Spring 2004

Defining the Period and Style of Constructivism

Aaron Gamble

Defining the Period and Style of Constructivism

Aaron Gamble

Senior Thesis

In Partial Fulfillment of the BA Degree in Theatre

Longwood University

Spring 2004

The purpose of my thesis paper is to define the style of theatre known as Constructivism by outlining and describing the theatrical conventions utilized by the Constructivists. These descriptions are based on research I have collected from various sources. It is important for any scholar to realize that it is difficult to define an artistic movement, due to the fact that styles are forever changing. This is why I have chosen to focus on the style at the time of its inception. By focusing on this fixed point I am able to define the original intent of the style.

I will also be discussing the sociological aspects of theatre history as they relate to the understanding of the psychological paradigms of the culture that spawned the artistic movement. Having a basic understanding of theatre as it relates to time and place is vital to understanding and appreciating any artistic movement and its significance to theatre history and society as a whole.

The history of the Soviet Union from its beginning in 1917 is, as scholar Bown puts it, "…one of the great dramas of the 20th century (Bown 1)." It was also

the most influential factor on Russian art and theatre of the period. Scholar Lodder states that the new "…radical reassessment of artistic activity was a direct response to the experience of the Russian Revolution of 1917…(Lodder 1)." This is the reason that Soviet art is classified into terms that are generally associated with politics. Soviet history as well as Soviet art can be classified into two periods, the "revolutionary period" and the period of "corrupted communism" (Bown 2). Bown states that the "…two contrasting schemes suggest on the one hand that art was moulded by politics above all, and on the other, that theme was a significant degree of autonomous cultural development. (Bown 4)." This can be seen as one analyzes the art created during Russia's Revolutionary period of 1917. Scholar Bown emphasizes the importance of art on the social and political paradigms of the Soviets and how the two are intertwined:

> …art practiced throughout the Soviet period was so tightly knitted into the social and political fabric that in periodizing Soviet art it is often tempting to appeal to events of extra-artistic significance to provide a framework (Bown 3).

In the midst of the First World War, the Russian people began to criticize the failures of their government and the tsar. In February of 1917, riots broke out and a major political revolution was set in motion. A temporary government was installed to maintain peace in the capital city. It was at this time the tsar, Nicolas II, resigned. In October of 1917, the Bolsheviks, directed by party leader Vladimir Iiyich Lenin, overthrew the temporary government and obtained political control of the State of Russia. The political upheaval during the time of the Revolution was a highly enlightening and inspirational period for artists and the people of the State at large.

Scholar Gorchakov claims that the Revolution had a direct effect on the popularity of the theatre due to the fact that people wanted a distraction from the riots and horrors happening in the streets (Gorchakov 97). The Russian theatre community embraced the Revolution, and, therefore, the people embraced the theatre. The Russian private theaters saw the Revolution as an opportunity to explore their creativity with unlimited bounds. The private theaters

hoped that the Revolution would free them from the tight hold on creativity held by the tsarist regime (Gorchakov 97).

This was not possible before the Revolution, due to the fact that the tsarist regime only gave financial subsidies to its own imperial theatres and was therefore able to justify its strict hold of creativity throughout the State (Gorchakov 100). The Imperial theatres feared the Revolution because they did not want to lose their first-rate status (Gorchakov 97).

During the eight months that separated the February Revolution, which ended the Tsar's rule, and the October Revolution, in which the Bolsheviks seized power, many significant changes in respects to the Russian theatre developed (Gorchakov 100). The temporary government, which was in power during the time of the Revolution, was not concerned with holding strict creative control over the private theatres, and the control was therefore lifted (Gorchakov 100). This included the ban on plays that had been forbidden by the regime and the Orthodox Church. This led to a surge of political satire aimed at the Tsarist regime

and the Orthodox Church (Gorchakov 105). Theatre became popular during this time because it was one of the fist art forms to openly criticize the Russian government (Gorchakov 105). For the first time, Scholar Gorchakov concludes, "theatre had obtained freedom of speech, and assembly, the right to use the stage to propagandize different political, religious, and philosophical positions (Gorchakov 100)."

An abundance of new art emanated from Russia's Revolutionary period. This new art came in waves from trendy nonconformist art groups that had been dubbed avant-garde (Guerman 6). In fact, everything not classified by the Russian government was considered avant-garde (White 10). The most notable of these groups were the Futurists and the Constructivists (Guerman 6). The art groups of the Russian avant-garde all shared the same defining characteristic of an optimistic anticipation of rebirth and a look toward the future rather than the past (White 202). The artists of the Russian avant-garde violently opposed any linkage to the past (Bown 4). Some of the more extremist of the avant-garde advocated the destruction

of national museums (Bown 4). Scholar Abrams asserts that "…in rejecting the past, they rejected everything indiscriminately including both academicism and genuine classics of art (Guerman 6)." The official Soviet culture considered the ideology of the avant-garde groups disrespectful and a slap in the face of generally acceptable public taste (White 10). Soviet culture classified the art of ideology of the avant-garde alien, antagonistic, anti-Soviet, and unpatriotic (White 10). Although the public was generally offended by the avant-garde, they were fascinated by their alluring tenacity (Guerman 6).

