

BOOK REVIEWS/КНИЖНЫЕ РЕЦЕНЗИИ

The Monkeys are Coming: Russian Drama of the 1920s. Translated, edited, and with an introduction by Michael A. Green, Jerome H. Katsell, and Stanislav A. Shvabrin. Idyllwild, CA: Charles Schlacks, Publisher, 2009. 160 pp. \$25.00 institutions; \$20.00 individuals (paper). ISBN: 1-884-445-45-4.

This collection of five plays from the Soviet NEP period includes some of the lesser-known works of five writers from the 1920s. The works, presented in the volume chronologically, comprise a portrait of what the editors/translators call “the essence of an unrepeatable time.” (p. 11) Green, Katsell, and Shvabrin offer a well-written and informative introduction to the volume, which begins with an allusion to the book’s title in a letter from Aleksandr Pushkin to Petr Viazemskii. In it, Pushkin refers to fate as a “monkey who has been given free will.” (p. 1) The next line contains one of a number of unfortunate typos in the volume: “Who will clamp a lease (sic) on it?” The original Russian “*Kto posadit eë na tsep’?*” might better be rendered as “Who will chain it?” suggesting both the taming and the subjugation of free will. Such is certainly the effect of the plays collected in the volume, all of which demonstrate “a need to confront the realities of the new Soviet state.” (p. 1) The result is a highly readable and engaging selection of Russian plays that together create a salient portrait of the Soviet 1920s, from the heady beginnings of the NEP period to the first Five Year Plan.

The first dramatic offering is the volume’s eponymous work *The Monkeys Are Coming* (1920) by Lev Luntz. It is also the only play in the volume that takes place entirely in Russia during that time, eschewing the flexible telescoping of time and time travel so popular in the writing from the period. The action takes place during a snowstorm in revolutionary Petersburg, with the stage symbolically representing the socially and economically bifurcated city: stage left is “stone, palatial, with columns,” (p. 15) while stage right is “the little wall of a Petersburg garret.” (p. 15) The cast of characters is equally motley and diverse, including peasants, urchins, clowns, Red Army soldiers, and a buffoon. The monkeys in the play represent the Revolution’s opposition, an impending threat that, as the title states, is always at the door. Their menacing and capricious nature is tempered only by the remarks of the Buffoon, who states, “Monkeys are kind, monkeys are fun. Are they ever?” (p. 30) The play ends in chaos and pandemonium at the monkeys’ impending arrival and the set decorations become a defended barricade on the stage. Appropriately, *The*

Monkeys Are Coming presents an effective first entry in the collection, characterizing the early days of the Revolution and the various layers and dimensions of Russian society, all anticipating events that would change them and the country forever.

Next, Anatolii Mariengof's *Conspiracy of Fools* (1922) transports the reader and audience to the first half of the eighteenth-century court of Empress Anna Ioannovna (1730-1740). Though titled "A Tragedy," the play abounds with wit, satire, and humor. The first scene opens with a myriad of fools at the funeral of what appears to him to be a horse, representing Anna's lover and orchestrator of her reign of terror, Ernst Johann von Biron. Even the intellectual Vasilii Trediakovskii, who reformed Russian versification, makes a guest appearance in the play, adding to the surreal action and use of language in the play. Mariengof's thinly veiled allegory of the chaotic period following the Bolshevik Revolution and the quick rise of a dictatorship resonates remarkably well in the political machination in present day Moscow, as well.

The third offering of the volume is Evgenii Zamiatin's *The Fires of St. Dominic* (1923), which is unique in the collection in that it is set outside of Russia. The action of the play occurs in Spain during the time of the Inquisition in the sixteenth century, but Zamiatin's drama does not shy away from allusions to the ills of Soviet collectivization, the creation of a Stalin-like cult of personality, and is even prescient of the purges to come a decade later. The destruction of the Santa Cruz family is central to the play, and becomes a case study of the allegiances and relationships that arise in the face of an autocratic regime. Zamiatin is best known for his 1920 dystopic futuristic novel *We*, which was not published in the Soviet Union until the late 1980s under Gorbachev. While his novel masterfully reveals the elimination of individual imagination and creativity in a totalitarian regime, *The Fires of St. Dominic* presents a much more nuanced critique of the years immediately following the Russian Revolution and insight into the difficulties and uncertainties of life under the new regime. As the character of Baltasar says to Doña Ynes, "I couldn't do anything else. Like the hand of a clock, I had to keep moving forward . . . Whatever the end turned out to be . . . And we never know what that will be." (p. 88)

