Revolutionary Acts

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From "Club Plays" to the Classics

A 1926 editorial in the Moscow journal The New Viewer asserted that Soviet theater was undergoing a fundamental transformation. During the first period of revolutionary upheaval, amateur stages had been an important force in destroying old forms and challenging professional stages. That period, however, was over. Now the battle had begun for higher quality and a new kind of professionalism, a battle that all theaters could engage in together.¹ These statements in a journal aimed at a working-class audience and covering amateur stages would have been inconceivable only a few years earlier. They showed that the radical anti-professionalism of the early NEP period was on the wane.

Katerina Clark has called NEP a period of "quiet revolution in intellectual life," when some of the most distinctive elements of Soviet culture began to take shape. Particularly during the second half of NEP, the period investigated in this chapter, intellectuals began to group themselves into ever broader and ideologically more diverse organizations that bore some similarity to the professional unions formed in the 1930s. At the same time, the Communist Party and Komsomol established an important place as the sponsors of critical journals devoted to politics and culture. The result was a radical simplification of cultural debate.²

On the surface, at least, there was no such simplification process in the world of amateur theater. Instead, the offerings on club stages became more diverse in the second half of the 1920s. Small forms, which predominated in Moscow and Leningrad a few years earlier, began to share stage time with special plays written for club theaters as well as works intended for the professional stage. Yet even while the offerings expanded, the discussions about the significance of amateur theater narrowed. Two large camps took shape, one supporting the innovations of small forms and the other advocating a larger, grander style. The journals devoted to amateur stages were filled with vituperative attacks on rival directions: some denounced the incomprehensible and unsatisfying “leftism” of small forms whereas others saved their venom for the reactionary “naturalism” of those who were copying the works they saw on the professional stage.

The economic recovery of the second half of NEP changed the social context of amateur performance. After several years of hardship, state resources began flowing to factories and trade unions again. These modest increases gave them a chance to consider building or renovating spaces for performance. Paradoxically, new resources infused more animosity into the struggle between small and large forms. The shape and placement of the stage in new structures indicated what kind of performances the builders expected to see. Economic recovery brought anxieties as well, since it was achieved through the semi-capitalist mechanisms of the New Economic Policy. For some groups, this very fact made prosperity dubious. They felt it was no time to relax their revolutionary vigilance, nor to give up the agitational tactics that reminded actors and audiences of their political duties.

There was a clear (if temporary) winner in this struggle over the form and content of amateur performance. At the 1927 conference on theater sponsored by the Communist Party’s Agitprop division, the organizational principles of the theater of small forms, especially the united artistic circle, came in for heavy criticism. Small forms had become too predictable to interest broad audiences, conference organizers determined. Moreover, significant changes in the repertoire of professional theaters, which had begun staging plays addressed to the revolution, made their work more appealing. Agitprop and trade union leaders recommended a new spirit of cooperation between amateurs and professionals. At the same time, however, they articulated their views in such a way as to show that amateurs would be the junior partners in this collaboration. In the words of final conference resolutions, the “theories thought up in
isolated offices" that opposed amateur and professional methods had nothing to do with Marxism.3

**Small Forms Besieged**

The heyday of small forms began to wane by the middle of the 1920s. Living newspapers and improvisations faced criticism from cultural consumers, who claimed that they had become too monotonous; from club activists, who worried that they were driving older workers from clubs; and from political organizers, who were concerned about their spontaneous and uncontrolled nature. Some supporters of small forms themselves argued that they led organically to a search for more complex works that would still convey an agitational message but do so in a more compelling fashion.

Criticisms of small forms came in part from the audience. The most influential viewers were worker correspondents (rabkory), self-taught critics from the lower classes who gained positions in journals and newspapers during NEP.4 While most of their attention was addressed to the professional stage, they also evaluated amateur performances. Although they did not always agree, many worker correspondents were skeptical of the improvisational theater of small forms, believing that it was not really designed with workers in mind. One rabkor sent to review a living newspaper performance at the Volodarskii Railroad Workers' Club in Leningrad had to admit that the audience loved the show. Viewers applauded wildly and even demanded encores. The critic made short work of their enthusiasm, however. "There were almost no workers in the crowd. Perhaps that explains the success of these completely trashy numbers [chisto khalturnykh nomerov]." Another rabkor insisted that clubs filled up for festival performances only because they were free: "It is true that sometimes the viewers applaud, but their applause is not meant for the work. Rather [it is meant for] the actors and for the revolutionary content of the instsenirovka."5 It was not enough to be proud of a performance just because workers had done it themselves,

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3. S. M. Krylov, ed., *Puti razvitiia teatra: Stenograficheskii otchet i resheniiia partiiinogo soveshchaniia po voprosam teatra pri Agitprope TsK VKP (b) v mae 1927 g.* (Moscow: Kinopechat', 1927), 498.


determined one critic in *The New Viewer*. Opinions like these showed little faith in the creative abilities of the working class.6

Worker correspondents were not the only ones to complain. The well-worn stereotypes and predictability of small forms irritated many others. One trade union leader argued that audiences were fed up with standardized depictions of cruel bureaucrats, honest workers, and brainless secretaries powdering their noses.7 Moreover, the villains of small forms did not really have a contemporary ring. Such predictable stereotypes simplified social reality, insisted the club instructor Dmitrii Shcheglov. "Not all Mensheviks are bastards and not all generals blood suckers. . . . Finally, the working class does not always function as a collective (or rather as a mass). It has its own distinctive figures (heroes)."8

Even those who found agitational works compelling maintained that a constant diet of small forms was more than they could stomach. In scattered accounts, reporters complained that viewers found living newspapers poorly executed, mundane, and uninspiring. "They are not interesting," one audience member at the Red October Club in Moscow claimed. "We can read newspapers ourselves."9 Other small forms met similar reactions, with at least some audience members finding them disorganized and episodic. One reviewer of an *instsenirovka* performed in honor of Bloody Sunday in a central Moscow club called it an "arsenal of effects and buffoonery" that in no way evoked the historical drama of the march on the tsar.10

The perceived link to bad economic times was also a mark against small forms. By 1925, key economic factors began to swing sharply upward, finally reaching prewar levels by the following year. The draconian measures of early NEP that had meant harsh budget cuts for cultural institutions slowly were rescinded, bringing funds for club construction and expansion. The improvisational theater of the Civil War and early NEP had made the most of scarce resources. Many club theaters were still making do with small spaces, at the same time that club memberships were growing. A Moscow study of more than one hundred clubs conducted in late 1924 discovered that only a few could accommodate performances for more than five hundred people. Large festival events

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sometimes needed to be held in shifts. With the improving economy, trade unions and factories began to discuss new space allocations. A club building boom began in the second half of NEP, although many new structures were not completed until the First Five-Year Plan. First on many lists was the construction of a large auditorium with a foyer, a stage, and dressing rooms, all of which would facilitate larger and more elaborate events.

