

Mayakovsky's *The Bedbug* at the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin: a missed opportunity

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For the first time in over thirty years the Maxim Gorki Theatre in the east of Berlin, which prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall specialised in presenting Russian and eastern European theatre, has revived Soviet poet and playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky's 1928 satire, *The Bedbug*. Mayakovsky described this work, together with his *The Bathhouse*, as tirades against petit bourgeois conventionality and backwardness. Both plays were originally written and performed towards the end of the 1920s. In 1930 Mayakovsky put a bullet through his heart and killed himself.

Director Peter Lund has put together an amusing production driven along by a peppy, jazz-oriented music score, but as I will deal with further on, the current presentation at the Gorki fails to really grasp the nettle and bring out the significance of Mayakovsky's offensive against bureaucracy and *Speisburgertum*. Before returning to Lund's production, it is necessary to recap briefly the life and career of a poet whose development was intimately bound up with the political and artistic turbulence of the first two decades of this century.

The rough outlines of Mayakovsky's career have been chronicled on many occasions. He was drawn both to art and politics at a very early age. Born and brought up in Georgia, already at the age of 12 he experienced the reverberations of the 1905 Revolution in Russia. He joined the Social-Democratic Party (Bolshevik) at age 15, the same year that he spent his second spell in jail for political activity. He writes that the months of comparative isolation at that time were very important for him. He studied new movements in literature and the fine arts, in particular the Symbolist movement, and after assimilating a wide range of contemporary literature he made a systematic study of classical writers including Byron, Shakespeare and Tolstoy.

Following the ebb of the 1905 Revolution Mayakovsky concentrated on his investigation of a variety of artistic tendencies. He was attracted to the Futurist movement which had its origins in the "Manifesto futurista" published by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909. Futurism proclaimed war on traditional values and conventional forms of bourgeois art, instead propagating an art and literature which defied or ignored logic and traditional rules and sought to express inner needs and feelings as directly as possible. In particular new developments in technology, trains, telephones, steamships were seen by the Futurists as potential weapons in their crusade against the encrusted old society—their search to capture life in its actual movement.

Differences rapidly emerged between the Italian and Russian followers of Futurism. Marinetti enthusiastically greeted the outbreak of the First World War: "We want the war—the only form of hygiene in the world—we glorify militarism." Mayakovsky, after an initial burst of enthusiasm when war was declared, turned against it in horror as soon as the first battles took place: "The war was repulsive, the hinterland was even more repulsive." Together with his Futurist colleagues Mayakovsky prepared a hostile reception for Marinetti when the latter undertook a public tour of Russia in 1914.

Mayakovsky's interests and occupations were manifold. He collaborated

in the writing of film and theatre; after the October Revolution of 1917 ("whether to recognise the revolution or not?—for myself (and the other Moscow Futurists) the question did not arise—it was my revolution") he developed the text and pictures for propaganda posters and placards for a number of Soviet ministries. He was active in the most important literary movements in post-revolutionary Russia, but it was above all his poetry and verse which won him admiration and recognition. Maxim Gorki, amongst other prominent writers, expressed his admiration for the work of the young poet.

One Italian admirer of Mayakovsky writes of his poetry: "With feverish restlessness Mayakovsky turns everything upside down. The weightiest, for centuries the most stationary and immovable objects, fly crazily through the air. In Mayakovsky's work is to be found a tireless dance of requisites, which live, move, mix and interpenetrate with a threatening urgency."

One calls to mind the pictures of Marc Chagall painted in the revolution years—men and women, musicians, goats and donkeys drifting freely through the air—a world where the traditional forms of "social gravity" no longer apply. The Russian Revolution had not been able to do away with poverty, suffering and violence overnight, but nevertheless an enormous confidence in the capabilities of men predominated, a feeling that anything was possible. Indeed one of Mayakovsky's poems is entitled *The Flying Proletariat*.

