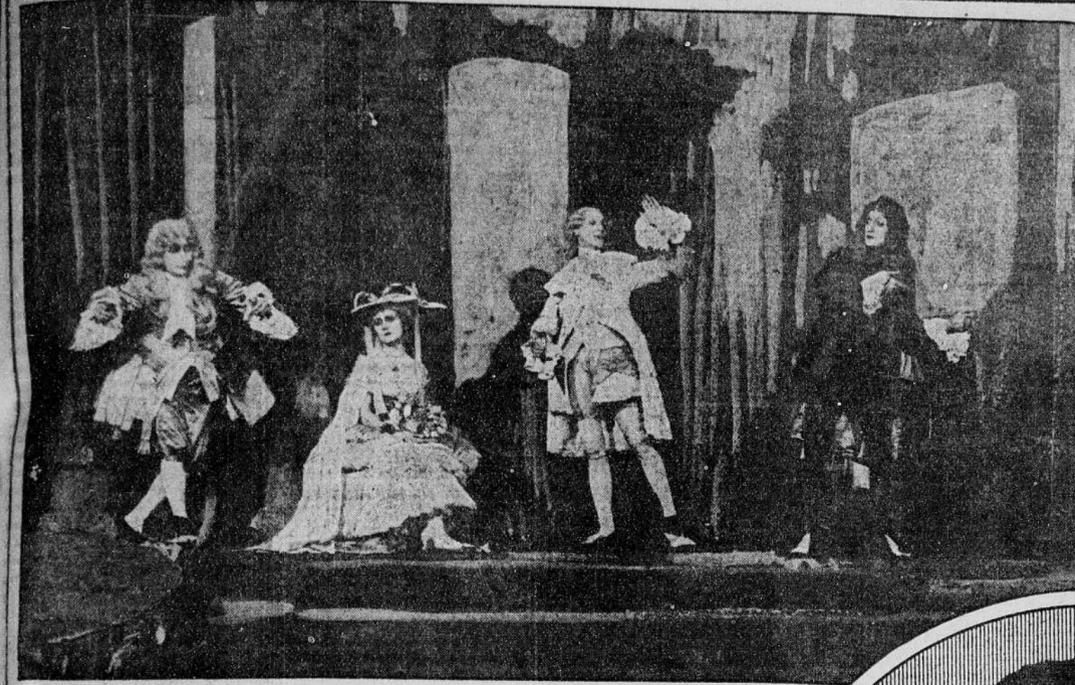


MOSCOW SPEAKS THE LAST WORD IN FUTURISM



"Adrienne Lecouvreur," as given in the futurist manner by the Kamerny players of Moscow. Explaining the stage setting, M. Lukianoff said: "Adrienne" is French of the rococo period, and naturally expresses itself in curves." Being Gothic or Romanesque in time and temperament, "Juliet" falls into arches

"Romeo and Juliet" at the Kamerny Theater combines the grace of the Russian ballet, the fatalism of Greek tragedy, the tableaux and scenic effects of the "Follies" or the Winter Garden. The final scene here pictured reaches high into the realm of poetry and imagination

By Nellie E. Gardner

A LITTLE boy I know ascribes everything that amazes and delights him to "magic." Magic is the only explanation for the development from a splash of oils on an eight by ten inch canvas, giving the artistic motif of the piece, through the creation of paper dolls and pastebord scene models, to the bewildering witchery of costume, color, setting, interpretation and setting seen in the finished production of the Kamerny Theater in Moscow. Manager, producer, costume designer and orchestra leader all have helped to create the unforgettable picture. And it is such magic as only Alice could have seen if she had stepped through the looking glass into a futurist Wonderland.

The Kamerny Theater Company of Moscow are futurists of such pure pedigree that they surpass anything of the sort in this country as completely as ocean surf surpasses a swimming pool. It was a great pleasure during my residence in Moscow this year to witness many productions at this unusual theater on Tverskoi Boulevard and to become well acquainted with M. Taeroff, the director, and several members of his staff. From him I learned the whole story of the futurist theater movement in Russia, something of its aspirations, and especially of its dream to come to New York.

