Revolutionary Acts

Mally, Lynn

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THE CONCLUSION of the Russian Civil War brought new challenges to all those engaged in constructing a Soviet culture. Efforts to rebuild the shattered economic base of the country, begun in 1921, meant that there were substantially fewer state funds available for cultural projects. Optimistic plans to construct new club buildings and new stages for amateur theaters were put off for several years. In addition, in order to infuse life into the economy, the Soviet government allowed limited capitalist enterprise to start up again in the form of the New Economic Policy (NEP). This program was not only an economic threat to those who hoped for the rapid victory of socialism, but it also posed significant cultural dangers in the minds of many affiliated with amateur theater. Urban commercial life quickly revived, offering entertainment opportunities ranging from imported films to boulevard literature. Many Bolsheviks, as well as their allies from the prerevolutionary people’s theater movement, saw these aspects of urban life as a threat to the creation of a healthy and edifying culture for the masses.

Even though funds were tight, state agencies at both the national and the local level realized the importance of launching cultural campaigns to win the population over to the Soviet cause. The Soviet state of the 1920s might be best called an “enlightenment state,” in the words of Michael David-Fox, so focused was it on transforming the consciousness of its citizens. “By the early 1920s,” writes David-Fox, “Bolshevik leaders across factional lines came to portray cultural transformation, educational work, and the creation of a Bolshevik intelligentsia as pivotal to
the fate of regime and revolution.”¹ Non-professional theatrical groups, which had proven themselves effective propagandists during the Civil War, emerged as an important arena in the struggle to educate the broad population to become enthusiastic Soviet citizens.

While sponsoring agencies had high expectations for amateur stages, they rarely provided new funds or resources. How, under these circumstances, could amateur stages best fulfill their pedagogical tasks? In this chapter I investigate one answer put forward initially by a select group of cultural activists in Petrograd and Moscow. They proposed abandoning conventional repertoires for club stages altogether, replacing them with the improvisational methods that had already gained ground during the Russian Civil War. These methods were called “small forms” (malye formy), yet another redefinition of a prerevolutionary term. Before the Bolsheviks came to power, the theater of small forms referred to music halls and vaudeville theaters.² Now small forms meant agit-trials, satirical sketches, and living newspapers.

The agitational theater of small forms satirized Soviet enemies and praised Soviet heroes. It was used to impart lessons on how Soviet citizens should live—what books they should read, what their hygienic habits should be, and how they should relate to the Soviet regime. These methods were in part a response to the new cultural offerings of the NEP era. Sponsors envisioned the healthy entertainments of Soviet clubs, among them amateur theatrical works, as an alternative to “decadent” forms of commercial culture made possible by NEP’s restricted capitalism. The theater of small forms was intended to be engaging; many skits used humor and buffoonery. Some groups consciously employed elements of NEP culture in order to interest viewers, giving them what they hoped was a healthy socialist twist. Thus this didactic theater was intended both to educate and entertain.

Limited cultural funding facilitated the turn to small forms. These improvisational methods were for the most part not dependent on well-appointed stages and expensive production techniques. Performers often played characters very much like themselves and therefore did not require expensive costumes or make-up. Because small forms were conceived as a method to bring performers closer to audiences, the humble performance spaces of clubs, with their small or non-existent stages, were not the impediment that they would have been for more conven-

tional productions. Some groups, like the Moscow Blue Blouse theater, commanded its followers to eschew complex costumes and sets, turning necessities into virtues. "Blue Blouse rejects all beautiful, realistic sets and decorations," read one manifesto. "There will be absolutely no birch trees or little rivers."3

Yet even while small forms gained ground, there were heated debates surrounding the eventual direction of amateur theater. Were these improvisational forms an end in themselves? Did they point toward the development of new kinds of "big" theater—new plays and operas with a revolutionary thematic and presentational style? Or were they temporary, stop-gap measures for poorly equipped club stages and poorly trained amateur actors, measures that could be phased out as conditions improved? These questions were debated within state agencies and trade union bureaucracies, among theatrical professionals interested in amateur work, and inside club theatrical groups themselves. Certainly, some club stage advocates believed that if a new, distinctive style of Soviet theater ever was going to take shape it would emerge from the shabby environs of workers' clubs and not from the glittering stages of the old theaters.

The Turn to Small Forms

The promotion of small forms on local stages came initially from local agencies in Petrograd/Leningrad and Moscow at the onset of the New Economic Policy. Their advocacy of a unique, politicized repertoire for amateur theaters found favor among select local groups. By 1923, the Communist Party endorsed the idea that club cultural work should be directly relevant to political and economic campaigns, a pronouncement interpreted as an endorsement of this direction on the amateur stage. The national trade union leadership soon followed suit. Although not all amateur theater groups abandoned prerevolutionary works and full-length Soviet plays in the early years of NEP, there was a definite swing to small forms. Local living newspaper groups were an especially popular manifestation of this aesthetic turn.

The first efforts to formulate a unique form of amateur performance took shape in Petrograd at the end of the Civil War. Petrograd Politprosvet activists devised a special organizational framework within clubs to structure cultural work, a model they called the "united artistic circle" (edinyi khudozhestvennyi kruzhok)—often called by its acronym, 3. "Prostye sovety uchastnikam sinebluznoi gazety," Siniaia bluza (henceforth cited as SB) 18 (1925): 4.
The goal was to make the life of the club revolve around Soviet festivals. Adrian Piotrovskii, the head of the Petrograd Politprosvet division, envisioned the united artistic circle as a way to continue and expand the agitational, propagandistic direction of club theatrical work begun during the Civil War. He believed that many amateur theater circles had already made theatrical festivals a central focus of their work. In Piotrovskii’s view, the united artistic circle simply described and clarified the direction that theatrical work had already taken in factory and neighborhood clubs. The central idea was to make all club artistic and educational circles work together toward the same goal. Music groups, physical education circles, and literary circles would all participate in the creation of a mass theatrical “happening” (deistvo). The newly emerging festival days of the revolution were the perfect occasion for these events. All would contribute to a celebration of Bloody Sunday, May Day, and the October Revolution. This new direction emerged from popular tastes, wrote Piotrovskii in 1921: “There is no pull toward the ‘spectacle’ [zrelishche] of professional theater; instead, popular theatrical events, popular performances have burst forth into light.”

In Piotrovskii’s description, local theatrical activity was spontaneously moving toward club festivals; the united artistic circle was a method to better coordinate that activity. Piotrovskii’s focus was on spontaneity, local creativity, and (although he did not say so directly) local resources. As Katerina Clark has noted, the united artistic circle displayed in striking clarity the newly constrained economic circumstances of NEP. What was proposed was in essence a bargain-basement festival, removed from the main squares of the city to the humble confines of club stages and their immediate neighborhoods.

In addition to these fiscal attractions, the united artistic circle marked a significant turn toward greater uniformity and control. What was pro-
posed was nothing less than a complete transformation of amateur theatricals. No longer would clubs devote themselves to performing classic or contemporary plays. Rather, they would focus their work on a festive calendar of revolutionary celebrations. Moreover, some descriptions of the united artistic circle significantly curtailed the element of spontaneity. It was the club’s political circle that gained the responsibility for drawing up the guidelines and taking control of artistic work. Grigorii Avlov, part of the cultural division of the Petrograd Politprosvet and editor of the most widely distributed book on united artistic circles, made the central role of the political group even more pronounced. The model he chose was that of a factory, where all sectors cooperated in the creation of a final product. The function of central planner was given to the political circle.