Mayakovsky put his talents and creativity fully at the service of the revolution. At the same time the enormous intellectual and social questions thrown up by the revolution taxed him to his limits. This was recognised and commented on by Aleksandr Voronsky, the editor of the best of the post-revolutionary literary magazines, *Red Virgin Soil*. In his essay of 1928, "On Artistic Truth," Voronsky wrote:

"Take Mayakovsky. Anyone who carefully examines the basic motifs of his works sees that this highly gifted poet is an extreme individualist, and that his true and genuine inner poetic core is found in such things as 'Cloud in Trousers' or the poem 'About that'; but that he stands on poetic stilts and does violence to himself when he writes pathetic and insincere poems about the human labour collective, about the development of capitalism in Russia (in his poem about Lenin), about the one hundred and fifty million, and so forth; the themes are superb, but completely alien to Mayakovsky. They are ideologically unconvincing in his works and thoroughly dishonest" (quoted in *Art as the Cognition of Life, Selected Writings, 1911-1936*, Mehring Books, 1998).

Perhaps Mayakovsky's individualism made him unsuitable to chronicle the accomplishments of the Revolution in verse, but at the same time this same individualism made him a keen critic of any form of hypocrisy or self-serving bureaucracy. In the spring of 1922 he strode into the editorial offices of *Isvestia* with a new satirical poem entitled *Incessant Meeting Sitters*, a scathing satirical verse criticising the waste of time and energy that resulted from the practice in party circles of holding countless meetings and sittings one after the other.

At a meeting of steelworkers a day after the poem's publication Lenin commented: "Yesterday I happened to read in *Izvestia* a political poem by Mayakovsky. I am not an admirer of his poetical talent, although I admit that I am not a competent judge. But I have not for a long time read anything on politics and administration with so much pleasure as I read this. In his poem he derides this meeting habit, and taunts the Communists with incessantly sitting at meetings. I am not sure about the poetry; but as for the politics, I vouch for their absolute correctness" (V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 33).

Written towards the end of his life, Mayakovsky's satirical dramas were, in his own words, directed against growing "bureaucracy, narrow-mindedness and indifference, and in favour of a broadening of horizons, inventiveness and enthusiasm". Mayakovsky's comments are striking in their similarity to Leon Trotsky's own appeal in *Literature and Revolution* (in the chapter "Revolutionary and Socialist Art") for "a Soviet comedy of manners, one of laughter and indignation" and for satire and scathing criticism of our "piggishness, vulgarity and knavery".

The Bedbug deals with a worker, Prissiykin, who proclaims that he has paid a high enough price for revolution and a new society, and now seeks to advance himself and work his way up the social ladder. He touts a guitar, exchanges his work overalls for fashionable clothes, drinks and pursues the good life. He plans to marry the daughter of a petty-bourgeois hairdresser. In the course of the alcohol-laced wedding celebrations a fire breaks out. Everyone dies in the fire, apart from our hero, who has hidden in the cellar. As the cellar fills with water Prissiykin is encased in a block of ice.

Fifty years later in a future socialist society our hero is rejuvenated from a block of ice by white-coated, antiseptic scientists who inform him of his second chance of life. Prissiykin's response: "God! I owe fifty years trade union subs!" Also brought back to life is Prissiykin's pet bug. Between the two of them they pose a threat to the future society. The play ends with the bug removed from circulation and Prissiykin incarcerated in a cage like a zoo animal, pleading for help.

For its production in 1929, the play brought together the very finest Soviet artists. The play was directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold, the scenery developed and built by Aleksandr Rodchenko and the music composed by the young Dmitri Shostakovich.

Nevertheless the play met with a range of hostile reactions... "too few positive heroes" (true)... "an unfavourable view of a future Soviet society" (also true). In fact, such criticisms must be considered against the background of a systematic campaign against all critical forms of art. Following measures to isolate the political opposition in Russia, the Stalinist bureaucracy was rapidly pulling down the curtain on independent and challenging art. Indeed some Russian critics questioned the worth of satire itself. In January 1930 a seminar took place in Moscow with the title "Do we need Satire?," in the course of which participants argued that satirical work "must necessarily take an anti-Soviet form". Employing satire "the class enemy can very easily disguise himself".

Stalinist hagiographies devoted to Mayakovsky declare that the principal reasons for his suicide in April 1930 were ill-health and the frustration arising from a failed love affair. Any considered examination of the period makes clear that the growing campaign to isolate critical artists had profound repercussions for Mayakovsky himself. Shortly before his death, in his diary notes, Mayakovsky refers to the growing criticism of his work and complains of "so many dogs at my throat".

