

RAINING ON TURANDOT, OR, WHY KHRUSHCHEV'S THAW WASN'T LENIN'S NEP

Stephen V. Bittner
Sonoma State University



The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research
2601 Fourth Avenue, Suite 310
Seattle, WA 98121

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Executive Summary

This paper examines nostalgia for the NEP period through the 1963 revival of Carlo Gozzi's comedic masterpiece, "Princess Turandot," at the Vakhtangov Theater in Moscow. The original "Turandot," which premiered in 1922, was the crowning achievement of Evgenii Vakhtangov, one of the most influential figures in early-Soviet theater. It was widely seen as proof of the dynamism of Soviet culture in the years before Stalin came to power. Its revival in 1963 spoke to the possibilities of the thaw; according to one of its proponents, "Turandot" would transform an "underlying atmosphere" that had been stultified by Stalinism. Yet this atmosphere proved more intractable than anyone realized. Soon after the revival of "Turandot," the Minister of Culture, Ekaterina Furtseva, ordered the theater to begin production of the anti-Stalinist play "Rainstorm." Furtseva's meddling struck many at the theater as a vestige of the very politics "Rainstorm" criticized. It was one thing to restage a play; it was quite another to recreate an era.

One of the most important components of the myth of the Arbat neighborhood that emerged during the thaw, namely the view that the present neighborhood was only a shadow of what it had been before Stalin, was nostalgia for the 1920s and early 30s. The Arbat's principal mythologizers, Anatolii Rybakov (born in 1911) and Bulat Okudzhava (1924) associated the era with the innocence of a generation that subscribed to the ideals of communism, but did not yet know Stalinist terror. Okudzhava used the Arbat courtyards, his childhood playground and a subject he returned to repeatedly, as a symbol of what his generation lost: friends, family members, and the innocence of youth. They were a place of "happiness and laughter," where Lenka Korolev, the Arbat's most popular boy, ruled as a just and benevolent "king" before perishing in the war. Rybakov recalled a neighborhood with a thousand diversions: the Art, Carnival, Prague, and Ars movie theaters; street peddlers from China who sold exotic toys; privately owned bookstores that traded in treasures from the West and the past; studios where avant-garde artists displayed their work; and restaurants where the poets Vladimir Mayakovsky and Sergei Esenin, heroes to a generation of Soviet youth, held court. The old Arbat, in short, was nothing less than a Soviet Eden.¹

Okudzhava and Rybakov's nostalgia amounted to more than a midlife crisis. It reflected mnemonic processes that were central to the thaw. When Khrushchev called for the restoration of "Leninist norms" to Soviet politics, a euphemism for the end of terror and the eradication of Stalin's cult, he unwittingly conjured seductive images of a benevolent pre-Stalinist past. The 1920s, after all, were Soviet but not Stalinist years, a

¹Bulat Okudzhava, Chaepitie na Arbate: stikhi raznykh let (Moscow, 1997), 27 ("Korol"), 54 ("Na arbatskom dvore . . ."); and Rybakov, Roman-vospominanie (Moscow, 1997), 34-35. For a similar account of the Arbat in the 1920s and 30s, see Ivan Arianovich Saposhnikov, "Ulitsa detstva," interview by Mariia Semenova, Arbatskie vesti, no. 23, December 2003, 7.

crucial distinction in a society searching for useable pasts. Artists and writers cast the 1920s as an era of artistic vitality and openness to the outside world. Young economists saw the limited market economy of NEP as a potential cure for chronic shortages and inefficiencies, a presumption that Kosygin would test in the 1960s, and Gorbachev in the 1980s. And the rehabilitation of scores of disgraced cultural figures from the 1920s and early 30s marked the outward face of an inward search for alternate political and cultural models. Yet one of the principal lessons of the Arbat myth was that the pre-Stalinist past was irretrievable, at least in toto. Stalinism was too transformative, and de-Stalinization was too limited for it to be otherwise. Many persons looked to the pre-Stalinist past for models for the present; as Okudzhava and Rybakov knew, not everyone was able to recover what they found.