Daniil Kharm's *A Saint Petersburg Comedy* (1927) is the fourth play in the volume and represents the absurd and often contradictory worlds of Kharm's work. The play begins *in medias res* with Part II (there is no Part I), and with the anachronistic interaction of Peter the Great, Nicholas II, and a member of the Communist Youth League. The indiscriminate – but seemingly unremarkable – time travel of characters in the play adds to the distortion of reality that the reader faces throughout the action. The vari-

ous characters travel at once in hot air balloons, airplanes, ships, and on horseback; when Tsar Nicholas exclaims that a beggar should be executed, Famusov retorts, “We tie him up, kill him. But what’s the use? Day after tomorrow he’ll come to life again and sing like a beggar.” (p. 102) In many ways, the absurdist language, characters, and setting of Kharms’ play is the perfect foil for the absurd topsy-turvy world of the new Soviet Union, or, as the editors contend, “. . . the time, the later 1920s, with its consolidation of Bolshevik power, was out of joint.” (p. 10)

The final and latest piece in the collection is Mikhail Bulgakov’s play *Bliss* (1929). It is also the only play in the volume translated by Bulgakov scholar Carl R. Proffer, although still edited by Green, Katsell, and Shvabrin. Best known outside of Russia for his later remarkable satirical novel, *The Master and Margarita* (1940), Bulgakov’s fame in Soviet Russia came primarily from his short stories and plays. *Bliss* falls into the author’s larger body of writing as one of several works, including his banned novella, *Heart of a Dog* (1925), that flirt with science fiction and fantasy in their exploitation of futuristic science and technology. In *Bliss*, the object of the hero Evgenii Nikolaevich Rein’s obsession is his invention of a time machine that will transport him out of the bleak and hostile reality of Soviet everyday life, with its grey, mediocre, and malignant denizens. After a series of false starts, including one that brings Ivan the Terrible to modern Moscow, Rein’s machine finally succeeds in transporting him to the Soviet capital in the twenty-third century, which is free of police and restrictions on vodka. However, Rein still finds his invention under threat by the commissar Radamanov, and ultimately chooses to return to Moscow in his own time. Both in style and in plot, *Bliss* is far and away the most ambitious and successful play of the five in this collection. Bulgakov creates in *Bliss* an everyman’s story of the desire to escape the false promises of the Revolution and the inherent dangers in even thinking such thoughts. Indeed, the play, with its plotline of Ivan of the Terrible appearing in contemporary Moscow, became the basis for another Bulgakov play, *Ivan Vasilievich* (1936), which later became the very successful and popular Soviet film *Ivan Vasilievich Changes His Profession* (1979). But aside from these later commercial successes, Bulgakov’s play invokes in the reader and the viewer the most primal of questions about the New Order: What if?

Green, Katsell, and Shvabrin are to be commended for assembling a unique and compelling collection of relatively unknown works by five of the most innovative writers of the early Soviet period. In assembling these five works authored between 1920 and 1929, the editors have succeeded in creating a quite remarkable portrait of NEP-era Soviet Russia, complete with the diversity, divergences, and dissonance that marked the

social, political, and literary culture of that time. As mentioned above, the volume would have benefitted from more careful proofreading, but the occasional typos do not detract from the overall impact and success of each of the plays. The volume holds interest and appeal not only to literary and drama scholars, but also to historians, cultural studies specialists, and to anyone interested in gaining a better understanding of how five quite different playwrights crafted their individual and unique vignettes of life in Russia following the Revolution, what the editors call “the essence of an unrepeatable time.” (p. 11) *The Monkeys Are Coming: Russian Drama of the 1920s* presents a brief, but vivid glimpse into the lives, hopes, and fears of many Russians at that time and, as such, invites further study and investigation of the events and policies of the NEP period.

Thomas J. Garza

University of Texas at Austin