Some of the most innovative club designs were begun in this period, including the Moscow buildings of Konstantin Mel'nikov, which remain among the most famous examples of constructivist architecture. Mel'nikov’s clubs featured a stark geometric exterior design and innovative interior spaces. His Rusakov Municipal Workers’ Club in Moscow, begun in 1927, made all kinds of performances possible. Large doors opened from the street into the club, so that demonstrations could move easily from inside to outside. The auditorium featured moveable walls, allowing the interior space to be divided into six separate meeting rooms to accommodate both large and small productions.

The building boom renewed the debate about interior space that had already begun during the Civil War. How elaborate should new clubs be? What kinds of stages should they feature? Advocates of small forms wanted theater work to be completely integrated into club activities. Thus, they objected to making large auditoriums with raised stages the focal point of club structures, since this would physically separate club performances and encourage a passive audience. Architects began with elaborate stages when they made their designs, remarked one commentator in the journal *Workers’ Club*, a strong supporter of small forms. He insisted that special theatrical spaces were not necessary for a successful club structure. Instead, it was essential to make rooms designed for meeting and discussion the focal point of new buildings. One important leader of the Blue Blouse living newspaper troupe, Sergei Iutkevich, advocated a style of theater that would require no stage at all. However, neither architects nor club users were very sympathetic to this plea for a small-scale architecture. The new structures being planned, with

space for costumes and scenery, undermined the minimalist aesthetics of small forms.

A more important challenge to small forms was the question of their political reliability. The open-ended nature of improvised performance put control of the final product in local hands. The ultimate decisions about content were left to the actors and directors, some of whom, in the words of one observer, were "politically illiterate." More often than not, shoddy preparations were the result of haste; overburdened theater circles did not have time to give their works the care that they deserved and performed them before political circles had time to monitor their content. The end result was low-quality work, which could easily be seen as a sign of disrespect for the very institutions that theaters intended to celebrate. One critic was particularly offended by a club's poor performance at a celebration of the October Revolution in 1925. Although charges of intentional political subversion were rare (that would come later), political overseers objected to performances that departed from goals set by the Communist Party and trade unions. For the rabkor Alexander Shibaev, the solution was more oversight, including the use of prepared texts that had been closely examined by political authorities.

Because small forms were linked to youth, their standing in clubs was further threatened when the political reliability of Soviet young people came under increasing scrutiny. Young people, especially students, were the most vocal backers of Leon Trotsky when Joseph Stalin began to consolidate his political power base in 1923–24. Trotsky had addressed himself directly to young people in widely distributed periodicals such as Pravda and the Komsomol's Young Guard, encouraging them to see themselves as the nation's most important political and cultural constituency. He had also been a vocal advocate of workers' clubs as a place where youth could gather and discuss their experiences. When Trotsky came under fire, young people who supported him began to face political difficulties. The Leningrad Komsomol was censured and

reorganized because of the support it gave to Zinoviev and Kamenev, two other opponents of Stalin, in 1925. In late NEP, young people emerged as the most articulate supporters of the United Opposition, the brief alliance of Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Kamenev against the party secretary.\footnote{21}

While one segment of Soviet youth expressed suspect political loyalties, other groups seemed more interested in having a good time. Urban youth were also the most enthusiastic consumers of Western styles in clothing, film, music, and dance. Young people formed the largest single constituency for imported movies, sometimes sneaking into upscale theaters to see their favorites over and over again. A very visible youth subculture copied the hairstyles and clothing they saw depicted in films, appearing as “flappers” and “dandies.” Urban clubs and houses of culture were a cheap gathering spot where they could practice the fox-trot and other dances linked to the decadent West.\footnote{22}

Because young people had a reputation for disruptive behavior, their continued dominance of club life began to be seen as a serious problem. Study after study conducted in the late 1920s revealed that young people were the leading constituency in almost all areas of club work, including artistic circles. The Sickle and Hammer factory in Moscow reported that seventy percent of club participants were young. The Red Putilov Club in Leningrad had the same high number.\footnote{23} “It is true,” stated the central trade union leader F. Seniushkin in 1925, “that the club lives and bustles with worker youth and pioneers. But this just goes to show that the club is not yet drawing in adult workers. Instead, it attracts the Komsomol, which of course is not bad. . . . But in addition to youth we have a huge layer of middle-level workers for whom we have to show some concern.”\footnote{24}

The question “Why doesn’t the adult worker go to clubs?” appeared almost simultaneously in many cultural journals. The issue was impor-

\footnote{23. \textit{Kluby Moskov i gubernii} (Moscow: Trud i kniga, 1926), 29; V. Bliumenfel'd, “Melochi klubnogo byta,” RK 3 (1926): 42–45.}
\footnote{24. F. Seniushkin, “Zadachi klubnoi raboty,” \textit{Prizyv} 1 (1925): 5, emphasis in the original.}
tant to cultural organizers because it meant that the club could not really serve as a new kind of public space that could replace the isolated world of the home. Young people were singled out as the root of the problem. Club leaders charged young people with drunkenness, disruptive behavior, and the defacement of club property, all of which drove more respectable elements from club events. Some clubs even formed volunteer militia groups (druzhinniki) to keep young people in line.\(^{25}\) As Joan Neuberger’s innovative work on prerevolutionary St. Petersburg has shown, anxieties about cultural cohesion and loosening public control easily translated into charges of “hooliganism.”\(^{26}\) Even before the gang rape of a peasant woman by young Leningrad workers turned hooliganism into a national obsession in the fall of 1926, fears of young people’s disruptive influence in clubs filled the writings of low-level bureaucrats.\(^{27}\)

These fears affected the discussion about small forms because young people were considered to be the most enthusiastic supporters. Older workers did not go to clubs because there was nothing for them to do there, complained one union leader. There was no quiet place for them to relax, the corridors were filled with noise and fistfights, and living newspapers did not interest them. “Bearded” viewers yearned for more serious content and complexity.\(^{28}\)