Pessimism about the viability of the pre-Stalinist past as a model for the present was critical to the emergence of an Arbat myth that was reflective about what had been lost, rather than restorative in its agenda.² Much of the power of the myth lay in the fact that many other persons in the Soviet intelligentsia came to similar conclusions. One of the most famous cases of restorative nostalgia occurred at the Vakhtangov Theater, the Arbat's chief cultural attraction. In 1963 the theater staged a new production of its most celebrated play from the 1920s: Carlo Gozzi's fairytale, "Princess Turandot." "Turandot" was the crowning achievement of Evgenii Vakhtangov, Konstantin Stanislavsky's disciple at the Moscow Art Theater (MKhAT), and one of the most influential figures in early Soviet theater. It was a central event in the cultural life of the Arbat in the 1920s, and oft-cited proof of vitality of NEP culture and the inventiveness of early Soviet

²Boym, The Future of Nostalgia (New York, 2001), 41-55.

theater. Its revival in 1963 was widely cast as a triumph of the thaw. At the final rehearsal, Ruben Simonov, the theater's artistic director, argued that "Turandot" represented "not only the rebirth of a performance, but the rebirth of the underlying atmosphere" that gave rise to it.³ He would soon discover that sanguine predictions are easier made than realized.

In truth, the "underlying atmosphere" of the original "Turandot" was more trying than many cared to admit. The play grew out of an often troubled experiment that began in 1913, when a group of aspiring teenage actors asked Evgenii Vakhtangov to lead a studio where they could study Stanislavsky's method acting. Vakhtanov agreed, and the Mansurovskaiia Studio was born. It was named for its location on Mansurovskii Lane, not far from Vakhtangov's home in the Arbat. Vakhtangov set low expectations: he promised only that his students would become better people, not better actors. He was a famous despot. An official history of the Vakhtangov Theater notes that its founder was both "cruel and gentle," and that his "insults . . . were forever remembered as lessons." In 1919 twelve students, apparently feeling otherwise, left the Mansurovskaiia Studio to protest Vakhtangov's apparent disregard for their professional success. Nonetheless, the results of Vakhtangov's experiment were impressive. His first production, Boris Zaitsev's "Lanin Estate," opened to positive reviews in March 1914. A string of future successes drew talent from other studios and schools, including many persons who would later become prominent: the actor and pedagogue Boris Shchukin, the director Ruben Simonov, and the actors Iurii Zavadskii and Boris Zakhava. In 1920 Vakhtangov's studio became the Third Studio of MKhAT, an imprimatur that made it possible to move to the theater's

³Abri Amaspiurants, Printsessa Turandot 63 (Moscow, 1996), 10. See also, Vasilii Lanovoi, Letiat za dniami dni (Moscow, 2003), 132.

present location at 26 Arbat street. Inspired by the independent success of Vsevolod Meyerhold, one of Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko's students at MKhAT, Vakhtangov despised his new subordination to MKhAT. He dismissed "Stanislavsky's dead theater," and spoke of the potential of his own "imaginative realism" (fantasticheskii realism), an ironic style that emphasized elements of the grotesque rather than the naturalistic detail common in Stanislavsky's plays. Vakhtangov hoped that "Princess Turandot" would convince critics that he had surpassed the achievements of his former teachers at MKhAT.⁴

"Turandot" premiered on February 28, 1922. It was the third and final play that Vakhtangov directed in the studio's new residence on the Arbat. According to Ruben Simonov, a former Vakhtangov student who was present at the original in 1922, and who presided over the revival in 1963, Vakhtangov was clearly showing symptoms of cancer at the last rehearsal on February 23; he rested in a chair in the sixth row, and occasionally ascended the stage to give directions. Vakhtangov took a taxicab home that evening, and never returned to the theater. On opening night, he asked Iurii Zavadskii, who played the principal role of Calaf, to read a letter warning the audience that cast members were still students, and that some were performing their first roles. "Turandot," Vakhtangov wrote, should be considered "laboratory work" rather than a polished play. Yet when the curtain came down after the first act, there were cries of bravo. During the subsequent curtain call (highly unusual because there were no curtain calls according to MKhAT tradition), the cast noticed Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, rival titans of the Russian theatrical world, applauding with their hands outstretched. The second act had to be

⁴W. L. Turner, "Vakhtangov: The Director as Teacher," Educational Theatre Journal 15, no. 4 (December 1963): 320; and I. L. Sergeeva and M. R. Litvin, Teatr imeni Evg. Vakhtangova (Moscow, 1996), 7-11.

delayed so Stanislavsky could drive to Vakhtangov's apartment and personally congratulate him. "In the life of the Moscow Art Theater, there are few such victories, such accomplishments," Stanislavsky told Vakhtangov's wife by telephone after the play had finished. "I am proud of such a student, if he is my student. Tell him, 'Please wrap up in the blanket as if it were a toga, and sleep with the sleep of a conqueror.'" Vakhtangov died on May 29, 1922. The chair in the sixth row where he supervised his final rehearsal was left permanently empty as a memorial to the artist who never witnessed his masterpiece.⁵