Vsevolod Meyerhold was the first director to incorporate the interrelated styles of the Futurists and the Constructivists into theatrical production (Eaton 56). He was an enthusiastic supporter of the Revolution and used theatre to inform and educate the masses of the politics of the day. In a quote from a letter to his friend and collogue Anton. Chekhov, Meyerhold expresses his view of the current state of theatre in Russia and stresses his position of the responsibility of the role of theatrical artists:

> I want all those who belong to the theatre to achieve a consciousness of their high mission. I am upset by my comrades' not wanting to rise above narrow caste interests foreign to the interests of society. Yes theatre can play a great role in the reconstruction of all society (Eaton 58).

Meyerhold was indeed dissatisfied with the present state of theatre in Russia before the Revolution. He once claimed that Russian theatre had been "wallowing" in "disgusting slime" before 1917 (Braun 179.) Like the artists of the Russian avant-garde, Meyerhold shared many of their philosophical ideas of art and politics. He shared their idea of embracing the new and destroying the old. He also embraced the idea of accepting only the best from the brightest young artists. Meyerhold once stated: "To have an outstanding theatre, the best artists...must be in control, to elevate the tastes of the masses (Eaton 58)." Meyerhold was referred to as The Master of Soviet avant-garde theatre (Eaton 34).

The Russian Revolution inspired artistic heroes and the Russian people on all fronts. Meyerhold's attempt to reach the people and to serve the Revolution through artistic means is one of great merit. Meyerhold's revolt against Naturalism is said to have

brought theatre into the 20th century, and the advances made on his front are still influential to artists today. (Schmidt XII). Scholar Marshal states that:

> Meyerhold is now the acknowledged theatrical genius of the century, and founding father of modern avant-garde theatre who has influenced all the theatre artists of the world…(Marshal 143).

There are two plays of the period that were directed by Meyerhold that I will be referencing as examples: *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922) and *Trust D.E.*(1924). I will be referencing one of these two productions in order to aid my descriptions of the theatrical conventions generally associated with Constructivism. I will also be referring to photographic research of these productions to help illustrate my descriptions, which I have provided in the appendix of this document.

Before I begin to define Constructivism, I must first set up a basic vocabulary of the theatrical terms that I will be mentioning.

There are as many theatrical styles as there are plays, and there are just as many interpretations of these styles as there are patrons of the arts.

One must keep in mind the subjective nature of the definition of these theatrical styles. Since the definitions of theatrical styles are left up to interpretation, the definitions of them vary. These definitions are not concrete and are subject to change over time. Before one can begin to interpret the definition of a particular theatrical style, one must first define style. Scholar A.S. Gillette defines theatrical style as "a method of expression in design (Gillette 149)." The method of expression scholar Gillette is referring to is the use of theatrical conventions which characterize the art of a specific time and place.

One way to know what style is appropriate for any given production is to have a clear understanding of theatrical styles and their time and place in theatre history. It is also important to have a clear understanding of the style in which the play was written, as well as the playwright's intention for the play. Scholar Sparre claims that one must understand the style of the playwright's work in order to best produce the play so as to transmit the playwright's

original intention to the audience. Scholar Sparre also claims that whether or not one chooses to design a play in the same style in which it was written, one must be aware of the characteristics of the styles that were prevalent when the play was written (Sparre 75).

In her book *Play Directing*, scholar Francis Hodge defines a theatrical convention as a contrivance that is used which has symbolic value (Hodge 194). Like style, theatrical conventions develop out of necessity. Theatrical conventions came out of the need to provide an audience with a visual background that served the needs of the style of the play. Theatrical conventions also developed from artistic esthetics established by the art community(Gillette 143).

History has shown that stage conventions of theatrical styles often become so deeply rooted into the psyche of the artistic communities that created them that artistic revolutions are often necessary to overthrow them (Hodge 194). This is, in fact, how many theatrical styles of the late 19th century and early 20th century developed.

The turn of the last century bared witness to the

development of many theatrical styles, and stage conventions, most of which are still in practice. Scholar Gillette claims that "At the turn of the century the field of scene design entered a period of development and experimentation unparalleled by any comparable span of years in 25 centuries of play production." The group of styles and counter-styles which developed from all of this experimentation came with unprecedented rapidity and were used with enough regularity that they were dignified by specific names (Gillette 149).

The styles that developed during the turn of the last century were a revolt against Naturalism*.

---

*Scholar Gillette states that the scene design style known as Naturalism is characterized by a meticulous recording of facts and their incorporation into the stage picture (Gillette 150).

The origin of Naturalism can be traced back to the High Gothic era, however, it was not a conscious and organized theatrical style until the end of the 19th century(Russell 90).