The rhetoric of social progress also worked against small forms. The years since the revolution had brought real improvements in the lives of average workers, insisted many club activists. These positive changes included a measurable growth in the sophistication of working-class tastes. The 1925 Communist Party decree on literature addressed the “huge rise in the masses’ cultural demands.”\(^{29}\) Echoing this language, theater critics insisted that the revolution had refined the tastes of the broad masses. According to one worker correspondent, “The worker viewer has increased his theatrical and cultural level and expects a more

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27. On the national anti-hooliganism campaign, which even at the time was interpreted as a fear of young people’s potential oppositional power, see Naiman, Sex in Public, 250–88, and Gorsuch, Enthusiasts, ch. 8.
serious and complete performance from the theater and the club.”30 Following this logic, small forms were equated with small minds. Small forms were much lower on the artistic scale than large ones, insisted one Leningrad cultural worker: “The push toward ‘higher’ scenic forms by worker artists is completely understandable. Only such forms can convey the emotional experiences of the working class.”31

With the sources at hand, it is very difficult to verify the claim that audiences in general were becoming more sophisticated and thus turning away from the simple agitational style of improvised theater. Audience studies of amateur stages were rare in the 1920s. Certainly, the most vilified genre of agitational theater, living newspapers, continued to prosper; more than thirty-five local groups performed at a Leningrad competition in 1927.32 The journal *Blue Blouse* provided ample evidence of the proliferation of such groups throughout the nation. In his work on Moscow clubs in late NEP, John Hatch argues that political theater lost significant ground to films as a popular form of entertainment. Nonetheless, some of the records he uses for the Sickle and Hammer factory in Moscow reveal that events featuring living newspapers, especially when they were free, continued to draw sizeable crowds.33

What one can say with more certainty is that the turn to more diverse repertoires came from within amateur theater circles themselves. At least at the outset it was not imposed by trade union, Komsomol, or Narkompros organs. It was only at the end of 1925—well after heated debates were already underway in the journals devoted to amateur theater—that the head of the art division of Glavpolitprosvet, Robert Pel'she, announced that agitational forms were beginning to play themselves out and that amateur theaters needed to search for more complex modes of performance.34 And it was not until 1927 that this view received official codification at the Agitprop conference on theater. By that

time, a number of amateur circles in Moscow and Leningrad had moved away from a repertoire limited to small forms alone.

**Club Plays**

The mounting criticism of small forms led club participants to consider different kinds of works that might engage a broader segment of viewers. The first steps away from small forms were themselves quite small, however. Club advocates began to call for a special form of "club play" that would take its inspiration from instsenirovki, agit-trials, and living newspapers. Similar to small forms, these would ideally be created from within the united artistic circle; they would also address themselves to the issues of contemporary life. Club plays would differ from agitational forms by adding complex characters and following a unified story line. Such works needed to have an agitational content without being overbearing, determined one Leningrad critic. They should use simple, clear language and convey a logically constructed narrative. Such an approach would result in richer and more satisfying works that could speak to a broad working-class audience.

The club play was a hybrid genre. Not only did advocates insist that their inspiration and roots should remain in the agitational theater of small forms, but they were also intended to be tailored to suit the specific difficulties and limitations of amateur stages. They had fewer characters, props, and technical challenges than did plays written for professional theaters. Because most clubs wanted new works at regular intervals to interest their audiences and mark Soviet festivals, they were also supposed to be fairly easy to prepare. This blurred the line dividing club plays from small forms. One advocate insisted that club plays reject the principles of psychological realism, which he believed formed the foundation of most professional theater. Like small forms, club plays would still be based on the principle of "massism" (massovost'), which meant they would be addressed to the broad masses in the most inclusive way possible. In an overview of different types of Soviet plays, another author defined what he believed were the essential elements of a club play: it had to have a unified story while maintaining modest staging requirements and a contemporary theme. These works should not

attempt naturalistic, psychologically complex portrayals of characters, but they should move beyond the simple stereotypes, or "masks," of living newspapers.\textsuperscript{38}

Advocates of club plays stressed repeatedly that they should emerge through the united artistic circle and not be appropriated ready made from available printed works. These points were made most forcefully by the Leningrad Proletkult leader, Valerii Blumenfel'd, who wrote a number of articles on club plays for Leningrad journals and the Moscow publication \textit{Workers' Club}. He envisioned a club play emerging from collective efforts, thus remaining true to the structure embraced by the advocates of small forms. These works "would maintain the basic forms of instsenirovki and living newspapers, but at the same time possess a unified and satisfying subject." Purely agitational works presented slogans, not life; club plays could come closer to the portrayal of life and move from agitation (a simple message for the masses) to propaganda (a more complex message for the more sophisticated). In the process, clubs would be better able to combat the rush of viewers to films and prerevolutionary melodramas.\textsuperscript{39} I. Ispolnev, a founding member of the Moscow action circle who had initially rejected any kind of play, went even further than Blumenfel'd. He used the dialectic to describe the cultural process underway. Initially, amateur theaters had copied the work of professional stages. Then they had rejected this position and insisted on their own original works, such as living newspapers. But now he suggested that there must be a synthesis of these two extremes. "We have arrived at a unique and original form of theater performance, at the 'club spectacle' which contains all new forms, but united into a single unified action, and even sometimes into a single intrigue."\textsuperscript{40} For both of these authors, club plays were a necessary, discrete evolutionary step beyond small forms.

This supposed synthesis of small and large forms met opposition from both the artistic left and right. Even these modest proposals were a threat to those who wanted to continue improvisation and collective work. For such individuals, club plays posed a danger because they marked a move toward more conventional repertoires. Once an amateur

\textsuperscript{38} A. Borodin, "Tekhnika klubnoi dramaturgii," RK 48 (1927): 29.
\textsuperscript{40} I. Ispolnev, "Teatral'naia deistvennaia rabota v klube," RK 22 (1925): 53–54, quotation 54.
circle had turned to plays, advocates of small forms feared that further steps toward prerevolutionary works and pieces designed for professional theaters would necessarily follow. That raised the danger that frivolous hackwork and apolitical entertainment might come to dominate amateur stages. These objections were raised most forcefully by Vitalii Zhemchuzhnyi, the most outspoken member of the Moscow action circle. He insisted that it was impossible to meld the two modes together because they were based on different principles: “Let us not study from centuries-old dramatic work and absorb the stagnant and alien dramatic canon. Rather let us create new rules for performance art.”

But another faction of critics believed that club plays should distance themselves much further from the impromptu methods of small forms. “Workers have longed for a deeper approach to questions of production and daily life in all their living dialectic,” determined one Moscow club leader. “And this has not taken place, and cannot take place, in improvisations and living newspapers.” A group letter signed by the staff of two large Moscow centers, the Sverdlov and Sapronov Clubs, stated that the united artistic circle itself should be tossed out because it was removed from life and gave too much power to the drama and literature groups within the club. They endorsed club plays and also insisted that more attention be given to providing participants better training in acting.