Ruben Simonov's revival of "Princess Turandot" premiered on April 21, 1963, too late to mark the fortieth anniversary of its first appearance, and the hundredth anniversary (according to the Julian calendar) of Stanislavsky's birth in December 1862. When the theater's artistic council asked Simonov to choose between timeliness and an original interpretation of Vakhtangov's masterpiece, Simonov opted for the latter.⁶ So there would be no doubt that he intended the new version of "Turandot" to be every bit as significant as the original, Simonov ordered artists to stencil two dates on the stage curtain: 1922 and 1963. Simonov's desire to retrace as closely as possible Vakhtangov's footsteps was a sign of the theater's diminished stature. Despite the perquisites of institutional prominence--comfortable salaries and annual performances abroad--and despite Simonov's constant reassurances that the Vakhtangov remained "the best theater," the center of theatrical creativity had shifted elsewhere, especially to Iurii Efremov's Sovremennik Theater. Anatoly Smeliansky, a manager at MKhAT and a prominent theater critic in the 1970s and 80s, mentions the Vakhtangov only in passing in his survey

⁵Simonov, Stanislavsky's Protégé, 168-70, 181, 191.

⁶Amaspiurants, Printsessa Turandot 63, 98.

of Soviet theater after Stalin. He notes that the Vakhtangov was a "relatively safe" venue with a first-class cast. By the mid-1960s, it was best known as the incubator of a prodigious young talent who got away: in 1963, after staging a smash production of Bertolt Brecht's "The Good Person of Szechwan" with a cast of student actors, Iurii Liubimov left the Vakhtangov to preside over the Taganka Theater. Liubimov quickly transformed it into one of the Soviet Union's most creative and acclaimed stages.⁷

From the start, Simonov saw "Turandot" as a way out of the theater's "dead end." During a meeting with actors before the beginning of production, Simonov spoke at length about the difficult material conditions in Moscow in 1920-21, when students subsisted on "copious" rations of bread and lentils. He told actors how Vakhtangov's students were inspired by their friendship for one another, by their idealism and confidence in the future of the young Soviet republic, and by their conviction that "Turandot" would be their lives' greatest achievement. Simonov explained Vakhtangov's democratic way of delegating responsibilities to a so-called "central organ," where two senior students chose a third, three chose a fourth, and so on until the "central organ" had a membership of seven. And finally, Simonov described how Nemirovich-Danchenko invited eighteen of Vakhtangov's students to join the troupe at MKhAT after Vakhtangov's death. The offer of steady work at Russia's most acclaimed theater was no small matter, yet sixteen students, unwilling to sever ties with Vakhtangov's studio, declined. Simonov hoped that "Turandot" would restore to the theater a similar sense of

⁷Anatoly Smeliansky, The Russian Theater since Stalin, trans. Patrick Miles (Cambridge, 1999), 6, 30.

studiinost', the casual, experimental, and egalitarian atmosphere of those heady days in the early 1920s, when anything seemed possible.⁸

Simonov's hopes for the theater went unrealized, and not because it was oxymoronic to encourage creativity in the present by copying what had been done in the past, or naïve to believe that established actors would forsake their privileges to return to the studios of their youth. Rather, the theater's "underlying atmosphere" proved more intractable than Simonov realized. Shortly after "Turandot" premiered, the Minister of Culture, Ekaterina Furtseva, ordered Simonov to begin work on "Rainstorm," an ostensibly anti-Stalinist play by the obscure playwright Boris Voitekhov. She also tried to reassign the theater's administrative director, Isai Spektor, amid charges of abuse. There was more to Furtseva's intervention than normal bureaucratic heavy-handedness. In both instances, she sided with individuals at the theater who had circumvented the normal chain of command by asking her for assistance. To Furtseva's many critics at the theater, the latter was evidence that not much had changed since 1953, and that habits honed by Stalinism were hard to break. It was one thing to restage a play; it was quite another to recreate an era.

