Nikolai Erdman

The Suicide

University of British Columbia
Frederic Wood Theatre
Presents

Nikolai Erdman

The Suicide

Directed
By

Klaus Strassmann

March 7 - 17, 1984

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"Onto my back the age, like a wolfhound leaps..."
from Osip Mandelstam's March 17-28, 1931

It seems like a cliché to us that a dramatic writer, a champion of the individual, might be suppressed in Russia. But when Nikolai Erdman (born 1902) wrote his two famous plays, **The Mandate** (1925) and **The Suicide** (1932), no-one questioned a person's right to speak freely in the USSR. In fact it seems that Erdman, whose famous older brother, Boris, was a poet and set designer, started his career as a satirist, writing parodies of Soviet **agitprop** theatre with his brother, and a comic revue for the debut of the Moscow Theatre of Satire which opened in 1924. He must have felt that he lived in a very exciting age. After the October Revolution of 1917, there was a general tendency towards artistic and political freedom in the country. In Moscow, new cabarets opened, and in an atmosphere of gaiety and relaxation, a vigorous young society gathered to discuss current issues of the day. Mingling with some of the most famous theatre people of the 20th century, Erdman met Vladimir Mayakovsky, the great director, who agreed to produce **The Mandate** in the coming season.

The Mandate, a brilliant satire on the malcontents in Soviet society, gained immediate success. Mayakovsky produced it as a stylised farce and it was hailed as the "first truly Soviet play," and the best comedy of the '24-'25 season. It was greatly admired by Maxim Gorky, who saw it in the company of Chekhov's wife, the actress Olga Knipper-Chekhov and Constantin Stanislavsky. Its fame spread through Europe: Bertold Brecht commended its political satire.

Riding the crest of this success, Erdman wrote **The Suicide**, and Russia's three greatest theatre companies, the Vaktangov Theatre, Stanislavsky's Moscow Arts Theatre, and The Meyerhold Theatre, vied with each other to produce it. But the political tide which had been so conducive to the growth of his humanising wit had already changed. Meyerhold worked on the play for 18 months and took it right to the dress rehearsal. But with the beginning of Stalin's first Five Year Plan, the tolerant atmosphere faded, and a ruthless attack on the dissident elements which remained was enforced. **The Suicide** was suppressed, and within a few years Erdman had disappeared, never to write another play.

What little is known of the playwright after 1932 comes from various sources. In 1934 it seems he worked with a film collaborator of Sergei Einsenstein on movie scenarios; and his work is praised in one of the letters of Stanislavski. The Soviet **Theatre Encyclopedia** credits him with sketches and and adaptation of **The Prince and the Pauper** by Mark Twain in the early 40's, and later for work on cinematic cartoons. He was known also to delight in composing little fables, one of which, read by an irresponsible friend at an evening in the Kremlin, first brought the wrath of the authorities down on his head. But we surmise that although he may at some point have been exiled, he was at least probably not arrested – though reports vary.

Nadezhda Mandelstam, wife of a much less fortunate writer, occasionally came across Erdman, who was a long-time friend. She describes his 40-year silence as "anything just to stay alive." Of course, in an environment where it was impossible to tell who might be obliged to inform on a writer, few spoke. But, Nadezhma says of Erdman, "very occasionally he would put his head close to mine and tell me the plot of a new play he had just thought of but would never write." And years later, during World War II, when she saw him once: "Erdman just sat and drank, without saying a word."

Nikolai Erdman died just fourteen years ago, in 1970, in Moscow. He preserved his life, and how can we know if he did so at the expense of his art, or possibly for its sake? But we don't expect that more Erdman plays will come to light. He had learned too well the lesson of one of his own little fables, which he wrote just before he was sent into exile for the first time:

Once the GPU came by
And grabbed old Aesop by the Ass.
The moral of this tale is clear —
No more fables needed here.

"Shhh...did you hear someone?"

An artist in Russia in the thirties had much to fear besides the possible failure of his artistic powers or the price of writing paper! In her memoir, **Hope Against Hope**, Nadezhda Mandelstam, a friend of Erdman's, describes the atmosphere in which writers lived, once Stalin came to power and curtailed his early, more liberal view of the arts. She details four types of spy who knocked on the doors of writers' homes at any time of the night or day – and especially at midnight! For like most people, spies too have a sense of the dramatic!