A number of short plays were generated from within club circles. Our Daily Life (Nash byt), written and performed by the Moscow Electrical Light Factory Club, depicted a member of the German Communist Party working incognito at the Moscow plant. He went from division to division, trying to discover how the factory worked and what difference the revolution had made in people’s lives. The protagonist “together with the viewers uncovered the good and bad aspects of the factory, the day care center, the club and the dormitory,” one audience member observed. The focus on local themes reportedly drew an enthusiastic crowd: “Hearing that the factory intelligentsia didn’t come off too well, the whole office came to watch. Many people recognized themselves in the play.” Another homemade play, presented at the Moscow Arta­monovskii Tram Park, showed how an older worker became convinced that the revolution was a good thing and explained his new convictions

42. V. Bogoliubov, “Nasha tribuna,” RK 23 (1925): 73.
to doubting peasants.\textsuperscript{44} Noting this turn to self-generated plays, a writer in the journal \textit{Soviet Art (Sovetskoe iskusstvo)} pronounced that amateur art was entering a new and more sophisticated stage.\textsuperscript{45}

But just as living newspaper circles faced problems creating their own texts, amateur theater groups did not always have the time or talent to devise successful club plays. One work, \textit{Face the Countryside (Litsom k derevne)}, by a Leningrad worker who was studying in special classes at the university, received very bad reviews. It was not really a play at all, wrote one worker correspondent. Instead, it was a collection of scenes from city and country life without cohesion or a common thread. A serious, unified work required more preparation than the month and a half that the factory circle had spent on this production, the critic chided.\textsuperscript{46} A play with the enticing title of \textit{Factory Love (Fabrichnaia liubov')}, written by a Komsomol member and addressing the sexual mores of young people, was panned for its weak dramatic structure and poor language.\textsuperscript{47}

To alleviate the problem of repertoire, a specialized class of professional writers began to compose plays designed specifically for clubs. Widely published club authors included Boris Iurtsev, G. Bronikovskii, Vladimir Severnyi, Dmitrii Shcheglov, and Iakov Zadykhin. Very few of their works were ever performed by professional theaters. Most of these authors had begun their careers composing short agitational works and later turned to plays. Only Dmitrii Shcheglov had insisted on the play form from the beginning, making his mark as the leading opponent of the united artistic circle in Leningrad.

Iakov Zadykhin was involved with the Agitational Theater in Leningrad and also took part in the central Komsomol club theater that would eventually evolve into the youth theater \textit{TRAM}.\textsuperscript{48} A successful play written for the club stage was Zadykhin's \textit{Hooligan}, which examined a popular theme of club plays in the mid-1920s—the transformation of rowdy youth into upright Soviet citizens. The play, published in 1925, depicts the change of a drunken, unemployed young man into a

\textsuperscript{46} On the creation of this work, see El'f, “Po nemnogu, no uporno!” RiT 24 (1925): 5; for the critique, see Rabkor Sheval'kov, “U tekstil'shchikov,” RiT 47 (1925): 15.
\textsuperscript{47} D. Tolmachev, “Fabrichnaia liubov’,” ZI 31 (1925): 16.
\textsuperscript{48} On Zadykhin's involvement in Leningrad theaters, see RiT 39 (1925) and A. S. Bulgakov and S. S. Danilov, \textit{Gosudarstvennyi agitatsionnyi teatr v Leningrade} (Moscow: Academia, 1931), 156, 167.
model worker. There are many twists and turns along the way. One complication involves his former liaison with the daughter of a prosperous NEPman. Another has to do with a serious theft in the factory where he ends up working, a crime for which he is initially blamed. Nonetheless, with the help of his Komsomol girlfriend, a worker correspondent, he eventually enters the ranks of productive proletarians, even managing to save his factory from industrial sabotage.\footnote{La. L. Zadykhin, \textit{Khuligan} (Leningrad: MODPiK, 1925).}

\textit{Hooligan} is a cheerful play that offers a socialist-style happy ending. Not only does the hero announce his pending marriage to the exemplary worker correspondent, but he is also named a hero of labor for saving the factory. The hooligan villains, his former friends, are not particularly unsavory characters. Although they drink and swear, their main disruptive act is to throw rocks through the windows of the local House of Culture. The funniest parts of the play satirize elements of NEP popular culture through the figure of Katka, the daughter of the NEPman. Her main goal in life is to attain the kind of romance she has seen depicted in imported films. Against the wishes of her parents, she quickly transfers her affections from the main character to one of his hooligan friends. This young man, interested in her father's money, wins her affections by declaring, "You have stolen my heart like the daughter of the thief of Baghdad," alluding to the popular Douglas Fairbanks film that was one of the biggest box-office hits in the Soviet Union during the 1920s.\footnote{On the popularity of \textit{The Thief of Baghdad}, see Youngblood, \textit{Movies for the Masses}, 20.} When the suitor delivers a flowery address while Katka is standing at her window, she exclaims, "It's just like in the movies."\footnote{Zadykhin, \textit{Khuligan}, 22.} In a Moscow performance by the Central Collective of Textile Workers, this star-struck shopkeeper's daughter stole the show.\footnote{Nikolai L’vov, "Tsentral'nyi kollektiv tekstil'shchikov," \textit{NZ} 23 (1927): 9.}

Zadykhin's work reveals the hybrid nature of club plays. Unlike most \textit{instsenirovki} and living newspapers, it is not made up of many short segments; instead, it is divided into four discrete acts. The characters have personal names and the beginnings of developed personalities. It also tells a cohesive story. The advocate of psychological realism, Shchegelov, called it "a completely realistic play about daily life."\footnote{Dmitrii Shchegelov, "U istokov," in \textit{U istokov} (Moscow: VTO, 1960), 175.} Nonetheless, the play still bears a strong resemblance to the agitational theater of small forms. The characters are easily recognizable social types, especially the
family of NEPmen and the upright Komsomol heroine. Only the hero experiences any kind of transformation during the play; the rest are static figures. Zadykhin's effort to use elements of urban popular culture was typical of small forms. Moreover, this work was clearly written with an eye to the limited resources at the disposal of amateur stages. It had only ten speaking roles, with a few additional walk-on parts. Not much was demanded in the way of scenery, making it very easy to stage.