These styles were known as the "Isms," and they include Constructivism, Expressionism, Surrealism, Futurism,

and Symbolism. Although each one of these theatrical styles had their own unique set of popular stage conventions, they all derived from the same desire to retheatricalize the art of theatre (Cohen 242). The popularity of the Isms helped to put an end to Naturalism. Naturalism had run its course and was scarcely used after 1914 (Gillette 151). These new styles moved progressively away from the traditions of Naturalism and moved towards a greater sense of imagination (Gillette 150). It is this imagination that has inspired the kind experimentation that produces conventions that defines both theatrical styles and the character of artistic communities.

The style known as Constructivism came out of Russia in the earlier part of the 20th century. Constructivism was an artistic movement, which blossomed, due to the country's new-found pride in the artistic talents of their native born sons (Pope 7). The artistic estheticism of Constructivism art inspired the theatrical movement.

The theatrical movement developed in large part due to the patronage of the Russian Aristocracy who

owned most of the countries private theatres and opera houses. It was entrepreneur S. Mamontov who first suggested "that a scene design should be more than just a background against which actors move." These patrons were aware of the artistic revolution that was occurring in their country and employed artists to work in their theatres. The aristocracy hired Russian artists of all trades to design sets and costumes for their productions (Pope 6).

The first wave of Constructivists were young working class adults seventeen to eighteen years of age who had previously served in the military. These early constructivists were militant young minds who violently apposed pre-revolutionary art and criticism of their work (Braun 165).

The constructivists rejected traditional modes of Naturalism (Pope 8). The esthetics of the designs produced by them resembled industrial design. To the Soviet public, these designs seemed to represent the new world of machines (Guerman 6). Scholar Cohen states that these constructions "reflect man in a machine age…(Cohen 243)." The Constructivists aimed to

realize the Communist expression of material structures (leach 94). These constructions were a response to the movement's need to fuse art and technology. Constructivist theatre is a style of theatre which is not structured around traditional modes of theatrical conventions, but rather engineering principals which acknowledge technological artifacts and rhythms of a dynamic industrial society (Cohen 243).The constructions maximized the potential of spatial relations created between the actors and the audience, and offered the actor and director the ability to explore unbound space (Leach 95).

In order to understand the purpose of Constructivist designs one must first have a basic understanding of the theatrical term known as mise-en-scene. Mise-en-scene is defined as the "arrangement of all the elements in a stage picture either at a given moment or dynamically throughout the performance (Wilson G6)." To the Constructivists, the mise-en-scene of a set construction was just as crucial to the telling of the story as the actors. According to Eisenstein's terminology, "The mise-en-scene itself

becomes the attraction, that is, an independent and primary element in the construction of the performance (Leach 99)." The Constructivists believe the mise-en-scene and the actor were alike in that they both had their own physical dynamic which was used to perform an action. The action being performed by the mise-en-scene was of course the action of directing that audience's attention to specific points on stage. The Constructivists were extremely consistent with their style, and used everything to their advantage. Meyerhold once stated that "The production of a play is a conceptual task which I accomplish physically using all the means that theatre affords (Schmidt XII)." The sole purpose of all the theatrical conventions utilized by the Constructivists was to compliment the stage picture created by the mise-en-scene.

The most basic convention of Constructivism was the use of raw materials to build the set constructions. The constructions were made from scaffolds, wooden platforms, ladders, slides, wheels, and other industrial materials (Cohen 243). The set of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* utilized all of these

materials, as Scholar Braun describes: "It {the set} consisted of the frames of conventional theatre flats and platforms joined by steps, chutes, and catwalks; there were two wheels, a large disc…and a vestigial windmill sail…(Braun 170)" (See figure 1). These industrial materials were chosen for their versatility and for their overall utilitarianism (Leach 94). In his lecture notes, Meyerhold has stated the goal of the utilization of raw materials to construct his sets:

> In art our constant concern is the organization of raw materials. Constructivism has forced the artist to become both artist and engineer. Art should be based on scientific principles; the entire creative act should be a conscious process (Braun 165).

The setting made use of the naked technological artifacts, as scholar Cohen puts it, "by emphasizing the rhythms created by the dynamics of the industrial work place (Cohen 243)."

The use of highly recognizable industrial materials coordinated very well with the architecture of the theatre, which was often exposed. Baring the back brick wall of the theatre was a definitive theatrical convention of Constructivism (Braun 172).

This convention was incorporated into the design of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* as seen in figure 2.

The Constructivists rejected the art of scene painting. They believed that element of scene painting would take the focus away from the new dynamic factor of the mise-en-scene that was being created by set construction. Exposing the raw materials not only created an original esthetic, which helped to define their style, it also enabled them to focus on the forestage. The lack of painted scenery not only contributed to the concentration of the mise-en-scene created by the set, but it also creates a void that fills itself by actively contributing to the performance of the mise-en-scene (Leach 93).