Early in the thirties appeared the "brisk young men of military bearing" who appeared simply to confiscate a writer's latest work – no questions asked, and no pretense of interest in the arts either. There was, Mandelstam thought, something almost wholesome about their directness.

The second category was more subtle. This was the "admirer" – a colleague or neighbour (for in housing collectives one's neighbour is, more likely than not, one's colleague too) who might in a better age have sat at the table and listened to the latest poem or story over a glass of wine.

The third category, the people Mandelstam names the "adjutants", were usually young devotees of literature, often graduate students who loved writing and knew a great deal about it. They were sincere admirers and first visited a writer just to hear about literature and perhaps read him their own compositions. But the scond visit? or the third? A young writer is in a very vulnerable position when publication is controlled by the government, and one does not get published unless one makes a candid report of conversations held with the great... At her table, Mandelstam saw young men and women suddenly look down uncomfortably, or change the subject, making obscure warnings. Perhaps they left quickly and never came back. Or perhaps one of the established writers suddenly disappeared from the community, and the shadow of suspicion fell on friends and strangers alike. The adjutant was a most dangerous spy – dangerous because his love of the arts could be so cruelly compromised.

And the fourth category, of course: those who enjoyed their role of informer. No wonder Erdman and many like him fell silent!

Unhappy is he who, like his own shadow,
Fears a barking dog or the wind after dark.

–Osip Mandelstam

In Reference to Mayakovsky

Vladimir Mayakovsky, Russia's most talented poet and the author of **The Bedbug** and of numerous other works, from political satire to political propaganda, was at the height of his fame when **The Suicide** was composed and in production. He was a spectacular figure, a huge, brooding, witty, exuberant genius. He dominated everyone who met him, and the whole artistic environment of his time. As the poet whom Lenin praised as "the best and most talented" of the Soviet epoch, whose work it was a crime to ignore, Mayakovsky created his greatest scandal by his suicide in April of 1930. Explanations may be his broken heart, his recognition of what the USSR was about to become under Stalin, or frustration with his own work: none is completely accepted by anyone to this day.

The possibility exists that the reference to Fedya Petunin in **The Suicide** is to Mayakovsky himself. Without a draft of the play, we can never be sure, as it was composed before he died, and we need evidence of a revision before the truth can be known.

PHOTOS Marcel Williams

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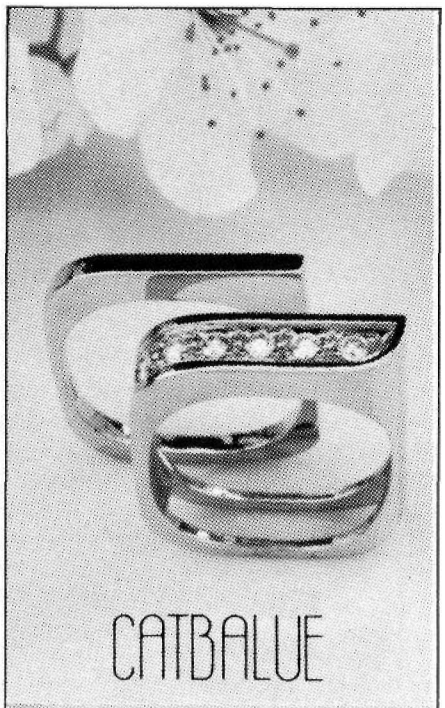

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"*The Suicide*, a play of self-immolation"

The Suicide has yet to be performed in the USSR. But when it was written in 1928, the Vaktangov, Meyerhold, and Moscow Arts Theatres all dropped the plays they were working on and competed for the rights to this second of Erdman's two plays. Obviously they all felt – even the politically canny Vsevolod Meyerhold and Konstantin Stanislavsky – that it was not only a great play, but a revolutionary one as well, and that it would be quite acceptable to the authorities of the new Stalinist government. No less a figure than Maxim Gorky championed Erdman's cause with Stalin, and obtained permission for the play to go ahead.