To aid club theaters in choosing suitable works, the national Politprosvet organization began to publish reference works that offered an overview of plays suitable for club stages. The Repertory Guide (Repertuarnyi ukazatel’), published in 1925, listed works according to their theme (class struggle, war and revolution, old and new life) and offered brief summaries. The Repertory Bulletin (Repertuarnyi biuletten’), a periodical beginning publication in 1926, was more elaborate. It not only had plot summaries but also noted the staging requirements, the number and gender of parts, and the price of publication.54 In the following year, the national and Moscow trade union organizations began the publication of Club Stage (Klubnaia stsena), the first Soviet journal devoted entirely to amateur theater. It gave an overview and critique of current practices and also published the texts of short plays. One of the first issues included a work by Vladimir Severnyi, Rotten Thread (Gnilaia priazha), which examined a historic textile workers' strike.55 With these resources at their disposal, club participants could choose works that matched their resources and abilities.

Reappraising Professionals

Small forms of the early 1920s were in part a negative response to professional theaters. Most had not changed their offerings significantly in the wake of the revolution. With the exception of the Meyerhold studio, prestigious, state-supported academic theaters had also not made any organized attempt to offer assistance to amateur stages. Thus, many club theaters proclaimed that they were the only ones interested in examining the great social changes the revolution had brought about; professional theaters had little to offer the average viewer.

54. Repertuarnyi ukazatel’: Sbornik otzyvov o p’esakh dla professional’nogo i samodeiatel’nogo teatra (Moscow: Glavpolitprosvet, 1925); Repertuarnyi biuletten’ 1 (1926).
By the mid-1920s, however, some of the most important professional theaters began to perform new works that introduced revolutionary themes. Pressure from Narkompros and the installation of new directors brought significant changes to academic stages. After 1925, institutions like the Malyi Theater in Moscow, which until that point had concentrated on the classics, undertook new plays about the revolution and its aftermath. For some amateurs, this shift meant that they no longer needed to justify their work in oppositional terms, which expanded their sphere of activity. Not only would they direct themselves to the pressing issues of the day, they would also try to prepare their audiences to view works in professional theaters. In addition, the spate of new works written on the theme of revolution made a more sophisticated repertoire available to amateurs. These changes minimized the difference between established and club stages—and raised the question of how club theaters would use the skills and repertoire of their professional colleagues.

Moreover, there was a marked shift in the discussion about the ultimate aims of the amateur stage. For those devoted to the agitational theater of small forms, amateur performance was an end in itself. Its tasks were to educate the viewing audience and build a new community centered on the club. But by the second half of NEP, some participants began to see amateur theater differently. It was a necessary but incipient building block toward a new kind of professional stage. This point of view was quite apparent in a heated discussion among worker correspondents in the Moscow journal The Worker Viewer in 1925 on the topic “What should a worker’s theater be like?” Although one participant expressed doubts about any kind of cooperation with professionals, this was a minority view. Most insisted that amateur theater had to grow aesthetically to the point at which it could form the basis for a new professionalism. And for that to happen, amateurs needed to solicit the acting, directing, and writing skills of professionals. One participant insisted that amateurs could never hope to create a serious theater unless they reached out to include specialists.

This idea that amateurism was something incomplete and rudimentary came even from factions of the artistic left, who had, by and large,

been very sympathetic to the club stage. In a 1926 article in Blue Blouse, Osip Brik maintained that professional living newspapers groups were the only hope for a new, revolutionary theater in the Soviet Union. They alone had the flexibility and immediacy to interest a wide audience and make theater relevant to the broad population. By contrast, club theaters, even those staging small forms, served mainly an educational role. Brik asserted that it was impossible to build a new theater from amateurs alone. Blue Blouse needed to guide and inspire these stages, “to transform their chaotic self-activity [stikhiiinaia samodeiatel’nost’] into productive methods.” Blue Blouse “moved beyond dilettantish self-help [liubitel’skaia samopomoshch’] toward a new professionalism in acting.”

By choosing derogatory words to describe amateur activity, such as liubitel’skii and stikhinyi, Brik underscored the unpredictable nature of club theater. And although his aesthetic solutions were very different than those of most worker correspondents, he also felt that amateur stages were in great need of tutelage.

The new affinity between the professional and amateur stage was most apparent in club repertoire. As a new generation of Soviet playwrights began to create plays about the revolutionary struggle, amateurs started using their work. One example of these new authors was Vladimir Bill-Belotserkovskii, a former sailor whose prerevolutionary adventures had taken him to the United States. His plays, including Echo, Port the Helm (Levo rulia), and Storm, examined the impact of the Russian revolution in the West and the tumultuous years of the Civil War. First performed at the Malyi Theater and the Moscow Trade Union Theater (Teatr MGSPS), they were quickly taken up by amateur stages. Storm, set in the Civil War, was a particular favorite in clubs. At the first Moscow competition of trade union club theaters in 1927, the metal workers’ club, Aviakhim, won first prize for its rendition of this play.

Another new author was Alexander Afinogenov, who began his writing career for the Central Proletkult Theater in the 1920s. Several club stages, particularly in Moscow, staged his plays. One popular work was Robert Tim, which depicted a revolt of weavers in England in the nineteenth century. Konstantin Trenev’s Liubov’ Iarovaia, first performed at the Malyi Theater in 1926, traced the involvement of a rural school teacher on the Bolshevik side during the Civil War. This play was soon

taken up by amateur theaters as well, although its popularity did not peak until the 1930s.\textsuperscript{60}

Following the satirical bent of many living newspapers and inst-
senirovki, comic works written for the professional stage were also adopted by amateurs. One writer, Nikolai Erdman, whose plays were closely tied to the Meyerhold Theater in the 1920s, found a following in clubs. His biggest hit was the raucous satire \textit{The Mandate (Mandat)}, which was both a critical and popular success. It told the story of an anti-Soviet family that attempted to achieve a "security warrant" by having the son join the Communist Party. This would not only protect them but make the daughter more attractive for marriage. After a number of twists and turns, which included the family cook being mistaken for the dead empress Alexandra, the social outcasts remained without the coveted document.\textsuperscript{61} The play's biting treatment of NEPmen and a variety of hopeless prerevolutionary types made it a popular hit on club stages.