The efforts made by the Constructivists of the extreme theatrical left to expose the architecture of the theatre and the raw materials of the set construction contributed to the performance of the mise-en-scene by heightening the audience's awareness of the theatricality of the spectacle that they were considered apart of. The line of causality of the mise-en-scene was a conscious line between the

stage and the spectator. Scholar Paul Schmidt states that these set constructions pose the idea that "...your own behavior is involved in this, may be responsible for this (Schmidt XVI). These conventions would later become the fundamentals of The Conscience Theatre movement.

These conventions were applied to the roots of the stories being told, the script. The Constructivists did not believe in author's rights and often changed or reworked scripts in order to suit they conventional needs (Braun 186). Meyerhold was once accused by his critics as being the "leader of a plot to destroy the classics of Russian drama (Symons 120)." In justifying his use of this theatrical convention he stated:

> ...the best way to most effectively communicate the essence of a script was to make sure that its verbiage did not interfere with the actor's virtuosity. If this necessitated some surgery on the script, then it was ultimately in the best interest of the drama itself: Any recreation of a work justifies its existence if it springs from an inner necessity (Symons 120).

The most used convention of this nature was the convention of breaking scripts into episodes. These episodes were called bits. Each bit had its own title (Eaton 56). These titles were usually projected onto a

screen. The best example of this convention is its notable use in Meyerhold's production of *Trust D.E.* *D.E.* was broken down into seventeen episodes (Symons 121). These episodes lasted about ten to fifteen minutes in length (Symons 122). Breaking the story into individual episodes allows the director the ability to alter time and space as it is needed to progress the action in the most efficient way (Schmidt XV). Scholar Symons states:

> Just as he had striven for the ultimate in actor mobility through biomechanics and the ultimate in mobility of stage action through scenic constructivism, so now he sought to "mobilize" the entire production through the device of episodic progression...(Symons 122).

Scholar Eaton summarizes comments made in Meyerhold's essay entitled "*The Reconstruction of the Theatre*," on using an episodic structure, by stating that "Meyerhold advocated eliminating the traditional division of plays into...episodes...in order to surmount the stagnation of the pseudoclassical unity of action and time (Eaton 55). This convention is consistent with the Constructivist/Futuristic philosophy of disassociation from traditional modes of artistic esthetics.

The Constructivists used projection screens in many dynamic ways. These projection screens were used to give information about the scenes, introduce characters, give ironic commentary about the scenes, and it sometimes incorporated current political propaganda that was relevant to the action and the main idea of the plays. The projection screens were usually hung from the architecture of the theatre or mounted on top of the proscenium arch (Leach 106). Projection screens were mounted onto the proscenium in the production of *D.E.,* as seen in figure 3.

The projection screens were sometimes stage flats that were incorporated into the physical action of the play. The best example of this is Meyerhold's 1924 production *D.E.* Scholar Braun describes the set as being

> …comprised entirely of moving walls. These walls were a series of eight to ten dark red wooden screens, about twelve feet long and nine feet high, which were moved on wheels by members of the cast concealed behind each one. They were deployed to represent different locations (Braun 187).

Scholar Herbert Marshal describes the efficiency of the action: "The actors, trained as they were, moved the

walls with such skill that the changes appeared to be miraculous…(Marshal 129)" (see figure 4).

The stage picture created by the placement of the flats resembled the modern silent film convention of cinema montage (Marshall 129). Marshal also comments that the use of these technical elements during climactic moments during the production "…Meyerhold produced a kind of light symphony, which together with the fantastic movements of the walls, truly created an impression of tremendous dynamic action (Marshall 132)."

The projection screens were not intended merely for visual decoration. The purpose of the projection screens was not only to acknowledge the audience by delivering messages directly to them, but it also contributed to the performance of the mise-en-scene by utilizing technology to direct the audiences attention. In this production Meyerhold incorporated not only scenery, but live action and modern technology as well, to create a stage picture and an effective mise-en-scene. Scholar Leach claims that this production was "A rare occasion in theatre history when stage flats

have played a dynamic part in stage action (Leach 100)." Although these projection screens did not always constitute as a part of the set construction, they were always incorporated into Constructivist designs.

The Constructivists incorporated stage lighting into the performance of the mise-en-scene. Area lighting was used to direct the audience's focus through the complex levels of action, and to reinforce the mise-en-scene of the set construction. Area lighting was sometimes used to divide two scenes play simultaneously. By using area lighting, the Constructivists were able to smoothly direct the audience's attention and progress the story efficiently (Braun 186). Scholar Eaton claims that Meyerhold is the "…first director to use light verses dark as a means of quickly presenting a series of brief episodes (Eaton 53).