I am writing this story in New York—nearly twelve weeks since I left Moscow. Yet the memory of this theater and the mood of players and audience is as fresh in my mind as if it were only last night that I witnessed the brilliant premiere of their latest production, "Signor Formico," to which I was invited on the evening of June 12. I can close my eyes and shut out the picture of Broadway and the white lights, and instead call back Moscow and the twilight nights with almost twenty-four hours of midsummer sun. Men with long linen blouses and high, black boots are walking arm in arm with girls in white dresses and slippers and ankle-length socks. Gray-bearded, blue-coated "izvostchiks" drive to the door and haggle about the millions of rubles that the "Amerikanskis" must pay (if they have neglected to make their bargain on entering the high-backed carriage). A small boy or an old woman is calling "Izvestia," the favorite newspaper. A young man with thin, pale face is tempting you to buy fragrant lilacs, peonies and lilies-of-the-valley. And every one is chewing sunflower seeds and covering the walk with their husks.

A band is playing in the Inner Boulevard. It is the first year since the outbreak of the war that public music for recreation has been enjoyed on the streets. But Russia is at peace and order has been restored, and a constant stream of men and women, sometimes solemn and sometimes laughing (depending upon whether they have earned any bread that day), are strolling through the avenue of thick-leaved trees.

You Forget About Politics, Wars, Food, Famine

But step inside the Kamerny Theater, buy a program from the old doorkeeper, leave your hat and walking stick with the venerable check man, climb the wide flight of stairs and hurry inside before the lights go out. For it is 8 o'clock, and no straggler is admitted to the hall after the act starts. And if you are not on time some pretty, bobbed-haired standee will take your seat!

Here inside this cozy, intimate chamber, built from the ballroom of a former fine residence, you forget all about politics, economics, wars, food, famine and mass feeding. You are in the temple of art, and art that is not afraid to step boldly forward and blaze a flaming trail to something new in drama.

and shoes, as you never imagined, even in a New Year's Eve post-champagne dream. Such gestures, grace, modulation of voice and intensity of passion and reality of emotion! And what wealth of imagination revealed in the bizarre settings, lighting effects, ensemble groupings and startling finales!

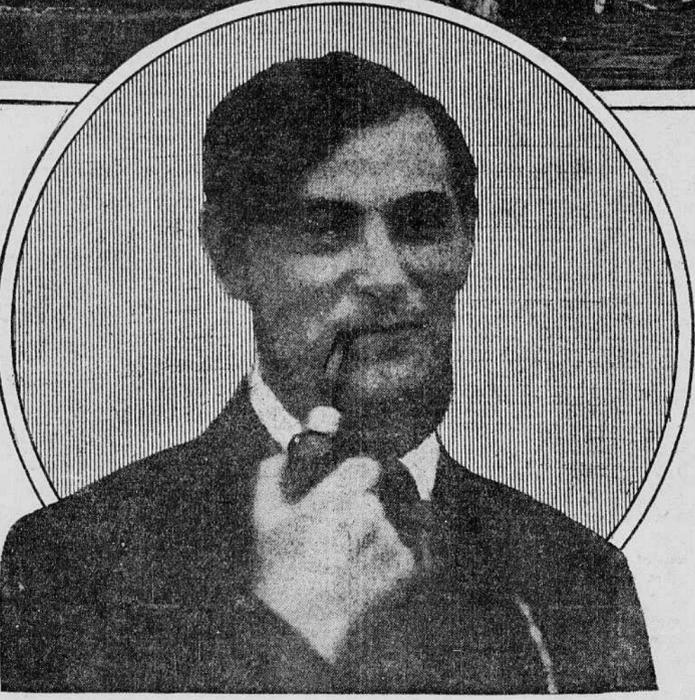
When the last curtain fell on "Romeo and Juliet," the first Kamerny Theater production I attended, I was actually limp with feeling. Though bearing no resemblance to anything Shakespearean I had ever seen, and at first seeming a travesty on the greatest of love stories, this dramatic production had soared to the heights of tragic fate and had attained a sublimity of poetry and beauty and pantomime in which the medium of comprehensible language was not necessary.