Another professional playwright who found a following on amateur stages was Boris Romashov. He wrote both serious dramas of the revolutionary struggle and comedies that were staged by the Malyi Theater and the Theater of Revolution. His depiction of the Civil War in South Russia, \textit{Fedka Esaul}, was performed frequently in club theaters. His satire of NEP life, \textit{The End of Krivoryl'sk (Konets Krivoryl'ska)}, was a popular if controversial work. It examined social change in a small Russian town, portraying a wide range of characters from counter-revolutionaries, to small tradesmen, to careerist officials. Unlike many NEP satires, it does not pit evil anti-regime elements against the brave representatives of the new state. Even the heroes of the piece, the Soviet officials and Komso-
mol members, have plenty of flaws. They drink too much, have numer-
ous sexual liaisons, and forget their duties in order to rush off to Mary Pickford films.\textsuperscript{62} Some rabkor critics objected to the play, saying that the portrayal of Soviet youth was much too negative.\textsuperscript{63}

A limited number of classical plays also began to reappear on club stages in late NEP, after all but disappearing in the early 1920s. One critic in Leningrad noted an emerging specialization among amateur

\textsuperscript{60} For an overview of dramatic works popular in the late 1920s, see Harold B. Segal, \textit{Twentieth Century Russian Drama}, rev. ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 147-81.


\textsuperscript{62} Boris Sergeevich Romashov, \textit{Konets Krivoryl'ska}, in his \textit{P'esy} (Moscow: Khudoz-
hestvennaia literatura, 1935), 143-245.

theaters there. Although most clubs performed works that reflected con-
temporary themes, a few staged primarily prerevolutionary classics, in-
cluding Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Molière, Carlo Goldoni, and
Alexander Ostrovsky. *Hamlet* played to a packed house at the Leningrad
Enlightenment Club. The Central Construction Workers’ Union chose
Gogol’s *Inspector General.*64 Select Moscow club theaters also turned to
prerevolutionary plays. One stage, sponsored with the support of sev-
eral city trade unions, included *The Lower Depths* by Gorky among its
opening works. A competition of chemical trade union theaters in 1927
featured works by Gogol and Pushkin, along with contemporary plays.65
Surveying this trend, Robert Pel’she of Narkompros concluded that it
showed the growing sophistication of the average Soviet viewer, who
now wanted a broader education in the arts.66

Those who looked to amateur theater for innovation, however, drew a
different message from this shift to the classics and professional works.
They felt that amateurs were moving backward, embracing prerevolu-
tionary models of amateurism whereby groups simply copied what they
saw on established stages. In the process, they tried to recreate the act-
ing and staging techniques of professionals, which were usually beyond
their abilities. In order to master complex works, they focused on one
play for many months, or even years, which meant they performed very
infrequently in the local club. As a result, amateur performance was
once again isolated from the life of the club, undertaken with no consid-
eration of the work going on in other circles. These pernicious trends
would lead to an apolitical repertoire performed for the pure entertain-
ment of viewers, warned Valerii Bliumenfel’d, who wanted club plays to
emerge from amateur circles themselves.67

Nikolai L’vov saw the turn to classical plays as simply the latest stage
in the battle between conservative and progressive forces that had be-
gun at the Worker-Peasant Theater Conference in 1919. There, the con-
servatives from the popular theater movement had recommended
Sophocles and Tolstoi; the progressive wing insisted that the masses cre-
ate their own repertoire. While all those involved with amateur theater
agreed that purely agitational works had grown tiresome, some were

64. Sergei Spasskii, “Pis’mo iz Leningrada,” NZ 11 (1925): 7; “Teatr stroitelei,” ZI 35
67. V. Bliumenfel’d, “Samodeiatel’nost’ ili professionalizm v klubnykh i khudozhestven-
nykh kruzhkakh,” ZI 38 (1926): 9; see also idem, “Klubnaia dramaturgiia,” RK 30/31
(1926): 12.
turning back the clock. Rather than attempt new works, they staged a repertoire common on amateur stages before the revolution. What L’vov saw as the progressive faction was building on what they had learned through agitational works, infusing their plays with more depth and complexity. “The struggle between these two directions has only just begun,” he concluded.68

Although the struggle was for the future of amateur theater, both sides expressed their views with reference to the professional stage. Those who wanted a unique repertoire accused their opponents of following the strictures of the popular theater movement. Their ideas about acting and staging were derivative, guilty of a reactionary “naturalism” that exemplified the values and individualism of the bourgeoisie. The methods of Konstantin Stanislavsky, founder of the Moscow Art Theater, loomed large in this critique. His psychological approach to acting was unfit to capture the spirit of the collective. Clubs should never turn to naturalistic sets and try to imitate the psychological actor, argued one commentator in *The Life of Art*. Workers easily grasped the key elements of “leftist” theater, from its focus on the collective to its constructivist set designs.69

Those opposed to the theatrical left were ready with accusations of their own. They charged that their opponents were under the thrall of a segment of the bourgeoisie who had articulated their avant-garde ideas long before the revolution. Their work was a luxury for the very few but out of reach for the mass audience. Workers were baffled and offended by fragmented structure and strange staging of their performances.70 Instead, these critics wanted more convincing characters, easily understandable plots, and a positive treatment of Soviet heroes. In short, they wanted what they called “realism.” One outspoken rabkor insisted, “Workers’ theater must be as realistic as possible. It should illuminate the life of the worker, satisfy his spiritual longings, and encourage his future growth. It should not include primitive folk forms [ne dokhodit’ do lubka] but nonetheless be close and understandable to the working masses.”71 Two Moscow trade union leaders, put it this way: “[The

70. For the most extreme expression of these views, see *Rabochie o literature*, 45, 52, 99–100. This work is a compilation of highly selective quotes from *The Worker Viewer*. For a searing critique of this book by a worker correspondent, see Turii Kobrin, *Teatr im Vs. Meierkhol’d i rabochii zritel’* (Moscow: Moskovskoe teatral’noe izdatel’stvo, 1926), 51.
worker viewer] wants to see life as it is. By this, he does not mean a naturalistic copy of life, but rather its most typical, realistic reproduction."72 This quotation articulates in embryo some of the basic principles of socialist realism. As most established stages also moved toward realism, the aesthetic distance between amateur and professional diminished.