The Constructivists rejected set dressing and scenic decoration. They did use stage furniture, but they utilized it in the most efficient way possible. Stage furniture served only two purposes: to add to the

physical action of the play, and to contribute to the performance of the mise-en-scene. The mise-en-scene created by the placement of the furniture directed the audience's focus on the actors. Stage furniture was always chosen for its utilitarianism, and it was never decorative. Stage furniture was usually kept to a minimum (Leach 102).

Although specific props and costumes were not associated with Constructivism the utilization of them was consistent with the other conventions of the style. Props were kept to a minimum and were usually real-life industrial objects, which were chosen for their utilitarianism (Braun 235).

The Constructivists utilized uniform costumes, which were usually jumpsuits (see figure 5). The geometric pattern of the jumpsuits was intended to enhance the human form. These jumpsuits enabled the actors the ability to perform a wide range of physical action. The uniforms were always the same color, which unified the characters as apart of an ensemble. Individual characters were identified in subtle ways. The uniform jumpsuits reinforced the concept that the

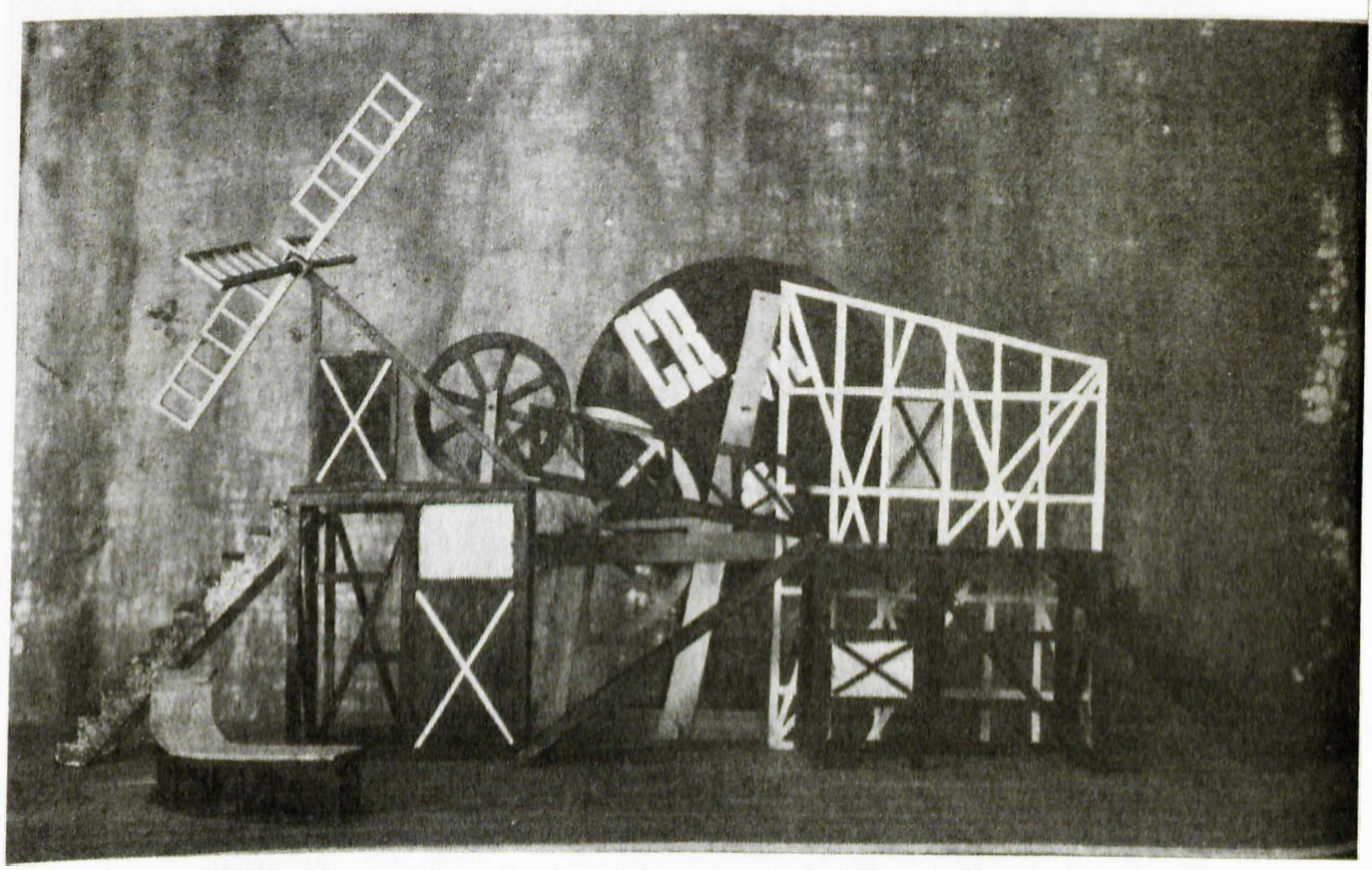
set construction was a machine for acting (Leach 108).

The scene design style called Constructivism is defined best by the theatrical conventions that accompany it. Constructivism allows for the maximum utility of all theatrical elements to achieve a strong and unified dramatic experience.