Not Necessary to Know Russian to "Get It"

I did not understand ten words of Russian at that time, but I could have caught the pathos and passion and plot of "Romeo and Juliet," even though I had never read a word of Shakespeare or never heard the story. After my first amazement at the stage setting, with its black, white and red strips of cloth arranged as if a giant geometrician had spilled a lapful of blocks, and at the prancing, black-masked fellows in the prologue, with the high curlicues on their heads and flaming torches in their hands—in other words, after I ceased to grasp I began to admire and inwardly to applaud. (One does not applaud in a Russian theater until after the last curtain.) This futurist production of "Romeo and Juliet" seemed more real, more mature in its love and more Elizabethan or Shakespearean in tone than any conventional interpretation I ever witnessed on the American stage. It combined the grace of the Moscow ballet with the fatalism of the Greek tragedy, and the tableaux and scenic effects of the "Follies" or the Winter Garden.

Alexander Taeroff is a genius, withal very silent and modest. But he has never lost sight of his vision of the futurist movement in the theater. He is something more than a genius. He is the beloved friend and respected leader of a group of men and women, as well as growing children, and the relation between this director and the members of his company is something as I imagine Shakespeare or Schubert might have inspired. For these players are not merely actors. They are devotees of an idea. They are almost members of a cult. And for the progress and glory of futurism in the theater they will live or die, or starve, if necessary. It is the ideal of their life.

The Kamerny Theater is their club and workshop as well as their stage. I dropped in there one Sunday afternoon and this is what I found: Beyond the cement courtyard at the side of the main theater building is the annex-workshop. Behind that is the school. On the second floor of the annex, reached by a very narrow stairs, is a large room. Within were racks of costumes, piles of new, massive hats, pastebord models for stage set, a golden-haired girl painting brown streaks on the white satin sleeve of a new bodice and a young man practicing cartwheels and standing on his head, and then steadying himself and returning to his palette and brush. The opening night of "Signor Formico" was only a week off and all the costumes and scenes had to be completed. They apologized for their sleepy eyes, explaining that they had begun to rehearse at midnight after the evening performance of "Fedra," and had only stopped at 6 o'clock in the morning. They would keep that up all week.



HE LOOKS LIKE LINCOLN WITH A PIPE But his name is Lukianoff. His is the soul which expresses itself in the dramatic futurism of the Kamerny Theater, Moscow

And American players imagine they are hard worked. The question of nourishing food over here is taken for granted, while over there one look at their thin cheeks and neck bones reveals that none has been overfed for at least three years. I did not ask any questions about this, for these Russian men and women are proud, well bred and reserved, and they do not lightly reveal their own or their country's misery.

However, of one thing I am sure. No matter what the vicissitudes of life in Russia since the war and revolution and high prices and famine, it is certain to me that M. Taeroff has been "big brother" to all the company and has shared whatever fate was theirs. Without emphasizing this human, sympathetic trait in this Russia theater director one cannot tell the real story of Moscow's Kamerny Theater.

When word was sent to M. Taeroff that an American woman had called at the theater for the purpose of learning more of its backstage and upstairs workings and of passing on the story to the American people he hurriedly dressed and came to welcome me. Even though he had had only three hours' sleep in the last thirty-six! (He tried to conceal that fact, but some member of his company let out the secret.)

Then M. Taeroff and M. Soumarakoff, his "secretary of administration," took me on a complete tour of the Kamerny Theater and explained all its processes and workings.

"I do not deserve the credit for this," said the director. "Here is the real genius of the futurist theater," and he presented M. Lukianoff, the creator of all that pertains to scenes, lights and costumes. Mr. Lukianoff told me that he attended the University of Moscow theatrical school, and then went to Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine, and later to Odessa, the busy port on the Black Sea, where he worked for a time as a player and then became manager of his own theater. Finally the futurist theater movement in Moscow, as exemplified in the Kamerny Theater, called to him and he came North to join the staff of the famed M. Taeroff.

"Look at me," he said to me through the interpretation of M. Soumarakoff. "I have grown a beard. I shall never act out front again. My life will be spent up here working out new ideas. I shall never leave my friend M. Taeroff."