In his piece of 1929 entitled *Discussion with Comrade Lenin* he writes :
...One gets tired,

of scrapping with the pack of rogues
you think they are gone,

the pack multiplies,
Very many

different sorts of scoundrel

are circulating on our territory.

Types

innumerable

and nameless,
unravel

like an illustrated broadsheet:

Bureaucrat,

speculator

and pot-bellied Kulak,
Sectarrians,

bootlickers

and drunks
There they are striding,

the puffed up

and snobs
speckled

with pen holders and insignia.
No doubt,

we will vigorously

deal with them,
however to cope with all

of them is hideously difficult ...
(the author's own translation)

In the first half of *The Bedbug* Mayakovsky gives a very unflattering picture of the individualist Prissiykin, the second half is devoted to an unflattering portrayal of future socialist society. The result is that at the end of his play our sympathies are firmly with the individualist calling out for help. What is the worth of a society which can be shaken to its foundations by the misdemeanours of one individual (and his bug)?

There is no happy socialist ending. Incorporated in the play seems to be Mayakovsky's disillusionment with the whole way in which things were going in his time and his growing conviction that the bureaucrats would have their way. He powerfully anticipated the campaign led by the ruling elite in Russia to cement its dictatorship—a campaign which was to reach monstrous proportions in the 1930s directed against political opponents and so-called "parasites" alleged to be working against Soviet society.

Torn from its historical and personal context, it is possible to turn Mayakovsky's play into an anti-socialist tirade. But the truth is that Mayakovsky did not have the background and intellectual equipment to embrace Trotsky's political alternative. The play strikes the spectator as a powerful warning about the direction of Soviet society and an attempt to create a forum in which its retrograde tendencies could be discussed. The relationship of the themes advanced in *The Bedbug* and the play's hostile dismissal by the pro-Stalinist critics to Mayakovsky's suicide appears evident.

In Mayakovsky's play Prissiykin is revived 50 years later—in the year 1979. The author's bleak anticipation of the future was confirmed by reality—Stalinist blockheadedness and police terror continued to dominate both in Russia and the eastern satellite countries.

After all how did the bureaucracy argue for its Berlin wall? They

declared it was nothing other than a “defence mechanism” constructed to keep out “poisonous and parasitic influences” from the West. Shortly after the building of the Wall youth members of the East German Stalinist Party toured the roofs of houses in the eastern sector and ripped down television antennae which could be used to receive information from beyond the Wall.

Already in the 1950s a prominent GDR musicologist assembled scientific arguments to back his claim that jazz was a form of psychological warfare developed by the West to undermine the “socialist state”. And in the 1970s an east European artist who posed the question in a meeting of the East German Stalinist SED Central Committee, “Why is it that you can be put in prison for telling a joke in the GDR?”, was greeted with blank stares and astonishment, and promptly ostracised by the party and state.

In 1979 or equally today, a genuine adherent of Mayakovsky would have used a revival of *The Bedbug* to launch a withering salvo against the narrow-mindedness, cynicism and chauvinism of the latter-day Stalinist bureaucracy. The first half of Lund's production at the Gorki is pacy and amusing and in the second half he recreates the clinical bleakness of Mayakovsky's original vision, while making a few gibes in the direction of everyday life in the former German Democratic Republic But in fact the regime of the bureaucracy is barely recognisable and is let off the hook. The “Song of the dream of a beautiful new world” sung in the first part of the play is repeated at the end as a sort of epitaph for socialism itself.

The music is fine and spirited and in terms of decor the production attempts to recreate the stark clash of colour, shape and material which marked Rodchenko's contribution to the staging of 1929. Nevertheless it would have hardly have required great violence to Mayakovsky's play to press home the author's original offensive.

Why does Lund pull his punches? Perhaps he was anxious not to offend those (many of them still active in German artistic circles) who still retain many fond memories of the GDR system. More likely is his failure to understand and appreciate the roots of Stalinism and the damage it caused—all in all, a missed opportunity.

Nevertheless, for those who can, *The Bedbug* deserves to be seen. In many respects it is a fascinating historical document—one of the last pieces of really genuine, independent, critical theatre to be offered the Soviet public before the final descent into “socialist realism”.



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