The Past and Future of Imaginative Realism

"Princess Turandot" was written in 1762 for the commedia dell'arte, the improvisational, open-air theater that developed in sixteenth-century Italy. It tells the story of Prince Calaf of Astrakhan, and his love for the beautiful Turandot of Beijing. After Astrakhan was vanquished by the armies of King Carizmo, Calaf sought his fortune in China to save his impoverished parents, the former king and queen of Astrakhan. The

⁸Amaspiurants, Printsessa Turandot 63, 10-11.

play begins in Beijing, where an incognito Calaf unexpectedly runs into his former tutor, Barach. Barach tells Calaf about the evil schemes of Turandot, a "heartless creature" who "hates men," and who refuses the wishes of her father, Emperor Altoum, that she marry, often at great peril to the empire. Turandot offers to marry only a suitor who can answer three impossible riddles; suitors who fail, as they all do, are decapitated, and their heads impaled on pikes as a warning to others. After seeing a picture of the stunning princess, a smitten Calaf undertakes the challenge. Contrary to his predecessors, he correctly answers the riddles and saves his own life, but fails to win Turandot's love. Turandot begs her father to show mercy by allowing her to write new, more difficult riddles. Pained by his beloved's unhappiness, Calaf offers a compromise: if Turandot can discover his identity by the following day, he will forsake his claim to marriage. With the help of the devious Adelma, a Tatar princess who is a slave in the court of Altoum, and who is plotting her own marriage to Calaf as a way out of bondage, Turandot learns Calaf's name. After she triumphantly reveals it at court, however, she is so moved by Calaf's misery that she agrees to marry. In the final scene, Altoum informs Calaf that the usurper Carizmo has died, and Turandot begs the forgiveness of heaven and men for her unwillingness to marry.⁹

Evgenii Vakhtangov's production of the play was inventive for a number of reasons. He started with Friedrich Schiller's 1802 adaptation, the basis for Giacomo Puccini's opera, which substituted Gozzi's romantic comedy with epic drama. Unhappy with the initial results and skeptical whether the troupe could add anything novel to the oft-performed play, Vakhtangov proposed that the theater use Carlo Gozzi's original

⁹My synopsis of "Princess Turandot" draws on Albert Bermel and Ted Emery's translation. See Carlo Gozzi, Five Tales for the Theatre, ed. and trans., Albert Bermel and Ted Emery (Chicago, 1989), 125-84.

instead, which was "a fairy tale, a continuation of the folk-theater tradition, the theater of improvisation, born on the streets of Italy." He especially liked the unscripted interaction between audience and cast that was characteristic of the commedia dell'arte. After the first scene, the character Brighella, the master of Altoum's pages, chastised late-comers who were then taking their seats, and sometimes provoked arguments with witty spectators. Between the first and second acts, as the stage hands changed the scenery, Brighella and Truffaldino, the chief eunuch in Turandot's chamber, entertained the audience with a stand-up dialogue that differed every night. Some nights they made fun of theater critics and prominent personalities; other nights they satirized Soviet and foreign politics. Simonov recalled "brilliant successes" in these stand-up routines, but also "dreadful failures" when the jokes fell flat. Similarly, between the second and third acts, a tense moment in the play, the stage hands pantomimed an abridged version of the play, thus foreshadowing the happy ending. Vakhtangov also reveled in anachronisms. Even though the play was set in ancient Beijing, the props included a tennis racket (Altoum's scepter), an accordion, and a camera. Costumes were more ridiculous than accurate: minor characters wore masks and exaggerated make-up; men wore formal tuxedos under their Chinese robes; and Boris Zakhava (who played Timur, Calaf's father) fashioned a long beard out of a wool pashmina. When an Italian composer failed to produce a musical score that Vakhtangov liked, he turned to Nikolai Sizov, a "sullen young man" and conservatory graduate who penned a score that was improvised and ironic. When Barach first appeared on stage, he hummed a tune from Rimsky-Korsakov's opera Sadko. When Turandot arrived, she parodied a dance made famous by Isadora Duncan. Orchestral musicians fashioned harmonicas from combs covered with paper.

Several decades later, Iurii Elagin claimed that the music for Princess Turandot was nothing less than "a subtle forerunner, an inspired, tonal grouping for the modern, musical tonalities which were being born at the same time in a different corner of the world and which have since become known as jazz."¹⁰

In the strange logic of Soviet culture, Vakhtangov's inventions became more remarkable in hindsight. In 1940 the Vakhtangov Theater celebrated the one-thousandth performance of "Turandot." Some were for audiences in Stockholm, Berlin, Tallinn, and Paris, where, according to Zakhava, the surprised reaction was always the same: "What? This was born in Soviet Russia?"¹¹ Yet the reaction to Turandot at home was far more equivocal. In the late 1920s, proletarian radicals in the literary world dismissed "Turandot" as "mystical" and "class alien." After the emergence of socialist realism as official dogma in the 1930s, even Vakhtangov's followers labeled "Turandot" as peripheral to his main contributions, a "scenic exercise not to be taken seriously." In this climate, it was easy to dismiss Vakhtangov's imaginative realism as "fantasticity," a word that was hard to square with anything that was conventionally realist. In the mid-1930s, Zakhava, then the director of the Vakhtangov's pedagogical studio, the precursor to the Shchukin Theatrical School, was forced to denounce nearly the entire repertoire of the theater as formalist. On the fifteen anniversary of the theater's independence from MKhAT, one critic sarcastically asked how long the theater could survive on the "laurels