It is not hard to understand the appeal of the united artistic circle for government and trade union organizations. In its ideal form, all club cultural activity would propagate the principles and goals of the revolution, supervised by political organs within the club. Petrograd Politprosvet workers enthusiastically embraced this new direction. By 1921, the political education division had opened a “Central Agitational Studio” that experimented with forms of collective improvisation. Headed by a former member of Gaideburov’s theater, V. V. Shimanovskii, this studio grew out of the agitational work of railroad unions during the Civil War. The following year Shimanovskii’s studio served as the basis for a special provincial Politprosvet division in charge of amateur theater. It sent trained workers out to monitor and direct the work of city clubs and tried to coordinate their activities. Soon the city’s education division formed a special Home of Amateur Theater (Dom samodeiatelnogo teatra), again under Shimanovskii’s guidance, which provided a central performance stage where local clubs could show their work.

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the methods of the united artistic circle and designed repertoire for amateur stages. To take just one example, two participants in the Shimanovskii studio, Iakov Zadykhin and Vladimir Severnyi, composed scripts of instsenirovki to mark the 1923 May Day festival.\textsuperscript{12} The Home of Amateur Theater helped to coordinate festival celebrations, noting which dates of the Red Calendar deserved commemoration and drawing up lists of suitable repertoire.\textsuperscript{13}

In Moscow, it was the Proletkult organization that initially called for a more focused agitational approach in club theaters. At the end of 1921, the city’s main Proletkult studio adopted a plan that rejected the plays of Ostrovsky in favor of “improvisations, living newspapers, and agitational work.”\textsuperscript{14} In a long overview of the city’s club activities, the leader of the Proletkult club division, Raisa Ginzburg, called for an end to standard repertoire on club stages in favor of a more didactic direction.\textsuperscript{15} By late 1922, the Proletkult began to advance these ideas in terms very similar to cultural workers in Petrograd. They called for the creation of a “united studio of the arts” (edinaia studiia iskusstv). All sections of the club would serve a common purpose, focusing on the harmonious interaction of club members to achieve the improvement of proletarian life.\textsuperscript{16}

As a consequence, “theater work inevitably will turn to instsenirovki focused on the burning issues of the day, on agitki, evenings of scenarios, revolutionary cabarets, living newspapers, theatricized courts, etc.”\textsuperscript{17} The Proletkult plan included a long list of classes in art and political education.

The turn to small forms got a real boost in April 1923, when the Twelfth Communist Party Congress determined that clubs should become active centers of mass propaganda designed to encourage the creative abilities of the working class.\textsuperscript{18} While the resolution also addressed

\textsuperscript{12} “Po rabochim klubam,” ZI 15 (1923): 18. Both writers would have long histories as authors of agitational works.

\textsuperscript{13} “K prazdnikam revoliutsii,” ZI 10 (1923): 12.

\textsuperscript{14} “Zhizn’ Proletkul’ta,” Gorn 6 (1922): 151.


\textsuperscript{17} Iskusstvo v rabochem klube (Moscow: Vserossiiskii Proletkul’t, 1924), 12. See also V. Pletnev, Rabochii klub (Moscow: Vserossiiskii Proletkul’t, 1925), 52–54.

\textsuperscript{18} Kommunisticheskaiia partiia Sovetskogo Soiuza v rezoliutsiakh i resheniakh s’ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TsK, v. 2:1917–24 (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1970), 456–57.
the necessity of leisure-time activities in clubs, many national and local institutions interpreted it as a call for better-coordinated agitational work from club cultural circles. Accordingly, they began to formulate programs for club activity that followed the general direction set by the Politprosvet division in Petrograd: they embraced agitational, educational work as the main focus of club activities. Although there were differences in emphasis, all these programs shared basic assumptions for amateur theaters. No longer would their primary task be to practice and disseminate conventional theatrical skills and repertoire. Rather, their main goal was to serve the club community as a whole and to provide highly politicized and topical activities.

The national trade union bureaucracy gave a resounding endorsement to agitational methods in club artistic circles. The cultural division determined that all artistic groups, including theater circles, would no longer be cut off from the general activities of the club. Instead, they should direct their efforts toward agitation and education. Evoking the words of the Party congress, the national trade union convention on club work meeting in the spring of 1924 voted to tie the work of all club circles to political education aimed at the broad masses. All club activity was to be unified into a single complex plan, embracing politics, professional life, and culture.

The most radical proposal for small forms was devised by a group of Moscow Politprosvet workers in the summer of 1923. They rejected any form of theatrical work that was set off from general club activity. They even rejected common nomenclature like “theatrical studio” or “theatrical circle,” proposing instead the new name of “action circles” (deistvennye kruzhki) or “action cells” (deistvennye iacheiki) that would initiate mass activities in clubs. The supporters of this position, including the long-time theater activist Nikolai L’vov and club instructors M. V. Danilevskii and Vitalii Zhemchuzhnyi, formed the Association of Action Circle Instructors, which sought a radical transformation (some would say annihilation) of theatrical work in clubs. The motto of the action circle was: “Stop play acting and start organizing life.” To show

21. See Nikolai L’vov’s personal archive, GTSTM, f. 150, notebook 1, ll. 25–29.
how this method marked a break from past approaches, the Moscow proponents suggested that the words “spectacle” (spektakl'), “actor” (akter), and “play” (igra) no longer be used. Instead, they would be replaced by “presentation” (vystuplenie), “performer” (ispolnitel'), and “action” (deistvie). This linguistic shift was meant to show that artistic work in clubs would be fundamentally different from professional artistic work. Clubs should never aim to imbue professional artistic techniques among their students. According to a manifesto written by Zhemchuzhnyi, “In its organization and methodology, artistic work in clubs should not be different from other club work. For this reason, the goals and methods of club artistic work is fundamentally different than the professional arts. The goal of clubs should never be to establish a professional artistic studio.”

Agencies that supported the turn to small forms created courses to train instructors in the new techniques. The Home of Amateur Theater in Leningrad offered classes for theatrical workers. The Moscow Proletkult designed a number of short training sessions, some with the collaboration of the Association of Action Circles. In 1924 the central Moscow trade union organization opened the Theatrical-Artistic Bureau, which approved a suitable repertoire for club stages and also attempted to provide technical assistance and coordinate the work of local groups.

The shift to small forms brought fresh resources to club theaters. Instructors trained in the new methods put themselves at the disposal of amateur theaters. Government agencies began to publish collections of short plays and sketches that could be performed by local theaters. In addition, a number of new journals devoted at least in part to amateur stages and their repertoire made their appearance, including The Worker Viewer (Rabochii zritel') and The New Viewer (Novyi zritel'), both located in Moscow, and Worker and Theater (Rabochii i teatr) from Leningrad. These publications, along with the older Life of Art (Zhizn' iskusstva), gave extensive space to performances on club stages. Two other impor-

25. V. Zhemchuzhnyi, “Printsipy khudozhestvennoi raboty v klubakh,” n.d., RGALI, f. 963 (Gosudarstvenniy teatr im. Meierkhol'da), op. 1, d. 1120, l. 23, emphasis in the original.
tant journals with coverage of amateur stages began in 1924: *Workers’ Club* (*Rabochii klub*) and *Blue Blouse* (*Siniaia bluza*), both of which published sample works that local groups were encouraged to alter for their own purposes.