Although The Constructivist movement supported the communist revolution, ironically, the Bolshevik party rejected their style and would adopt Realism as the official art of the Russian Soviet State. The Constructivist movement did however set an unprecedented standard in Russian art, which could not have been possible without the Revolution. Though it failed to obtain official state recognition, Constructivism has earned its place in theatre history.

Appendix

Figure 1. *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922). From Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* . Copyright 1983 by Yale University Press.



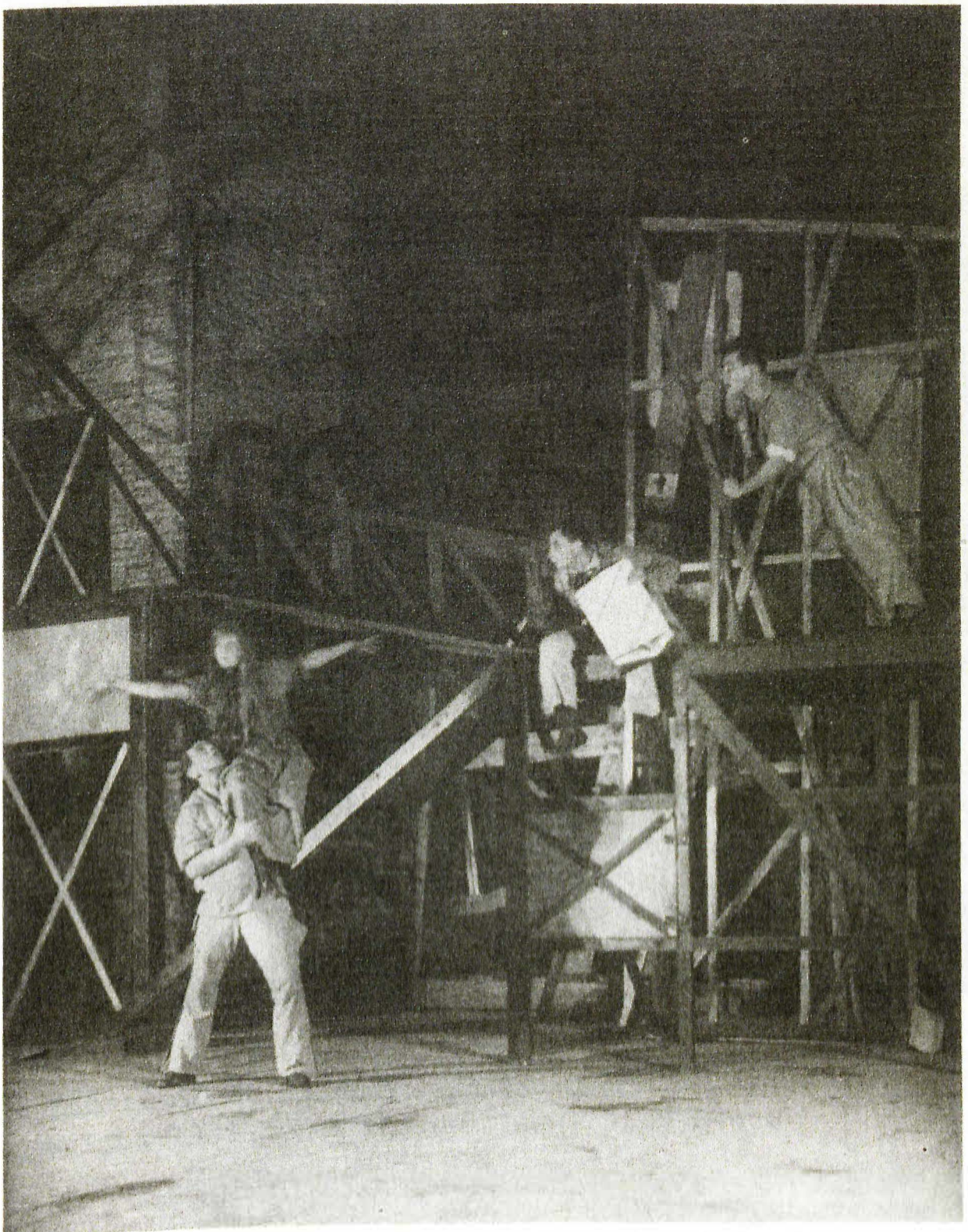


Figure 2. *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922). From Marjorie L. Hoover, *Meyerhold The Art of Conscious Theater.* Copyright 1974 by University of Massachusetts Press.