Meyerhold already had the contract to do the play when Stanislavsky too decided to produce it; so Meyerhold challenged him to "socialist competition." Both men realised the play was controversial; and to forestall possible censorship, Stanislavsky wrote to Stalin himself, and received the following answer on Nov. 9, 1931, almost a year before the play was banned:

Dear Konstantin Sergeiyevich

I do not have a very high opinion of the play The Suicide. *My closest comrades consider it empty and even harmful. You can see the opinion (and reasons) of the Repertory Committee in the enclosed document. It seems to me that the Repertory Committee's opinion is not far from the truth. Nevertheless, I am not against the theatre experimenting and showing its skill. Provided that the theatre achieves its aims. The Cultural Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of our party (Comrade Stetski) will help you in this matter. Comrades will judge who know about artistic matters. I am dilletante in this.*

Regards,
J. Stalin

In light of the subject matter of the play, we see now that what is remarkable about **The Suicide** is not that it was finally banned, but that it could possibly have remained in production for as long as it did! Meyerhold rehearsed it for a year and a half. We know that originally, the play was to feature a crowd of intellectuals – that segment of the culture most often satirised at the time as "puny" and "spineless" – in repulsive masks. The greatest comic actor of Meyerhold's Theatre, Igor Ilinsky, played Podsekalnikov. But on the night of the dress rehearsal, with the show to open the following night, the show's "supervisor", one of Stalin's new tough young men, was in the audience: the show was banned.

One reason might lie in the style of Meyerhold's directing. His principle for actors, unlike Stanislavsky's, was that they **show** the character, rather than **be** the character and so gain the audience's empathy. Still it might be difficult not to find Podsekalnikov endearing. Meyerhold advocated the use of many long-held theatrical devices – music, spectacle – and traditional popular theatrical devices – but none of these were really in keeping with the new movement towards socialist realism on the stage. Meyerhold had praised both Erdman and Mayakovsky to the Party as follows: their plays "are splendid; with their poetry and their satirical wit, they attack the weakest points of our society without driving the spectator to despair." But Meyerhold was under pressure to abandon much of his progressive experimentation in the areas of constructivism and biomechanics. Even while Meyerhold championed the writer of "the first great Soviet play", funds were being withdrawn and the arts entered a period of financial crisis. Several years later, in 1938 when his theatre was closed for good, one of the main reasons given was his production of **The Suicide.**

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MARGARITA

Costume Design Sketches By Brian H. Jackson

THE SUICIDE
by
Nikolai Erdman

Directed by
Klaus Strassmann

Set and Lighting Design by
Allan Watts

Costumes Designed by
Brian H. Jackson

CAST

Semyon Semyonovich Podsekalnikov ..... SIMON WEBB*
(a man refused employment)
Maria Lukianovna (his wife) ..... PAM DANGELMAIER
Serafima Ilinichna (his mother-in-law) ..... CAROLYN SOPER
Alexander Petrovich Kalabushkin ..... MARK HOPKINS
Margarita Ivanovna Peryesvetova ..... LISA KLINGSPON
Aristarch Dominikovich Golashchapov ..... BRUCE DOW
(a member of the intelligentsia)
Cleopatra Maximovna ('Kiki') ..... SHAUNA BAIRD
Egor Timovyeyevich (a postman) ..... CARLO CIOTTI
Nikifor Arsenyevich Pugachov (a butcher) ..... DREW KEMP
Viktor Viktorovich (a writer) ..... PHILIP SPEDDING
Raissa Filipovna ..... LA VONNE GIRARD
Father Elpidi ..... JOHN WOODS
Oleg Leonidovich ..... DON PLANT
Zinka Padespan ..... SYLVIA SWIFT
Groonya ..... CONSTANCE BRILL
Old Woman ..... BERYL BAYLIS
Deaf Mute ..... JOEY CRAMER
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Informers ..... CONSTANCE BRILL, DAVID U. GARFINKLE, LA VONNE GIRARD, SARAH RODGERS, ROBYN STEVAN and CARA TEKATCH
Fedya Petunin ..... ★★★

THERE WILL BE ONE INTERMISSION

*Appearing through the courtesy of Canadian Actors' Equity Association.