These publications are filled with what one might call “conversion stories,” illustrating the switch from conventional repertoire to small forms within individual clubs. The tales have a similar structure: a club theater labored away with heroic prerevolutionary plays or silly melodramas, accomplishing very little. Performances were rare and inadequate. They had nothing to do with other events in the life of the club. Then suddenly the direction changed. From this point on the theater circle began to produce works for club events and festivals, becoming happily integrated into the life of the club. The impetus for change was not uniform in these tales; sometimes they came from the trade union sponsoring club work, sometimes club leaders intervened, and sometimes amateur actors themselves took credit for the reorganization. The Moscow Transit Workers’ Union decided to alter the methods of a regional club, inviting a director trained in small forms to take charge. Almost overnight, the repertoire changed from Ostrovsky plays to celebrations honoring International Women’s Day. At the Northern Railroad Club, the chief administrator dispensed with the old expert in charge of theater. Members of a club at a Moscow metal-working factory decided to adopt the new methods on their own, since they could not afford to pay an instructor.29

Not all amateur theater circles embraced small forms. One instructor who had been to a training course in Moscow and altered his club’s work according to the “new course” met resistance from viewers. They did not like the *instsenirovka* *Bourgeois in Hell* (*Burzhui v adu*) and asked for a play from the prerevolutionary repertoire.30 Some groups produced mixed repertoires. The Nekrasov People’s Home in Leningrad performed a homemade *instsenirovka* together with two acts of Denis Fonvizin’s *The Infant*, a standard of the prerevolutionary Russian repertoire. According to one worker correspondent attending the event, the Fonvizin play did not compare well with the improvised work.31 The Moscow Perfume Factory “Freedom” ended up with two theater

groups, one that followed an old repertoire and another determined to devise new works. Those who had chosen the new direction called themselves "conscious workers" (soznatel'nye) as opposed to their "dilettantish" (liubitel'skie) former colleagues. The supporters of plays were still harboring hurt feelings at the Red October Club a year after theater members switched to small forms. The changes sometimes caused considerable bad blood. Members who resisted small forms were pronounced guilty of "dramatism" (teatral' shchina). Old-style drama circles had "crippled the worker from the bench," in the opinion of an activist from a Moscow metalworkers' club, "evoking from him either the most mundane dilettantism or turning him into a bad actor."

Not surprisingly, the rift between those embracing small forms and those who preferred a more conventional repertoire was often interpreted as a split between the young and old in clubs. In early NEP, as during the Civil War, young people were the main users of clubs and the primary participants in theater workshops. A 1924 survey of large clubs in Moscow determined that the approximately ninety percent of those in artistic circles were young people. "Workers clubs are becoming youth clubs," the author concluded. Both advocates and foes of small forms saw the marked transformation of club theater as a reflection of its youthful composition. For those in favor of the shift, it was a sign of the radical and experimental nature of young people. "Youth instinctively turns away from old forms," wrote the trade union cultural leader, Emil Beskin, "believing them to be a vessel for old feelings and thoughts." Critics saw things differently. They felt that the disjointed, iconoclastic repertoire was a sign of youthful inexperience and maintained that older workers were not interested at all. These radically juxtaposed positions lent an aggressive undertone to discussions about club performances. Small forms were not simply an aesthetic direction; they im-

plied political choices as well. For those in favor of the shift, their opponents were guilty of holding suspect beliefs. “We have noticed that the drama circle used to suffer from ‘petty bourgeois theater,’” observed worker correspondents in the journal New Viewer. “But it has made a good recovery from that illness.”38

Festivals and Celebrations

Small forms tied the work of theater groups to the dates of the “Red Calendar,” a fluid list of celebrations designed to supplant Russian religious festivals and transmit the values of the new regime.39 The two most central dates were May Day and the anniversary of the revolution. Other celebrations might include January 9, to mark the revolution of 1905; January 15, the death date of German revolutionary leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht; January 21, the anniversary of Lenin’s death; February 23, Red Army Day; March 8, International Women’s Day; March 12, the anniversary of the fall of tsarism; March 18, the day of the Paris Commune; and the anti-religious festivals of Komsomol Easter and Komsomol Christmas.40 New celebrations and special occasions were added to the list at the local level. Amateur theaters also participated in efforts to publicize local election campaigns, to celebrate the founding dates of clubs, and to entertain at their sponsoring trade union’s annual convention. Participants and club leaders frequently complained that this extensive list of festivities made performance groups struggle from campaign to campaign, without time for adequate preparation or rehearsal.41

Festivals were designed as participatory events, allowing as many people as possible a chance to perform—resulting in mixed-media events that could last all through the night. Many clubs opened the festivities with “An Evening of Remembrances.” Workers with a personal link to the holiday being celebrated, such as the revolution of 1905 or a May Day celebration before the revolution, got a chance to tell their sto-

40. See M. Veprinskii, Khudozhestvennye kruzhki i krasnyi kalendar’ (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1926), 40-47.
The entertainments could include recitations of favorite poems, along with musical interludes by the club choir and orchestra. Art circles were active making banners, posters, and decorations. Sometimes physical education groups got involved, presenting feats of skill for the audience. The British writer Huntley Carter, who visited Moscow in the early 1920s, offered this account of a May Day celebration:

The performance and room decorations and inscriptions were clearly designed to usher in May Day, just as a certain church service is designed to usher in New Year’s Day in England. The club room, which was crowded to suffocation, was festooned with evergreens, draped with red and hung with portraits of Lenin, Trotsky, and Marx, and with inscriptions. The exhibition was an improvised revue designed to emphasize the importance of May Day and its implications. One might call it a family affair in honour of the October communistic revolution.

The festive family spirit was also noticed by Soviet observers. One witness to a Petrograd May Day celebration determined that “there were no spectators—everyone was a performer, a participant.”

Leaving the cramped spaces of clubs behind, some theater groups took their performances out into the streets, mounting trucks and platforms or using nearby squares as their performance space. The 1925 May Day celebration on Vasileostrovskii Island in Leningrad was a three-day affair, with club circles taking part in outdoor festivities the first day and returning to their club stages for the second and third. Festival performances were sometimes very elaborate, staged like small versions of the huge events of the Civil War years. The Trekhgornyi Factory in Moscow acted out scenes from John Reed’s book Ten Days That Shook the World for the 1924 October celebration. Divided into fifteen different parts, the dramatization involved some two hundred participants. The Lenin Workers’ Palace in Moscow staged an instsenirovka for the 1924 October celebration that portrayed the history of the revolution.
from the start of the First World War to the Bolshevik takeover. The cast included three hundred civilians and one hundred soldiers.  