"Yes, he will never leave his little room, back of this, where he lives," laughingly added M. Soumarakoff. "And he will never invite

any one into it. It is sacred only to himself and his pipe."

Lukianoff and his pipe are never separated—not even long enough to have a picture taken, as the accompanying snapshot shows.

I looked around this room, with its piles of dashing colors and fantastic forms of garments of all descriptions, and asked, "Please tell me all about this. Just how do you work it out? Where do you begin?"

"It all begins in the brain of M. Taeroff," they told me. "He studies for a long time on the new plays that he wants to produce, and finally chooses one and works it all out in his own mind. Then he calls in M. Jakuloff, one of the most famous painters of Russia, and gives him an idea of the effect he wants to produce. All M. Taeroff has is the mental image of a mood, an idea, and an effect. It remains for M. Jakuloff to translate this brain image into something pictorial and tangible. He goes away and returns a few days later with a small canvas with something on it in oils."

To me this flat oil sketch seemed little more than a splash of about four small brushes. But to M. Lukianoff it suggested colors, lines, curves and backstage drops, and he followed the artist's futurist creation to the last suggestion. He showed me the sketch for "Signor Formico," and as I recall it now it looked like the husband of old Mother Hubbard, or the sister of the Witch of Endor, flying through the clouds and stabbing their enemies en route!

After the artist's sketch come the paper dolls. M. Lukianoff showed me the paper dolls which he had cut and pasted and painted as models for the costumes, and sure enough, I could see the resemblance to the canvas futurist sketch. As he makes paper dolls for the guidance of the costume makers, so he makes pastebord and paper sets as patterns for the creation of all drops, wings and interiors. A complete model is built by himself, measuring about 12 by 25 inches, and from this the full-sized scene is easily constructed.

I asked M. Lukianoff to explain why "Romeo and Juliet" was played in a scene of straight lines, and pyramids and sharp pointed arches, where "Adrienne Lecouvreur," by Scribe, was set in curves.

There's Plenty of Logic In Lines and Curves

"The answer is easy," he replied. "I only followed the suggestion in M. Jakuloff's sketch. And, anyway, it is logical. 'Adrienne' is French, of the rococo period, and naturally expresses itself in curves. 'Juliet' is Gothic, or Romanesque, or Italian in time and temperament and just naturally falls into arches."

So there you are! After we had finished the inspection of the workshop and had seen the rooms where all the costumes and scenery were made we passed down stairs to the Kamerny Futurist Theatrical School. There the young men and women, just in or out of their teens, are training for the serious futurist plays of tomorrow. M. Taeroff is at the head of this school, and he has thirty pupils, from sixteen to eighteen years of age. The course includes, as he told me: Lessons of improvisation, training in short theatrical pieces, lessons in make-up, ballet, plastic art, rhythm, diction and elocution, training of the voice, singing, gymnastic lessons, acrobatic lessons, juggling, fencing and lectures on the history of art and the history of the theater. There is a small, inviting stage in this school-room, where from time to time exhibitions of the class work are given. It is the ambition of all the pupils to be allowed to appear in the regular com-

pany, but it takes years of training before they attain that privilege and distinction.

Besides creating these Kamerny Theater productions and specifying the spirit and tempo in which they shall be given, M. Taeroff assumes all direction of the players. The principal members of his executive staff include M. Lukianoff, director of scenes; M. Souloff, business manager; M. Metner and Alexandroff, music composers; M. Soumarakoff, secretary of administration; Mme. Shlestova, the little lady who is always on hand to "mother" the entire company and see that everything goes right. The entire company, from director to doorman, have a great affection for her and say the Kamerny could not do without her.

Plenty of Experience Back Of Kamerny Project

During that afternoon's interview I obtained these biographical facts about M. Taeroff: He was born in Russia in 1885, and at the age of fifteen years began to act in amateur plays. Finishing his primary education in 1904, he entered the University of Petrograd and also the Ramesargovskoe Theater of that city. In 1906 he appeared for the first time as chief manager in the Peredvignal Theater, putting on "Hamlet" as his initial production. Not satisfied with the theaters of Petrograd and the chance they offered for his development he went to the provinces and worked both as actor and manager in the theaters of Riga, on the Baltic Sea, and Simbirsk, on the Volga.