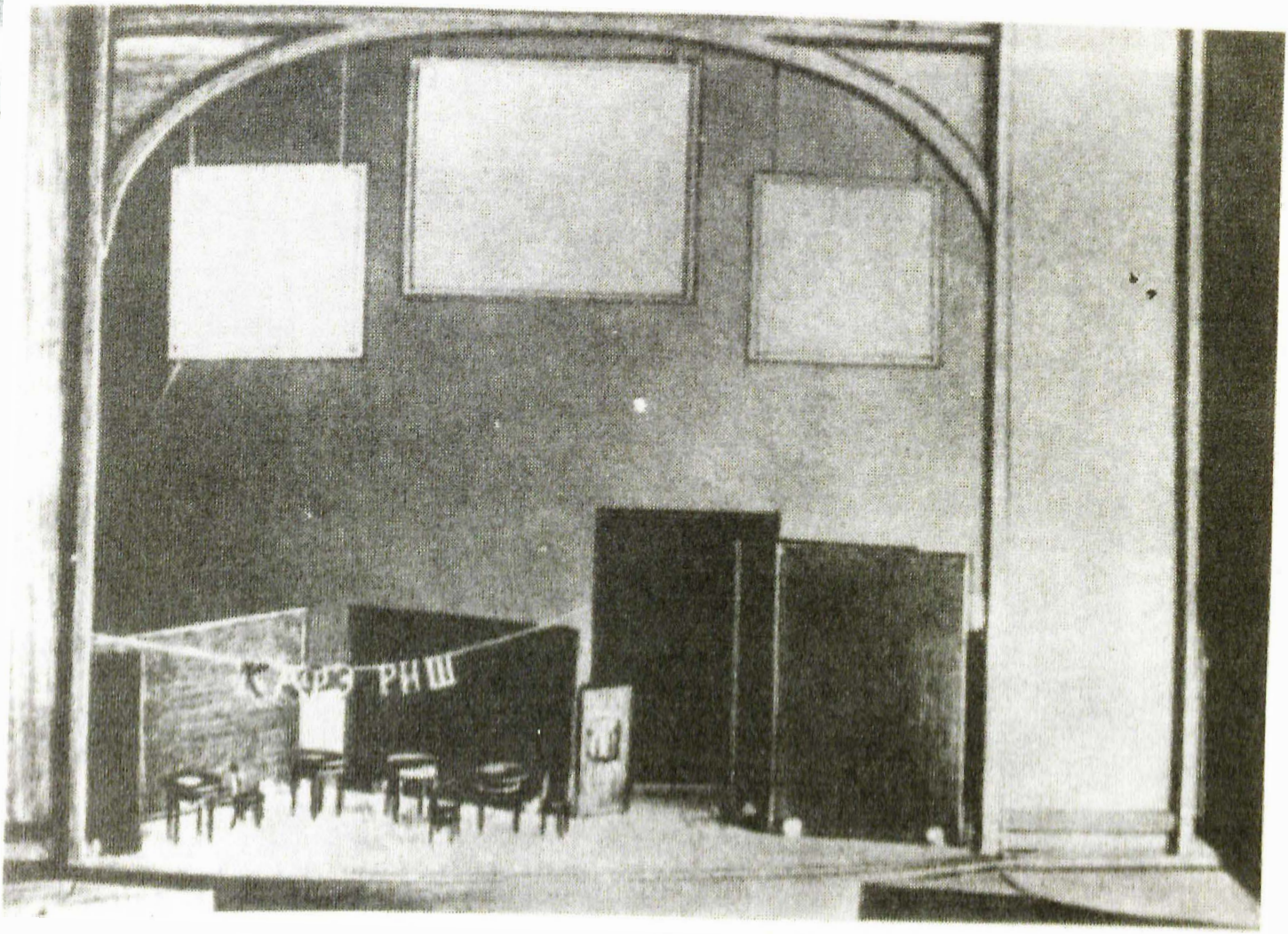


Figure 3. *Trust D.E.* (1924). From Robert Leach, *Directors in Perspective Vsevolod Meyerhold.*