Annual trade union conferences were a popular venue for agitational performances. Meeting in large halls, the conferences provided a forum where theaters from several clubs could collaborate and perform for a captive audience of trade union delegates. The Red Woodworkers' Club of Moscow decided to act out their union's charter at the annual union convention in 1924. Their goal, according to one viewer, was "to give the rank-and-file trade union member a chance to familiarize himself with the dry language of the union charter by artistic means." This observer was especially impressed by the scene in which the membership rules were enacted. Doors on stage opened wide to include all workers, regardless of sex or nationality. The doors closed quickly, however, when former members of the tsarist police, capitalists, or priests tried to enter. These undesirable elements, dressed up as "wolves in sheep's clothing," were excluded from the union's ranks.  

With the emergence of journals and publications aimed at amateur stages, it was not necessary for club stages to devise their own texts. If they found the work appealing, club circles could use published scripts for a variety of celebrations. One example of this new material is a 1924 work, Hands off China (Ruki proch' ot Kitaia), published in the journal Blue Blouse. Using rhymed couplets, this text depicts the victimization of the Chinese peasantry by Western and Japanese imperialists. Only the Soviet Union intervenes to help the people of China assert their independence. "China, squeeze imperialism with your claws!" intones the character representing the Soviet Union. "Hands off China! Let's have a [Chinese] October!" This short play, which offered a Soviet interpretation of international events and celebrated the October revolution simultaneously, was a popular choice for October festivities in Moscow in 1924. Five different club theaters used it to mark the holiday.  

Groups that embraced small forms judged instructors by their ability to stage successful festival performances. The Timiriazev Club in Moscow underwent a long search for an instructor who could meet the rigorous schedule of Soviet celebrations. After unsuccessful experiences with two instructors from the Moscow Art Theater and one from the
Meyerhold Theater, members finally turned to the Moscow Politprosvet department for help. It sent the action circle advocate, Nikolai L’vov, who in short order turned the group toward agitational productions. Shortly after L’vov was hired, the circle staged a self-created work for the 1924 May Day celebrations, *In Honor of May Day* (*K vstreche pervogo maia*)\(^5\).\(^2\)

The use of improvisational methods allowed club theaters to prepare performances in a hurry—one of the chief advantages of small forms. Participants in the Ivan Fedorov Printers’ Club in Moscow decided just two days before Christmas that they would like to stage an anti-religious event. They brainstormed together and came up with a plot tracing how a worker convinced his wife to use icons as fuel for the samovar. Forty-eight hours later, an *instsenirovka* entitled “A Purpose for Icons” was staged for the club community. Introduced by a lecture on the scientific creation of the world and a short performance by the

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club's living newspaper group, the improvised text was presented to a largely sympathetic young audience.53

These efforts at creation from below and broad participation gave a new spin to the word *samodeiatel'nost'*, which for many club participants came to mean “homemade.” Those who enthusiastically supported the turn to small forms claimed that it empowered the participants to try their own hands at cultural creation. Surveying the preparations for the 1923 October festival in Leningrad, Grigorii Avlov praised the level of independent work. Some groups were using prepared texts, which they altered to suit their purposes. Others had works that were written by individual group members or group leaders. The most impressive circles were those who created their works collectively, revealing the creative potential of the theater of small forms.54

**Investigations of Daily Life: Agit-Trials and Living Newspapers**

Festivals by their very nature were special occasions, separate from the quotidian world. In addition, most early Soviet festivals had an overt political meaning; they honored turning points in the revolutionary struggle and marked important moments for the new state. As such, they did not have a direct influence on workers’ daily lives. For many advocates of small forms, marking festivals was not enough. They believed that daily habits and social interactions (in Russian *byt*) could be analyzed and transformed through performance. Two styles of agitational theater were particularly suited to topics of daily life: the *agit-sud*, or agit-trial, and the living newspaper.

Agit-trials emerged as an important form of amateur performance during the Civil War, when they were used to praise the heroes and excoriate the enemies of the revolution.55 In the 1920s, their subject matter was broadened significantly. Workers who would not join a union were put on trial to demonstrate proper behavior at the factory. Social problems were acted out in trials of alcoholics and prostitutes. A wide range of trials also examined historical issues, like “The Trial of Those Responsible for the First World War.”56 Some agit-trials were easily integrated

55. See ch. 1.
56. This taxonomy of agit-trials comes from Grigorii Avlov, *Klubnyi samodeiatel’nyi teatr* (Leningrad: Teakinopechat’, 1930), 93–94.
into festival celebrations; "The Trial of Father Gapon," for example, was often staged during the events marking the anniversary of 1905.57

One kind of agit-trial aimed for verisimilitude, attempting to follow the structure and atmosphere of a real trial as much as possible. These events enumerated the violated paragraphs of the legal code. Both prosecuting and defense attorneys took part, as well as witnesses for both sides. The Leningrad club activist Grigorii Avlov insisted that the more realistic the trial, the more effective it would be. It was better to try the hooligan than hooliganism. His own "Trial of Hooligans" was a case in point. The two young men on trial for misbehavior, Pavel Iudin and Ivan Karnauchov, were introduced with detailed information about their character and appearance. In the course of the trial, viewers learned about the social circumstances and political beliefs of the accused.58

But not all trials followed these guidelines. Some, such as "The Trial of Bourgeois Marriage," put abstract concepts on the witness stand. Even inanimate objects could win their day in court. In "The Political Trial of the Bible," the good book itself had a speaking role. In the course of questioning, the Bible was forced to admit to many inconsistencies about its authorship and contents. Unnamed worker witnesses asked tough questions that the Bible had difficulty answering: If people were made of clay, then how could they burn? How could two of all animals in the world fit on Noah's Ark with enough food for forty days? The Bible's one defender, an illiterate peasant girl, could say only that she believed the Bible was the word of God. She could not defend its contents in detail because she had never read them.59 While the basic structure of the event bore some resemblance to a trial—with a prosecutor, a defendant, and witnesses—clearly this scenario was intended more to make the Bible look foolish than to give the audience a sense of life in the courtroom.

Trials also varied according to their predetermined nature. Many texts for agit-trials were published as elaborate scripts, with the speeches of witnesses and attorneys set down and the verdict preordained. Although the printed speeches (some quite detailed) were presented as a base for improvisation, and although the texts sometimes

57. See, for example, "Sud nad gaponovshchinoi," RK 2 (1924): 61.
58. Avlov, Klubnyi samodeiatel'nyi teatr, 94; idem, Sud nad khuliganami (Moscow: Doloi negramotnost', 1927), 10.
59. "Politsud nad Bibliei," Komsomol'skaia paskha (Moscow: Novaia Moskva, 1924), 111–28. It was performed at the Tsindel' textile factory in Moscow in 1924 (RK 7 [1924]: 38).
offered a variety of possible verdicts, the general outcome was unmistakable. In the many agit-trials of hooligans, for example, the young offenders were never allowed to escape without punishment. Here the drama of the event was in the performance, not the outcome.