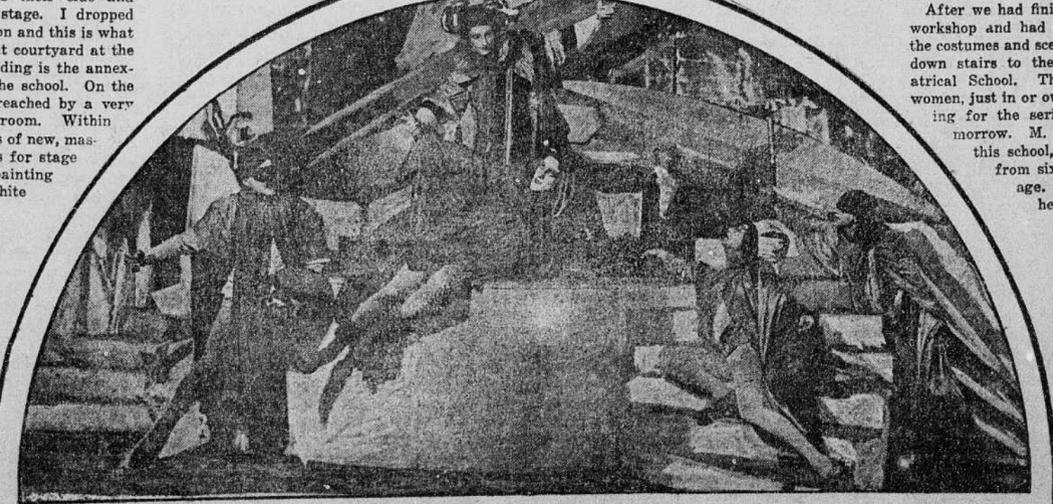
He returned to the New Theater of Petrograd in 1911 to assume the duties of manager and actor, but in 1912, still dissatisfied with his dramatic work, he left the theater and re-entered the University of Petrograd to study law. But law could not hold him long. He was invited to become the manager of the Free Theater of Petrograd, where pantomimes were being produced. He was particularly interested in this form of dramatic art, and his management of this theater produced "The Veil of Pierrette" and "The Yellow Jacket."

After the closing of the Free Theater in Petrograd M. Taeroff founded his own Kamerny Theater in Moscow. What the name really means I could not discover in the interview, but it is a name dear to the hearts of all the company and will never be changed. Besides his regular work as manager of this futurist theater M. Taeroff has been engaged to help stage some of the operas at Moscow's Bolshoi Theater (formerly the Imperial Theater, but now called the Big Theater, where wonderful opera and ballet is produced as of old), and this summer was directing the sets of the ballet "Djar Bird." Infinite pains is taken in the production of all his works, and nothing is presented to the public until it is considered faultless in the technique of all its art.

Whatever else of value the Bolsheviks chose to destroy in Russia when they rose to power they have kept their hands off the theaters. Throughout the revolution, I was told, the sign might have been hung out, "Business as usual." In Moscow, at least, these theaters never closed. In fact, I believe the actors were compelled by the government to carry on their work for the benefit and pleasure of all. At first the seats were all free and the doors were thrown open to as many faithful members of "the party," as the Communists are called, as could find room.

But now something like the old system of private ownership of the theaters has been reinstated. I believe they operate on government concession. Seats are no longer free. The prices are so high, in comparison to the average wages earned, that only the most fortunate can attend. And yet the seats of every Moscow theater I attended were always filled with a row of standees present besides. And the Russian is such a lover of beauty and art that if he has only 1,000,000 rubles, which is worth 25 cents at this writing, he will spend half of it for flowers, and the other half for a theater ticket, and then go without bread that night. He has missed so many meals in the last eight years that one or a dozen more does not matter.

(Continues on page four)



It takes the magic wand of a genius to make an artistic unit of geometrical strips of white, red and black cloth, bizarre costumes and the Russian translation of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," but M. Taeroff, director of the Kamerny Theater, achieves this result. In this scene from Act I the masquers and torchbearers are counseling Romeo to have the courage of his love