel by Sergei Reshetnikov portrays two friends, one of which fought in Chechnya and the other deserted from the army unable to endure the hazing. The latter is constantly speaking to Boris Yeltsin, urging him to end the war in Chechnya and rewrite the Constitution. Mr. President answers evasively, constantly referring to the “difficulty” of the situation. As a matter of fact the majority of playwrights who write about Chechnya have second-hand evidence taken from mass media and internet may be that is why so far there are no full-blooded plays of true artistic value on this subject.

Although the play We, You, They… by Dmitrii Istranin is not about the war as such, it is closely connected with its consequences, mainly national intolerance, which has recently become a number one problem in Russia. It shows a common school torn by the national conflict between the Chechen and Russian students referred to as “Blacks” and “Whites”. In a way it continues the theme, which is one of the most recurrent in Russian new drama – the theme of juvenile violence, showing teenagers, who having faced the cruelty of the world respond with even surpassing brutality. The play is absolutely shocking both in its naturalistic style and in the treatment of the subject itself. The school featured by the playwright is totally controlled by the “Blacks,” who taunt, humiliate and fiercely beat up the “Whites,” and when the latter try to repulse the Principle, the teachers and the Police (as a matter of fact the one who investigates the case is also a Caucasian by birth) disregarding the evidence, lay the blame completely on the Russian students and accuse them of fascism. Having failed to restore justice (they were accused of beating up their friend almost to death, while it was done by the Chechens) three Russian students pour gasoline over themselves and threaten to set it on fire.

Unfortunately a situation like this is not absolutely impossible – similar cases are often reported in the internet and mass media. What really surprises, to put it mildly, is the standpoint of the author, who like his characters does not see any other solution of the problem than hatred and ruthless violence. He altogether supports his adolescent characters, who curse and menace each other using most obscene language. [Istranin, 2005].

The author’s message is quite transparent and explicit. The school in the play stands for the country, poisoned by social alienation, hatred and intolerance, where violence has become the norm of existence not only for the problem youth but evidently for the playwright himself, who does not allow even a slightest possibility of compassion and understanding. The problems of intercultural communication in a poly-ethnic environment have more than once attracted the attention of our scholars [Fahrutdinova, 2014], [Khabibullina, 2014]. According to Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky in plays like this “Communicative violence is highlighted as a “natural”, commonly understood language of power and submission, which has substituted the soviet ideological doctrine and the corresponding rules of behavior.” [Beumers, Lipovetsky, 2012].

Another way of coexistence between nations, in this case a peaceful one, is offered by Vladimir Zabaluev and Alexei Zenzinov in their play Smog. The action takes place in future on a
space ship, where two astronauts – Russian and American are working together. The title refers to the situation on the Earth where everything is wrapped in smog. The spacemen converse quite peacefully until interrupted by the chimes of the Kremlin clock, transmitted by the radio. However the twelfth stroke of the clock is not followed by the Russian state anthem as expected but instead the voice of muezzin calling the faithful for prayer is heard, and both spacemen spread their prayer rugs, kneel down and start praying in Arabic. Thus according to the authors, in future Islam will become the only religion in the world. Friendly and peaceful as the situation might seem it is hardly possible that plays of this sort may promote mutual understanding and friendship between people belonging to different religions.

4. Summary
Having analyzed the development of Russian political drama in the second half of the 20-th – beginning of the 21-st centuries we can state that the turn of the century was marked by its obvious outburst. Plays based on real facts, incorporating documentary materials, featuring political events and political figures not only of the historical past but of the current present and addressing most burning social issues of the day turned over a new page in Russian theatre. Theatre of this kind started to articulate things that official mass media prefer to keep silence about. The main conflict running throughout all of these plays is the conflict of a common man with the multifaceted society represented by state authorities, President himself, army, educational and penalty institutions, national communities and the mob, which reflects its general ill-being. The very fact of the existence and development of political drama cannot be overestimated as it definitely shows the level of democratization in society. It has become possible to speak openly and sharply on the formerly forbidden subjects and criticize everything, government policy and President including. All this sounds quite optimistic mainly in terms of social life and gives hope of its improvement. However, in our opinion the aesthetic results of this process are much less auspicious. Many playwrights seem to think that it is quite enough to refer to some topical question or to ridicule authorities using obscene language to write a good play.

6. Conclusion
So in spite of considerable creative potential – the appearance of young free thinking playwrights, new theatrical forms, and wonderful actors – Russian theatre has not yet fully overcome the crisis it found itself in at the beginning of the 1990s. The majority of the new drama playwrights have not surpassed their perestroika predecessors sometimes developing by far not the best aspects of their heritage. Even Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, who in their comprehensive study of Russian new drama Performing Violence pay considerable tribute to its achievements can’t but acknowledge that “…theatrical activity of “new drama” activists is marked by the signs of crisis. [Beumers, Lipovetsky, 2012]. Russian dramatists seem to have forgotten the most characteristic feature of Russian literature – diagnosing the illness to give hope of revival and spiritual purification. The diagnosis is there – hopefully, spiritual purification is to come!

7. The conflict of interests
The authors confirm that the data presented do not contain any conflict of interests

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