However, other trials were impromptu events, sometimes written by local participants and casting members of the audience as witnesses and jurors with the power to come to their own conclusions. This kind of trial could sometimes bring surprising results. A factory circle from Petrograd playing in the countryside in the summer of 1923 had a very difficult time convincing village audiences to convict the character of a corrupt priest. Isaac Babel’s controversial collection of stories, Red Cavalry, was put on trial in a Moscow club in 1926. Although the speeches against the book were passionate, Babel himself made an appearance to argue in his defense. The assembled crowd not only acquitted Babel, but also judged his work to be a real service to the revolution.

Agit-trials in the 1920s aimed to stamp out old habits and inculcate new ones. This purpose is strikingly evident in one trial written by the Moscow advocate of action circles, Vitalii Zhemchuzhnyi, called “An Evening of Books” (Vecher knig). This humorous work lampooned popular reading tastes, which tended toward religious works, detective novels, romantic potboilers, and Tarzan adventures. The judge in the trial, the American socialist author Upton Sinclair sent the work of the prerevolutionary romantic writer Anastasia Verbitskaia to the archive; he allowed God, a character in the drama, to go free since no one paid attention to him anymore; and he determined that all of Nat Pinkerton’s books should be burned “to the last letter.” Only Tarzan managed to escape judgment, since he escaped from the courtroom during a brawl. By the end, the audience was presented with a new, wholesome reading library, including Soviet adventure stories and, of course, the works of Upton Sinclair himself.

Agit-trials also attempted to teach audiences new standards of public health. “The Trial of a Midwife Who Performed an Illegal Abortion” showed the risks of the abortion and the content of the Soviet abortion law. Venereal disease was a very common theme. In a Moscow typog-


rappers’ club, a hypothetical case was brought for a hearing; a man had infected his wife and children with syphilis. The court had a magnanimous verdict in this case. Because of his ignorance, the man should be cured and educated, not punished.64 The traditional Russian scourge of alcoholism was another common theme. In one work, “The Trial of the Old Life” (*Sud nad starym bytom*), a frequently drunk worker was put on trial for beating his wife and keeping her from political work. Not only was he condemned to jail at the end of the trial, but so were the small shop owner and tavern keeper, who kept him supplied with alcohol.65

While many works for amateur theaters lacked major parts for women, agit-trials offered them starring roles, frequently as the chief obstacles to the new life. Agit-trial titles, which read like the names of bad

mysteries, give a sense of women's "crimes": "The Trial of the Woman Who Did Not Take Advantage of the October Revolution," "The Trial of the Illiterate Woman Worker," and "The Trial of the Mother Who Deserted Her Child." One script, "The Woman Worker Who Did Not Attend General Meetings," examined six offending women who avoided trade union gatherings. Although the women had very different reasons for their truancy, ranging from fear to boredom, they were all charged with cultural and political backwardness.

Club life itself was a theme for agit-trials, as activists considered ways to draw more workers to club activities. "The Trial of the Old Club" featured a surprising list of witnesses. One by one the library, the piano, and the drama studio came forward to accuse the club of poor organization, poor equipment, and lack of space. In the end, the old club broke down in tears because its members were preparing to leave for a new building.

By claiming the small conflicts of everyday life as a proper subject matter, agit-trials could potentially turn nasty, singling out members of the audience for shame and censure. "The Trial of Six Workers at the Red October Factory" focused on actual factory workers who were deemed to have undermined cultural work. Their specific "crimes"—spreading rumors about the club and preferring an evening at a pub to wholesome entertainment—were presented in some detail in the proceedings. Although the accused were allowed to defend themselves, their comments were limited to lengthy admissions of guilt and promises of reform. This use of agit-trials as a form of urban charivari, or samosud, would become much more common during the First Five-Year Plan, when many forms of agitational theater took an aggressive stance toward the audience.

Even more common than agit-trials were living newspapers, which began to appear in great numbers on amateur stages after the phenomenal success of a professional living newspaper circle from Moscow, Blue Blouse (Siniaia bluza). The unusual name stemmed from the group's ba-

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68. A. Abramov, "Kak my 'sdelali' sud," RZ 22 (1924): 22.
sic costume element, a blue work shirt, which is called a *bluza* in Russian. Begun at the Moscow School of Journalism in 1923, Blue Blouse was headed by the energetic Boris Iuzhanin, who had prepared living newspapers for the Red Army during the Civil War. The group attracted the writing skills of some of the country's finest satirical authors, including Sergei Tretiakov, Argo (Abram Markovich Gol'denberg), and Vladimir Maiakovskii. According to theater historian František Deak, Blue Blouse was "the largest movement in the history of theatre in which the avant-garde participated."71

Presenting the news of the day in a vibrant mix of satirical songs, lively posters, dances, and pantomime, the Blue Blouse living newspaper soon won an enthusiastic audience in Moscow. A performance typically opened with a parade of the "headlines," followed by from eight to fifteen short vignettes on topics ranging from international affairs to local complaints about factory management.72 The actors amended their simple work clothes with exaggerated props to identify the role they were performing, such as a top hat for a capitalist or a large red pencil for a bureaucrat. Since the troupe did not need sophisticated stages or lighting, it could perform almost anywhere. In the early 1920s Blue Blouse played in clubs, cafeterias, and factory floors throughout Moscow and Moscow province.73

In 1924, Blue Blouse was incorporated into the Moscow Trade Union cultural division. With this increased financial backing, it was able to start its well-known journal, Blue Blouse, which stayed in publication until 1928. The journal published scripts for living newspapers, offered advice on costumes and staging, and printed scores for Blue Blouse songs. It served as an inspiration for local groups wanting to stage their own performances. They either adopted the printed material whole cloth or used it as a model for their own creations. After a popular Blue Blouse presentation at the Moscow Elektrozavod factory in 1924, drama club members voted to start their own living newspaper. "In the future the living newspaper 'Electrical Current' (Elektrotok) will direct its work toward the productive life of the factory and will only make limited use of the material in Blue Blouse," the club members determined.74 It was only one of many living newspapers formed from below, including the "Red

72. See the Blue Blouse's instructions on the structure of a successful living newspaper, "Eshche raz kak stroit' zhivuiu gazetu na mestakh," SB 13 (1925): 60.
73. See, for example, Andrei Shibaev, "Sinebluzniki," RZ 19 (1924): 15 16.
Tie" (Krasnyi galstuk), the “Red Sting” (Krasnoe zhalo), “Red Coil” (Krasnaia katushka), and the “Red Scourge” (Krasnyi bich).75

The success of Moscow’s Blue Blouse sparked emulation in Leningrad. In early 1924, the Leningrad Trade Union Organization founded its own professional living newspaper group, Work Bench (Stanok). The agitational theatrical studio of the city’s Politprosvet organization began a living newspaper as well.76 Both of these professional circles served a similar function to Blue Blouse in Moscow; their perfor-

mances encouraged the creation of living newspapers at the club and factory level, with colorful names like "Our Pencil," and "Factory Whistle." By the summer of 1924, living newspapers gained national backing as a potent agitational form. The national convention of club workers, sponsored by the trade union organization and Glavpolitprosvet, endorsed living newspapers as a "method of agitation and propaganda, serving the political, productive, and domestic [bytovye] tasks of the proletariat." By the following year, living newspapers were widespread on amateur stages in both capitals. The Leningrad journal Worker and Theater printed a separate page devoted to local groups, and one observer determined that "some people are talking about the 'triumphant procession' of living newspaper through factories and plants." In a survey of one hundred city clubs, the Moscow-based journal Worker's Club revealed that living newspapers were the most popular form of performance, drawing in larger audiences than any other theatrical events.