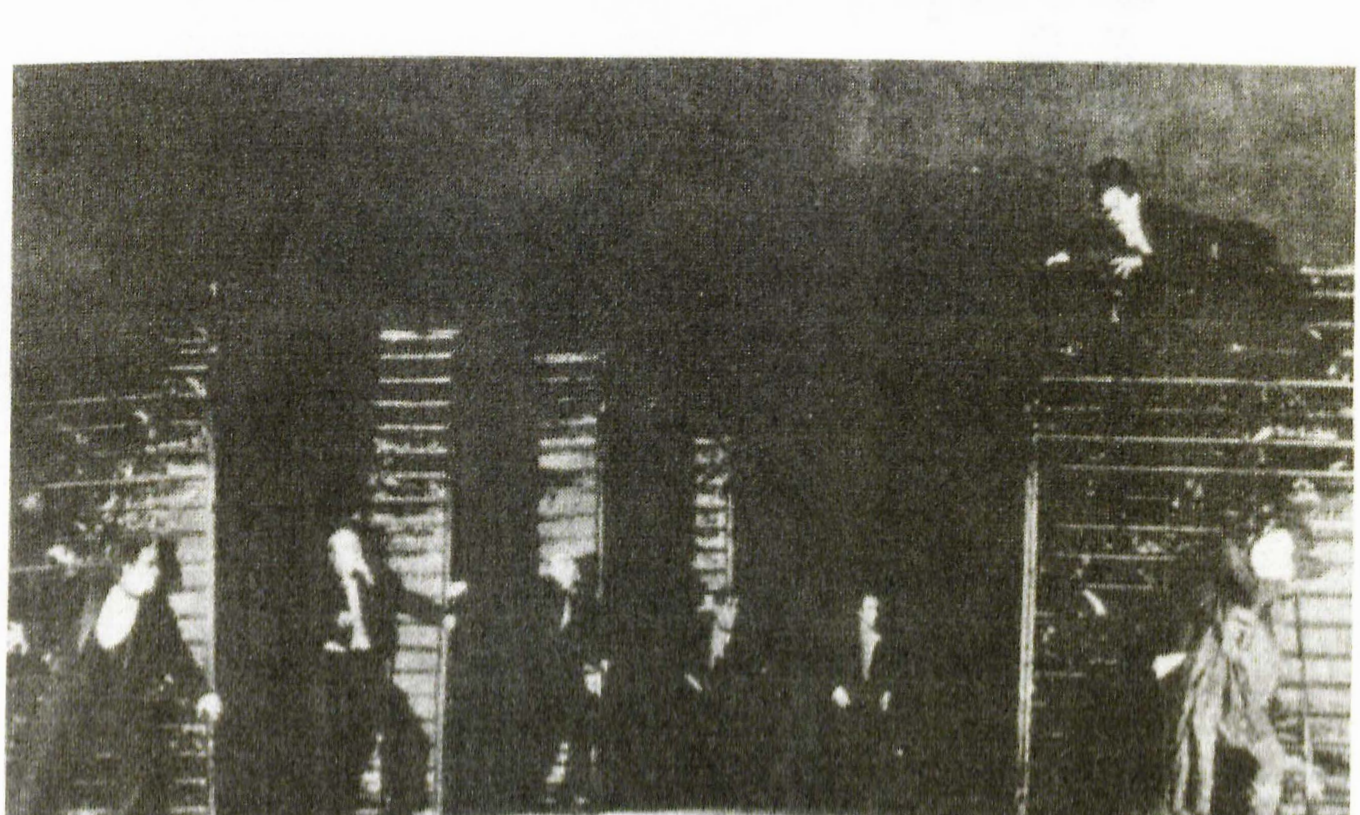


Figure 4. *Trust D.E.* (1924). From Robert Leach, *Directors in Perspective Vsevolod Meyerhold.*

Figure 5. *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922). From Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*. Copyright 1983 by Yale University Press.

Bibliography

Bown, Cullerne, Matthew, Brandon Taylor. *Art of the Soviets Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture In a One Party State, 1917-1992.* New York: Manchester University Press, 1993.

Braun, Edward. *The Theatre of Meyerhold Revolution On The Modern Stage.* London: Methuen, 1979.

Cohen, Robert, and John Harrop. *Creative Play Direction*. New Jersey: Prentice -Hall, 1974.

Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *The Theater of Meyerhold and Brecht.* Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985.

Gassner, John. *Directions In Modern Theatre and Drama.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1967.

Gillette, A.S. *An Introduction To Scenic Design*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967.

Gorchakov, A. Nikolai. *The Theater in Soviet Russia.* Trans. Edgar Lehrman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1957.

Gray, Camilla. *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922.* New York: Harry N. Abrams,Inc, 1962.

Guerman, Mikhail. *Art of The October Revolution.* Trans. W. Freeman, D. Saunders, C. Binns. Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1979.

History and Culture of Russia. Geographia Homepage. InterKnowledge Corp. February 25, 2004 (http://www.geographia.com/russia/rushis06.htm).

Hodge, Francis. *Play Directing.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000.

Hoover, Marjorie, L. *Meyerhold The Art of Conscious Theater.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974.

Leach, Robert. *Directors in Perspective Vsevolod Meyerhold.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Leach, Robert. *Revolutionary Theatre.* London: Routledge, 1994.

Lodder, Christina. *Russian Constructivism.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

Marshall, Herbert. *The Pictorial History of The Russian Theatre.* New York: Crown Publishers, 1977.

Pope, H., Annemarie. *Russian Stage and Costume Designs for the Ballet, Opera, and Theatre.* International Exhibitions Foundation, 1967.

Russell, A., Douglas. *Period Style for the Theatre.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1987.

Schmidt, Paul. *Meyerhold At Work.* Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1980.

Symons, James M. *Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque: The Post-Revolutionary Productions, 1920-1932.* Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971.

White, Garrett. *Forbidden Art: The Postwar Avant-Garde.* Los Angeles: Curatorial Assistance, Inc., 1998.

Wilson, Edwin, Alvin Goldfarb. *Living Theatre A History.* Boston: McGraw Hill, 1983.