PRODUCTION

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Properties . . . . . SHERRY DARCUS
Lighting Execution . . . . . ROBERT EBERLE
Set Construction . . . . . DON GRIFFITHS and JOHN HENRICKSON
Costume Supervisor. . . . . ROSEMARIE HESELTON
Cutter . . . . . CHRISTINA MCQUARRIE
Scenic Artist. . . . . DON. S. DAVIS

Stage Manager. . . . . KAIRIIN ASELTINE
Properties Coordinator . . . . . COLLEEN WILLIAMSON
Assistant to the Director . . . . . SYLVIA SWIFT
Assistant Stage Managers . . LORREEN BELL, PENNY CONNELL and JANET WILSON
Sound . . . . . CAROL FORNATARO and CHRIS PLUNKETT
Make-up . . . . . CAROL NESBITT
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Suicide is no laughing matter; but Nikolai Erdman places it at the centre of this political farce in which Podsekalnikov's intended act of self-immolation is greedily politicized by a mob of Muscovites, each anxious to claim it for his own political cause. Both Stanislavski and Meyerhold were to have produced this dissident comedy of post-Revolutionary life in the U.S.S.R., but THE SUICIDE was banned by the Soviet Censorship Committee in 1932 and has still not been seen in that country. The play takes a comic stand against any ideology which denies man's humanity.

Front Cover Photo
Semyon Semyonovich Podsekalnikov
(Simon Webb)
Photo by Marcel Williams

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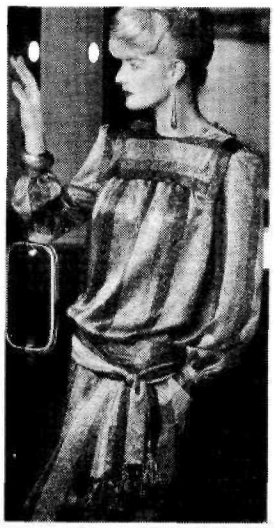

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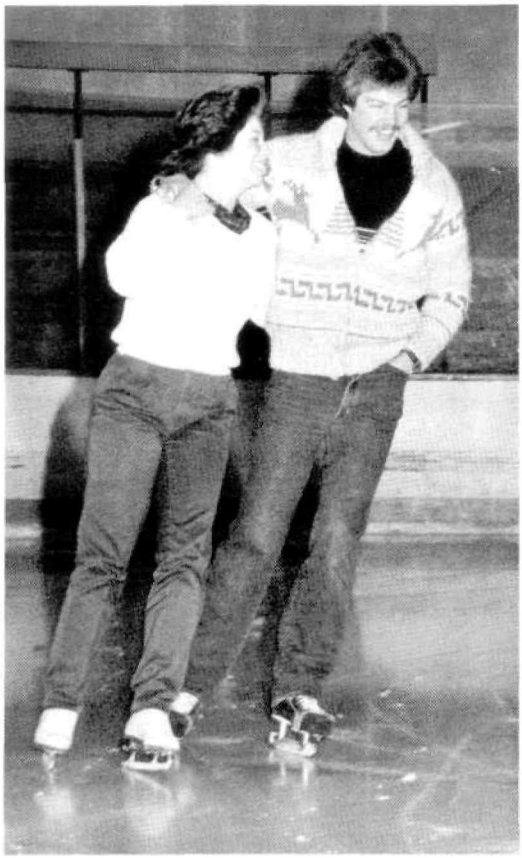

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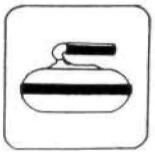

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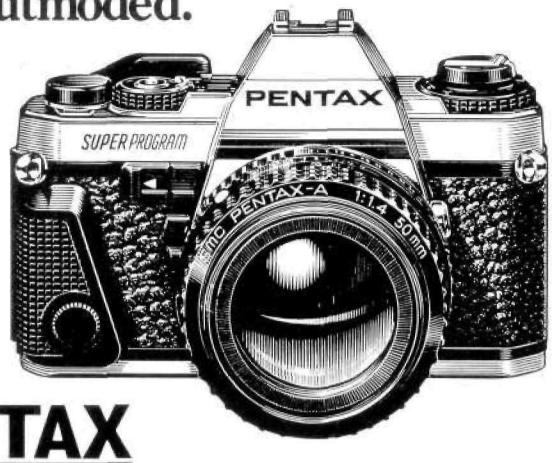

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