Advocates gave living newspapers an almost magical power to attract and educate audiences. One viewer was supposedly so taken by a lively Blue Blouse performance that he forgot to leave the club as usual for the local bar. His wife was astonished when he came home sober. An enthusiastic supporter from the Moscow Construction Workers' Union claimed that Blue Blouse performances always generated lively discussions in workers' barracks and even inspired some workers to find out more about the event portrayed on stage. "When a worker sees [the British politician] Curzon or some other important political figure, he is very interested in this guy who has played such a funny role on stage. And afterwards, even if he hasn't understood everything, he begins to look around to find out more."

It is not hard to see living newspapers' attraction for cultural activists and for many viewers. Their agitational and didactic function was self-evident, because they always included information about contemporary national and international politics. They were often humorous, offering comic relief to viewers used to much drier political fare. Posters, slides,
and sometimes even film clips were included, providing information and visual stimulation. They also were easily changed and amended to meet local conditions; a section for “letters to the editor” could contain complaints and commentary about concrete problems at the club or work site.

Those who wrote the texts for living newspapers attempted to put the traditions of folk theater to use in a new way, thus providing a familiar entree for urban audiences. A director from the Moscow Blue Blouse theater called his group a balagan, a Russian folk theater, and claimed that for precisely this reason Blue Blouse was comprehensible to worker audiences.83 Parts of the performance were called a “raek,” or peepshow verse, an important element of fairground theater. Many living newspapers included a role for a carnival-like Barker, called a rupor or raeshnik, who introduced the action and tied the various small skits together.

Works included humorous four-lined rhymed ditties, or chastushki, an integral part of Russian urban and rural folk culture since the nineteenth century. The naughty star of Russian puppet theater, Petrushka, sometimes made an appearance. The living newspaper script “Give us a New Life” (Daesh' Novyi Byt), published in 1924 and performed by several groups in 1924 and 1925, contained a part for a ryzhii, the traditional red-haired Russian clown.

Not only did living newspapers attempt to transform folk culture for agitational use, they also drew on familiar forms of urban popular culture as well. In one programmatic statement, the editors of Blue Blouse insisted that a living newspaper should be performed at a fast pace and look like a film to the audience. Music was a crucial part of a Blue Blouse performance, and participants drew on melodies popular in cafés and nightclubs. The opening march for all Blue Blouse performances, “We Are the Blue Blousists,” was set to the tune of the popular song “We Are the Blacksmiths.” Organizers made no excuses for this eclectic approach; they maintained that their task was to reach out to unsophisticated viewers, appealing to their emotions as well as to their intellect.

The rapid expansion of Blue Blouse influence won it enemies as well as fans. Some critics resented the group’s professional standing, saying it was a theater for workers, not by workers. They charged that professional groups had influenced the creation of local living newspapers from the top down. “Where was the self-activation [samodeiatel’nost’] in this?” wondered one Leningrad union activist. Other viewers did not believe that satire was an effective educational tool. “Does anything remain in workers’ heads but laughter after a Blue Blouse performance?” asked a trade union leader.

In contrast to Blue Blouse and other professional troupes, local living newspapers were located close to their audience and could address issues of direct relevance to the life of the club and the community. Partic-

85. “Daesh’ novyi byt!” Iskusstvo v rabochem klube, 72 95.
89. Prizyv 6 (1924): 106 7, 111.

Participants included concrete details about problems in their union or workplace and could shape their repertoire to fit any special event. Local groups could also aim their performances toward particular audiences. Komsomol-based newspapers addressed the problems of youth; a living newspaper sponsored by educational workers included a section called “Teachers during NEP.”  

It was the thrill of immediacy that supposedly won audiences over to living newspapers, with the most contemporary material drawing the most interest. At an anniversary celebration for the Central Sales Workers’ Club in Moscow, a living newspaper addressed the accomplishments and failures of different club circles, much to the delight of the audience. Such methods brought about a strong bond between the performers and the viewers, insisted one advocate.

However, homebred living newspapers often faced complaints for following the patterns designed by professionals too closely. The vast

majority of local groups imitated Blue Blouse models, claimed the passionate advocate of action circles, Vitalii Zhemchuzhnyi. They did not involve the entire club in their preparation and drew their performers from drama circles alone. Because participants did not write their own work, performances did not address the specific needs and interests of the audience.\textsuperscript{92}

Because they attempted to educate and entertain simultaneously, both amateur and professional living newspaper groups found themselves caught up in what Denise Youngblood has called the “entertainment or enlightenment debate” that dominated the Soviet film industry in the 1920s. One faction of Soviet filmmakers looked to foreign films for their inspiration, trying to use popular elements—suspense, slapstick humor, happy endings—to draw in viewers while imbuing their films with a Soviet message. They were opposed by those who argued that such concessions to capitalist methods undermined the films’ socialist content. Instead, directors should concentrate on edifying and didactic topics that could not be mistaken for bourgeois products.\textsuperscript{93}

In their efforts to integrate elements of urban commercial culture, living newspaper groups found themselves in a similar situation to filmmakers who sought to make their movies entertaining. In the words of one advocate, living newspapers were “a political genre, but a light and cheerful kind that is good for workers who want to relax and have a good time.”\textsuperscript{94} Sanctionious critics complained that this was precisely the problem. Their work looked too much like bourgeois cabaret. “The performance has a theatrical character, along the lines of ‘Crooked Jimmy’ [a prerevolutionary cabaret], but the copy is worse than the original,” complained a representative from the Central Art Workers’ Union.\textsuperscript{95} One worker correspondent claimed that the living newspaper “Red Scourge” offered an inauthentic analysis of hooliganism among Soviet youth—the hooligans looked more like Parisians than “our own.” He also did not like the dances, the many jokes, and the frivolous portrayal of the Komsomol girl. The entire performance was “sloppy, superficial, and thoughtless.”\textsuperscript{96} “If this is theater,” wrote two worker critics

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{92} V. Zhemchuzhnyi, “Klubnaia zhivaia gazeta,” RK 15 (1925): 26–27.
\item \textsuperscript{93} Denise Youngblood, Movies for the Masses (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), esp. chs. 2 and 3.
\item \textsuperscript{94} “Zhivaia gazeta v klube,” Prizyv 6 (1924): 105.
\item \textsuperscript{95} Ibid. For similar comments, see R. G., “Siniaia Bluza v mestnom prelomlenii,” RK 15 (1925): 31–33, where she complains about the “café-chantant” musical style of Blue Blouse performances.
\item \textsuperscript{96} Rabkov F. Lev, “Zhivaia gazeta ‘Krasnyi bich,’” RZ 31 (1924): 19.
\end{itemize}
in response to a Blue Blouse performance, "then it is an unhealthy kind. . . . Put an end to bourgeois elements in workers’ theater." 97

Living newspapers, both professional and amateur, attempted a difficult balancing act. They tried to merge political information of national and local relevance, presenting it in a witty and engaging style. Complaints focused on their inability to meet all of these requirements—their approach to politics was too frivolous, their coverage of local problems too superficial, and they made too many concessions to commercial popular culture in their efforts to engage audiences. Eventually, these charges would coalesce into a blanket condemnation of “Blue Blouse-ism,” a term of approbation that criticized living newspapers’ satirical approach to serious issues and their episodic presentational style. It was a critique that attacked the central premise of most living newspapers—that elements of urban popular culture were appropriate conduits for political education.