The "Smychka" in Theater

The idea of a smychka, or union, between the proletariat and the peasantry, two potentially hostile classes, was a central concept of the New Economic Policy. This bedrock principle was extended outside the sphere of economics and class relations to discuss fruitful interaction between other potentially opposing forces. In late 1925, Robert Pel'she broached the idea of a smychka in culture. "Now apparently a smychka between professional and amateur art is beginning to show itself," he asserted. "We must deepen this trend."73

Pel'she's comments indicate that the debate surrounding the repertoire of club theater, largely conducted in specialized journals in the early 1920s, began to emerge as a topic of national discussion. The Seventh National Trade Union Congress, meeting in late 1926, addressed the problem of club repertoire. Mikhail Tomskii, the head of the national trade union organization, endorsed greater cooperation between amateurs and professionals. He insisted that much of the literature made by workers themselves was of poor quality—vulgar in tone and ungrammatical. If appropriate new works could not be found, then it was better to perform old plays. The final resolutions indicated that trade unions were willing to look to professionals for aid: "It is imperative to attract the best artistic forces to create and rework good plays for club stages and to lead club circles."74 At a special meeting devoted entirely to trade union cultural work in early 1927, the head of the national cultural division, Nikolai Evreinov (not to be confused with the famous theater director Nikolai Nikolaevich Evreinov, who had emigrated to France), made the message even clearer. He insisted that clubs attract professional groups to give model performances and strengthen ties with established stages in order to solicit better instructors.75

74. Sed'moi s'ezd professional'nykh soiuzov (Moscow: Profizdat, 1926), 67–69, 773, quotation 773.
The gathering with the most significant impact on club stages was the national convention on theater sponsored by the Agitprop Division of the Communist Party in the spring of 1927. The main purpose of this meeting, designed to parallel the 1925 Party conference on literature, was to assess government policies for professional stages, reviewing their financial support, repertoire, and organization. But because the conference was justified as a method to acknowledge the importance of theater to the laboring masses, amateur stages in urban centers and the countryside received considerable attention. At this congress, the notion that there should be a rapprochement (sblizhenie) between amateur and professionals received official codification. The conference determined that amateur theaters needed to learn artistic mastery from established stages. At the same time, professional theaters had to provide the mass viewer with a repertoire that reflected the problems and accomplishments of the contemporary era.

The assumption that audiences in amateur theaters were becoming more sophisticated and discriminating reached the level of truism at the conference, being repeated in every single speech and resolution. In his opening statements, the head of Agitprop, Vilis Knorin, linked workers' improving economic and political condition to their demands for better art. He sounded a recurring theme at the proceedings—namely that amateur theaters had an important role to play as the transmitters of artistic values and the theatrical heritage: “Club and rural theaters at the present time must and should learn artistic mastery and the skills of directing and acting from professional theaters; they should transmit what they have learned to the broad masses.” The imbalance between amateur theaters, which were revolutionary but not artistic, and professional theaters, which were artistic but not revolutionary, had to come to an end.

The main speech on amateur theaters was presented by Evreinov from the central trade union bureaucracy. Such institutions were important, he began, because professional theaters could not begin to meet all the needs of the viewing public. By making reference to the several thousand amateur stages under trade union control, Evreinov argued

78. Ibid., 12.
that amateur stages served a larger segment of the population than professional theaters. Because they were closer to their audiences, amateur stages could more easily meet viewers' needs and could better serve as a conduit for socialist education.  

But while he recognized the strategic importance of amateur theater, Evreinov began with the assumption that these institutions were in a deep state of crisis. Bitingly critical of current offerings, he denounced the idea that performance works should only be generated from within the club circle. He also attacked what he called the "false theories" of the past, which had led club theaters astray. These included all of the ideas that had formed the theoretical underpinnings for small forms. The unified artistic circle denied the importance of the artistic heritage and subordinated all creative work within the club to a single circle. He was no kinder to the principles behind action cells, which he referred to as "action art" (deistvennoe iskusstvo). This approach repudiated any specific qualities for the art of the stage. Finally, in a rather confused coda, he denounced the concept of utilitarian art, a notion he traced to the Civil War but which still had adherents in the trade union movement. All of these ideas were cooked up in isolated offices by poorly qualified intellectuals who wished to establish a monopoly on conceptions of proletarian culture. They resulted in the worst possible kinds of agitational performances, works without any artistic value.

Evreinov believed that the movement away from small forms was coming from below, from amateur theater groups themselves. The worker viewer had begun to say, "Enough agitation, enough homemade concoctions [samodel'shchina]—give me theater." As a result, club stages were beginning to choose large, important plays such as the opera Rusalka, Bill-Belotserkovskii's Storm and the Dutch classic The Good Hope. Protests against this shift in repertoire came not from viewers but rather from (unnamed) leaders who opposed artistic mastery and the cultural heritage of the past.

But rather than discard agitational work altogether, Evreinov proposed a mixed repertoire for clubs. Amateur stages should continue to use small forms; they could have a positive political value and in general were easy to perform. However, these had to be combined with...
plays written for club stages, works intended for professional theaters, and select representatives from the classics. The only way to achieve such a diverse repertoire, Evreinov suggested, was to strip club theaters of some of their agitational responsibilities. Such suggestions had been made by union leaders periodically during the 1920s to protect drama circles from their burdensome performance schedules. Evreinov articulated this position in uncompromising terms. "Finally," he proclaimed, "we must relieve circles of a whole variety of obligatory appearances for any number of campaigns. They now have to appear at all political campaigns and holidays—on March 8, the day of the Paris Commune, May Day, and others. For this reason drama circles cannot do serious work." 83 Evreinov's intention was to lighten the burden of drama circles so that they would have more time for serious preparation. Yet seen from another perspective, he actually heaped more responsibilities on them. In essence he charged them with two equally important but not necessarily complimentary tasks—political agitation (although in lesser amounts) and the artistic education of their audiences.

The wide-ranging discussion after Evreinov's speech rehashed the many controversies facing club theaters since the revolution. How were they supposed to attend to agitation and also create artistically satisfying work? queried one representative from Ivanovo-Voznesensk. Some club theaters had responded by creating two separate groups, one for agitation and one to tackle plays, but this put a further strain on scarce resources. Another delegate from the Urals commented that it was a good thing to lighten club theaters' heavy agitational load, which required them to perform for every festival and also for political campaigns of all kinds. Still, he questioned how appropriate an opera like Rusalka would be to mark the celebration of the October Revolution. Others insisted that if clubs were going to produce more effective artistic works, they needed significantly more resources. Most club stages were simply too small and poorly equipped to perform big plays. Thus, there remained no serious alternative to agitational works. 84

Beneath these debates around repertoire, one can discern a real sense of anxiety about a production strategy that left significant control in local hands. Many speakers at the gathering complained about lack of vigilance over club stages, which resulted in the performance of prerevolutionary hack work and even works that had been officially banned by the government. But the most passionate exclamations of censure were

83. Ibid., 277.
reserved for living newspaper scripts, which some participants felt had become the purveyors of pornography. Evreinov quoted offensive lines from a work dedicated to International Women's Day, which he believed praised philandering and loose moral conduct. Other delegates had similar stories. According to one, living newspapers had become a forum for "salty and pornographic anecdotes." The final resolutions at the conference called not only for tightened vigilance over the text of works performed, but also increased monitoring of the performances themselves—a recognition that improvised forms could vary considerably from one show to the next.