Small Forms and the Avant-Garde

With their episodic structure and non-naturalistic staging, amateur productions employing small forms bore a distinct similarity to the theatrical experiments of the avant-garde. This similarity was hardly surprising, since avant-gardists were deeply involved in what they saw as an exciting attempt to create a utilitarian theater that would not simply observe life but also change it. 98 Students of Vsevolod Meyerhold, the doyen of avant-garde theater, took positions in amateur theater groups. Writers from the Left Front of the Arts (LEF) wrote scripts for Blue Blouse and amateur living newspaper circles. 99 The involvement of these artists brought precious resources to struggling amateur stages; in addition, it linked the fate of small forms to the avant-garde.

Meyerhold was a significant supporter of the club theater of small forms. In early 1924 he opened a “Club Methodological Laboratory” as part of his training courses in Moscow. It prepared directors for club theaters, reviewed manuscripts for club performances, devised plans for mass spectacles, and debated the aesthetic principles of club theatrical work. 100 The workshop endorsed a variety of small forms, including inst-
senirovki and living newspapers. Improvisations took precedence over ready-made works. “Only when there is no material and no time to prepare any should the circle turn to plays,” read one instruction.101

Training club instructors was the studio’s most important task. Meyerhold enrolled students with a wide range of experience. Some, like Olga Galaktionova, came with modest credentials, having worked only briefly in the provinces before arriving at the studio. Others had considerable experience and would go on to make big names for themselves in the world of Soviet culture. These included Nikolai Ekk, who was simultaneously a student in Meyerhold’s directors’ studio and the Meyerhold Theater. He eventually turned from theater to movies and directed the first Soviet sound film, The Road to Life (Putevka v zhizn’) in 1931. Another studio participant with a similar trajectory was Ivan Pyr’ev, who began in the Proletkult and also studied acting and directing with Meyerhold. He turned to film already in the middle of the 1920s and by the next decade began to build a reputation as a director of filmed musical comedies. His biggest hits included Tractor Drivers (Traktoristy) and Kuban Cossacks (Kubanske kazaki), which gained a reputation as one of the worst examples of Stalinist culture during the Khrushchev era.102

Meyerhold’s laboratory acted as an employment facilitator, fielding requests from local clubs for experienced instructors. “We have almost no money,” read one query from a local chemical factory. “However, we do have a good group of young workers who are interested in the theater.”103 Instructors were sent to clubs that were willing to pay their salaries. By late 1925, the club laboratory had provided instructors for more than forty different Moscow clubs. The sponsors included trade unions, the Komsomol, the Red Army, and five clubs under the control of the GPU, the Soviet secret police.104 Most students worked in the capital, but some received placements in the provinces. Pyr’ev ended up in Ekaterinburg in 1924.105

Wherever they went, these instructors encouraged the turn to small

103. RGALL, f. 963, op. 1, d. 1094, l. 5.
forms. One Moscow club, which had been performing Ostrovsky plays, changed entirely with the arrival of Goltsov, a Meyerhold student. Participants began to use different kinds of material, like satirical stories from the journal *The Godless (Bezbozhnik)* as the basis for their improvised work. Ispolnev, another Meyerhold student, took charge of the club at the large Trekhgorny textile mill in Moscow, where he concentrated his efforts on staging club festivals.106

The Meyerhold laboratory encouraged instructors to write their own material. In a 1926 questionnaire, Nikolai Ekk boasted that only five percent of the work he staged in his four years of club activity was written by others; the rest he devised himself, together with his students. Two of his works, *The Red Eagles (Krasnye orliata)* and *Ky sy my* were published and performed in numerous clubs. Boris Ivanter, a leader of several Moscow clubs, composed *The Earth in Flames (Zemlia zazhglas*) in 1924 together with his wife Vera. It tells the story of the Bolsheviks' rise to power and subsequent efforts by the bourgeoisie to subvert the revolution. This work played on numerous factory stages in 1924, including the Triangle Rubber Plant in Moscow and the Putilov factory in Leningrad.107 Nikolai Mologin devised a humorous work making fun of bureaucratic language and the Soviets' new-found love of acronyms. Entitled “Upruiaz” (an acronym for “Uproshennyi russkii iazyk”—Simplified Russian Language), it proposed that individuals should start using abbreviations and acronyms in their daily speech. In addition, Mologin's witty script suggested that people should leave off Russian's complicated grammatical endings and communicate only with word roots, a change that might have been welcomed by non-Russians struggling with the language. It was staged at several clubs, including the Central Printers' Club, where Mologin was in charge.108

Studio members also organized large-scale festivals that drew in a number of amateur theater groups. The laboratory worked together with the Red Army to prepare plans for a “Red Stadium.” Although the structure was never built, a number of large outdoor events using amateur participants were staged at its proposed site at the Lenin Hills in

Moscow. In addition, studio participants planned and executed elaborate neighborhood festivals. One such event in Moscow celebrated the history of the Sokol district Communist Party. Using masses of raw material sent by the Communist Party Committee, two studio members devised a scenario that examined significant events from the revolution until 1925, incorporating data and statistics about the Sokol region. It was staged by Nikolai Ekk to mark the 1925 anniversary of the revolution.

Through their efforts, Meyerhold students believed they were bringing sophisticated professional techniques to a broad audience. For them, the Meyerhold Theater was the main inspiration for small forms on amateur stages. One statement from the Meyerhold laboratory determined that those wishing to compose compelling living newspapers should look to Meyerhold’s production of *The Trust D.E.* for inspiration. This play, based on a novel by Ilia Ehrenburg, caused a sensation in the world of professional theater with its use of jazz, stylish dance numbers, and physical education routines. Theoretical statements issued by the laboratory charged that other groups supporting small forms, particularly the action circles led by Zhemchuzhnyi, were making use of Meyerhold’s methods without giving him credit.

Artists from Moscow’s action circles and the Politprosvet division in Leningrad, however, believed that Meyerhold had gotten his inspiration from amateur theaters, and not the other way around. “In the struggle against naturalistic and psychological tendencies, professional theaters have produced their conventions of heroism and buffoonery, their synthetic methods integrating music, song, and dance, under the influence (*pod znakom*) of amateur theaters,” declared Adrian Piotrovskii. Stefan Mokulskii, from Leningrad’s State Institute of the History of Art, con-


curred. Professional theater is challenged in each historical epoch by amateur theatrical forms—and this was precisely what was happening in Soviet Russia. The proletariat was creating its own forms of art, daily life, and knowledge within workers' clubs and Komsomol circles, he determined.114

Given the affinities between the theater of small forms and the avant-garde, is it possible to find a constituency among urban youth and working people for experimental theater? Until now, scholars have routinely rejected the idea that the avant-garde had much of a following outside the educated population, a conclusion we can find echoed in one school of 1920s criticism.115 But at least some club participants appreciated Meyerhold's methods enough to imitate them. The Kalinin Club in Leningrad put on a self-generated work called “Path to Victory” (Put’ k pobede) that was obviously influenced by Meyerhold, according to one critic. The Sapronov Club in Moscow copied Meyerhold’s controversial interpretation of Ostrovsky’s play The Forest (Les), performing it for club members and other groups.116

In addition, worker viewers frequented the Meyerhold Theater. A number of worker correspondents (rabkory) attending a discussion about The Trust D.E. found it stimulating and insisted that it offered a very critical look at the bourgeoisie. “I talked to the workers at my factory,” said one reporter. “There were some who found deficiencies but in general they praised it.”117 The rabkor Iurii Kobrin was an enthusiastic supporter of Meyerhold’s methods. In his short pamphlet The Meyerhold Theater and the Worker Viewer, he insisted that this innovative stage had a large and enthusiastic proletarian audience. Evidence from the Moscow agency that distributed tickets to trade unions provides some verification for this claim. The most popular tickets were those for the Meyerhold Theater, which were “snatched up and never returned.”118 Evidently, not all worker viewers were averse to theatrical experimentation.

Eventually the ties between amateur stages and the avant-garde would work against small forms. Critics who opposed this direction in clubs used the same terms to denounce amateur performances as those reserved for the avant-garde, namely, that the approach was alien to proletarian taste and "bourgeois" in inspiration. "The worker is a realist down to his bones," wrote one observer. "He doesn’t like phrases. He cannot stand abstractions. And by the way, for him the symbolic, entertaining concoctions of a closed off clique of educators, such as talking factory whistles or cake-walking money, are just so much red tape." 119

**Spontaneity and Consciousness**

After watching an exhibition of amateur theaters in Leningrad in 1925, the distinguished theater historian, Alexei Gvozdev, announced, "There now can be no doubt that a new theater will be created not from above but rather from below." 120 Debates about who was responsible for the making of Soviet culture—the broad population, the intelligentsia, or the state—began with the revolution and continue on in scholarship to this day. For amateur theaters of the early 1920s, it was clearly a combination. Piotrovskii was inspired by the methods he observed on the club stages of revolutionary Petrograd. He then used his considerable influence as head of the city’s Politprosvet division to ensure that these methods were refined and spread to as many amateur stages as possible. Small forms were appealing to at least a segment of actors and audiences because they were inclusive, opening up the stage to a large number of people. They also held the promise of conveying "local knowledge," with spaces to insert the small victories and heartfelt needs of those creating and viewing them. Their structure, comprised of many small skits and vignettes, made the process of creation easier, opening it up to untrained club members. Thus they appeared to offer proof of the spontaneous, self-generated creativity of the masses. "Self-activity—that is the most distinctive feature of workers' theater. This is its most important difference from professional theater. Here the workers are simultaneously the carpenters, actors, and authors," effused one observer of a performance at Leningrad’s Nekrasov People’s Home. 121

Advocates of small forms believed that they undercut the power of "bourgeois" professionals, who still dominated the world of established

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theater. Soviet club theater was the negation of bourgeois theater in all of its forms, insisted Grigorii Avlov of the Leningrad Politprosvet organization.\(^\text{122}\) It was called into life because professional theaters were not addressing the needs of workers and peasants to reflect upon their political situation and engage in the construction of a new political order. Because professional theaters had refused that role, a new kind of theater needed to take shape with a politicized, openly utilitarian purpose.\(^\text{123}\)

Many participants in the theater of small forms went a step further and rejected the idea of professionalization altogether. They denied that club theatrical circles should try to find talented individuals who could be prepared for and promoted to the professional stage. Trade union leader S. Levman believed that the task of amateur theater was to serve the club community as a whole and to engage members in mass work, not to prepare well-trained actors.\(^\text{124}\) One union activist endorsed the unified artistic circle because this method supposedly limited the influence of specialists.\(^\text{125}\) Because small forms allowed participants to use speeches, newspaper articles, and other commonly available materials for theatrical work, it allowed energetic circles to work on their own without professional intermediaries.

Yet despite these broad claims for self-determination, the amateur theater of small forms was also created by club instructors (some with impressive theatrical credentials) and sponsoring agencies. Even when amateurs wrote their own material, they were influenced by printed scripts from a variety of official sources. Reports of festival repertoire show considerable uniformity, a uniformity that was encouraged by state organizations overseeing cultural work. The Petrograd section of autonomous theater collected information on fifty-seven clubs performing works for the 1923 May Day celebrations; thirty-three used works prepared by the city’s Politprosvet division.\(^\text{126}\) A circular drawn up by the Moscow branch of the Communist Party, Komsomol, the trade union organization, and the Politprosvet division for the first anniversary of Lenin’s death in 1925 offered this advice: “Prepared texts should be used only in extreme circumstances. All work should be built around the autonomous activity of club members.” At the same time, though,

\(^\text{123}\) G. Avlov, Klubnyi samodeiatel’nyi teatr, 22-24.
\(^\text{126}\) “Podgotovka k prazdnovaniu 1-go maia po sektii Samodeiatel’nogo teatra,” ZI 17 (1923): 19.
the brochure included a list of acceptable repertoire and also determined the official slogans for the celebration.127

The sponsoring agencies for clubs, particularly local trade union divisions, were important supporters of the turn to small forms. They interceded to reorganize club management and to find instructors sympathetic to new modes of theatrical presentation. Many club training programs, from the Meyerhold laboratory to the Petrograd/Leningrad Politprosvet division, turned out instructors who wanted to stage holiday celebrations and living newspapers rather than Ostrovsky plays. Regardless of claims to the contrary by the most passionate defenders of small forms, the guidance of these instructors was a significant factor in changing local repertories.

The amateur theater of small forms offered a vehicle for self-expression for participants, but one that was heavily supervised. The spontaneity of participants was guided and directed by a number of agencies whose job it was to ensure that the final product was imbued with "consciousness," with slogans and programs endorsed by the Communist Party and trade union and political agencies. Its overt messages were almost always politically correct; performances directed viewers to mark the holidays of the new state, sober up, and avoid boulevard literature left over from the old regime. Thus, "do-it-yourself" theater was not entirely the creation of its actors or audience. As one advocate argued, samodeiatel'nost' did not mean doing whatever one wanted. Without any sense of irony he continued, "It is most correct to speak about organized and directed self-activity."128

Despite the transparent didacticism, supporters of this style of performance worked with their audience in mind. They tried to engage and interest viewers. It was precisely this attempt to mix education with pleasure that angered many critics of small forms. They argued that club works were too amateurish, too disjointed, and too close to commercial culture to be effective aesthetic or political tools. Perhaps most important, they insisted that club forms were simply too small to articulate the grand dreams and accomplishments of the victorious Soviet revolution.

127. "Plan provedeniia kampanii po godovshchine smerti V. I. Lenina i '9 ianvaria' v klubakh i krasnykh ugolkakh," RGALI, f. 963, op. 1, d. 1096, ll. 1–5, quotation l.4.