Despite the considerable attention brought to amateur stages at the widely publicized national event, the conference served mainly to fix their junior status in any cultural partnership with professional stages. Many speakers found amateur theaters useful only to the degree that professional theaters could not meet all the needs of the population. "Professional theater cannot completely satisfy the interest of the broad proletarian masses in performance," read the final resolutions. "Because of this the club stage has become and will continue to be a significant tool to meet workers' cultural demands." And although small forms were not abandoned entirely, the organizing methods that had supported their proliferation and their most widely used form, the living newspaper, were singled out for criticism. Evreinov denounced the theories of early NEP that claimed a special role for amateur theater in the creation of Soviet culture as so much radical nonsense. Small forms were discussed primarily in terms of their inadequacies. The conference delegates did acknowledge why club stages might employ them; they were easy to perform, adapted easily to agitational goals, and allowed some local creativity. But these positive points were undercut by the premise that the most important task of club stages was to introduce a serious repertoire and show the masses the best examples of artistic work.

The Agitprop conference offered unambiguous advice to local amateur stages: call in the experts to improve your work. Certainly, delegates gathered at a trade union conference in Leningrad only a few weeks later got this message. Konstantin Tverskoi, head of the city-wide artistic section, insisted that trade unions must aim to "bring art closer to the masses" (iskusstvo—blizhe k massam). In local discussions on the-

85. For anxieties about "pornography," see ibid., 270–71, 301, quotation 293.
86. Ibid., 487.
87. Ibid., 490.
88. Ibid., 498.
ater, the most common demand he had heard was for higher quality work. The only way to achieve this was to bring in more professionals. He predicted that by the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the revolution, only a few months away, “the antagonism between professionals and amateurs will finally be eliminated.”

Tverskoi’s prophesy was fulfilled through a joint project between trade union theaters and the Leningrad Bol’shoi Drama Theater, called “Ten Octobers” (Desiat’ Oktiabrei). This mass spectacle, which included an estimated one thousand performers, celebrated ten years of Soviet power. Billed as a direct response to the Agitprop conference, the printed program even incorporated excerpts from the conference resolutions. The episodic script, with twenty-five separate sections, used literary works, songs, excerpts from plays, and political writings to tell the story of the revolution from Lenin’s arrival at the Finland station until October 1927. It incorporated the performance and technical staff of the Bol’shoi Drama Theater, as well as thirty-five amateur theater groups, music circles, and living newspapers.

It is worth stepping back for a moment to compare “Ten Octobers” to the mass festivals of the Civil War years, such as “The Storming of the Winter Palace” in 1920. Those earlier events also included amateur performers, but only as part of the crowd scenes. In this celebration, amateurs had speaking and singing roles. They were given voice, and this reflected a positive change in the status of amateur creation in the Soviet artistic pantheon. According to one observer, however, “Ten Octobers” was structured so that the professional performers provided the narrative elements that moved the story forward. Amateur circles provided the local color, the background atmosphere; they were not integrated as equals. This judgment was unintentionally confirmed by the main director of the spectacle, B. Andreev-Bashinskii from the Bol’shoi Drama Theater. He contended that the amateurs learned about professional discipline and mastery from the collaboration. For their part, the professionals were inspired by the immediacy of amateur theater and its direct political relevance to proletarian audiences. While he surely meant his

90. Desiat’ Oktiabrei (Leningrad: Bol’shoi dramaticheskii teatr, 1927).
comments to be appreciative of amateur performers, he nonetheless pre-
presented them as valuable raw materials that needed to be shaped and di-
rected through professional intervention.

The second half of the NEP period was a time of great diversity for
amateur stages. Although sharply criticized by some viewers, living
newspapers and other small forms remained popular. Plays designed
specifically for clubs appeared in cheap editions and were also distrib-
uted in the new journal Club Stage. New dramas intended for profes-
sional stages, especially those dealing with the history of the revolution
and contemporary life, also were common choices. Some circles turned
to classic plays that had been common on club stages before the
revolution.

This broad range of performances reflected a fundamental shift in
ideas on the value and significance of professional stages. Once shunned
as irrelevant or dangerous for amateur performers, many club theaters
now looked to professionals for repertoire and assistance. They adapted
work from major theaters and even collaborated on joint projects. Such a
change in attitudes was hardly unique to amateur stages. By the middle
of the 1920s, many utopian projects that envisioned a society less struc-
tured by hierarchies of skill and training had fallen by the wayside. The
dream of an all-volunteer militia, put forward by a faction of the Red
Army, evaporated. School curricula designed to nurture the whole per-
son and avoid excessive specialization were revised as Soviet industry
called for better training and students demanded programs that would
offer better chances for advancement. Everywhere, the egalitarian cur-
rents of the Russian revolution were weakening.94

Nonetheless, we should not assume that calls for better training and
skill meant the same thing to everyone who voiced them. Supervisory
cultural institutions, such as trade union administrations and the Agit-
prop Division, hoped to limit the unpredictable nature of amateur per-
formance; they wanted additional controls over poor production stan-
dards and poor choices in repertoire, which had allowed dangerous
material to make its way on stage. Some professionals, like the director

94. See Mark von Hagen, Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship (Ithaca: Cornell Univer-
sity Press, 1990), 206–8; Sheila Fitzpatrick, Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union
1921–1934 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 57, 63; and Richard Stites, Rev-
of the Leningrad Bol'shoi Drama Theater, expressed the wish that amateur stages might help them gain better access to proletarian audiences. As the program for “Ten Octobers” stated, amateurs could serve as a bridge between professionals and the proletarian public.95

The motives of the participants and audiences of the amateur stage were even more complex. A segment of the viewing audience hoped that a more varied repertoire would make for more interesting viewing. The financial improvements of late NEP, which meant expanded club stages and more funds for props and costumes, allowed actors and directors to bring performance standards closer to those on the professional stage. For some advocates, this was evidence of the smychka in culture; they were finally in a position to collaborate with their professional counterparts. But for others, this provided the basis for a new aggressive onslaught. Improvements by amateurs meant that select theaters, with intrinsic ties to lower-class audiences, might finally be able to challenge the dominance of conventional stages.

95. Desiat' Oktiabrei, 7.