¹⁰Ruben Simonov, Stanislavsky's Protégé: Eugene Vakhtangov, trans. Miriam Goldina (New York, 1969), 173, 175-76, 178, 184; Turner, "Vakhtangov," 321; Nikolai A. Gorchakov, The Theater in Soviet Russia, trans. Edgar Lehrman (New York, 1957), 253-56; idem., The Vakhtangov School of Stage Art (Moscow, n.d.); P. A. Markov, The Soviet Theater (New York, 1972), 87-90; B. Zakhava, Sovremenniki (Moscow, 1969), 256-92; Ts. L. Mansurova, "Tvorcheskaia avtobiografiia," in Pervaia Turandot: kniga o zhizni i tvorchestve narodnoi artistki SSSR Tsetsilii L'vovny Mansurovoi, ed. N. I. Zakhava (Moscow, 1986), 26-19; and Juri Jelagin, Taming of the Arts, trans. Nicholas Wreden (New York, 1951), 30.

¹¹Boris Zakhava, Vospominaniia. Spektakli i roli. Stat'i (Moscow, 1982), 67.

of "Turandot." Where was the "depth and realism," he wondered. From the vantage point of the early 1960s, the American critic W. L. Turner found it "depressing to contemplate the decay" of Vakhtangov's vision: "It was Boris Zakhava who complained of the unreality of the masks in [Brecht's] 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' when the Berliner Ensemble visited the Vakhtangov Theater [in 1957], though he had worn a Turkish towel around his chin for a beard . . . in 'Turandot'" Many people at the theater would have heartily agreed.¹²

The postwar period, when the whole Soviet theatrical world became "drug dependent," and only alcohol made it possible to maintain the "state of permanent optimism" that socialist realism demanded, was no better for the experimental atmosphere that Vakhtangov promoted.¹³ On November 19, 1945, the Vakhtangov Theater premiered Aleksandr Gladkov's "New Year's Eve," a love story set during the war. The play was a hit that propelled its romantic hero, Andrei Abrikosov, to stardom. After the Central Committee decree on theater repertoire in August 1946, however, Gladkov's play was labeled a "grave repertory mistake," and pulled from the stage. In the ensuing weeks, Western plays like Edmond Rostand's "Cyrano de Bergerac" and Hervé's "Mam'zelle Nitouche," Soviet plays that failed to display the requisite optimism in the socialist future, and anything that veered from the strictest interpretations of socialist realism were targeted by the so-called zhdanovshchina. Two of the theater's employees were fired for cosmopolitanism. Students at the Shchukin Theatrical School nearly got in

¹²Gorchakov, The Theater in Soviet Russia, 262, 360; Simonov, Stanislavsky's Protégé, 145; Mikhail Ul'ianov, Vozvrashchaias' k samomu sebe (Moscow, 1996), 139; and Turner, "Vakhtangov," 321n21, 325.

¹³Smeliansky, The Russian Theater after Stalin, 4.

trouble when they discussed writing a protest letter to Stalin in response.¹⁴ The Vakhtangov Theater had a convenient excuse for minor criticisms: one of the first bombs to fall on Moscow during the war destroyed the theater, forcing the troupe into temporary exile in Omsk, and then into inadequate quarters near Gorky Street until 1952.¹⁵ But the only response to criticism of the repertoire was to change it. According to the theater's official history, the Vakhtangov troupe made the best of it by staging good productions of bad plays, particularly Konstantin Simonov's thriller, "The Russian Question," about an American journalist fired for telling the truth about the Soviet Union, and Aleksandr Fadeev's story of heroic partisans, "The Young Guard."¹⁶ The latter play was significant because Iurii Liubimov received a Stalin-prize nomination for playing the lead role of Oleg Koshevoi. He later admitted that he was embarrassed to have benefited from Fadeev's "bad literature."¹⁷

Given the demise of Evgenii Vakhtangov's inventive brand of theater in the 1930s and 40s, it is not surprising that one of the most important events at the theater after Stalin's death occurred off the stage. During the 1950s, Ruben Simonov, and Nikolai Gorchkakov, a Vakhtangov student who moved to MKhAT in 1924, tried to restore the reputation of their teacher by publishing lengthy autobiographical accounts that situated Vakhtangov squarely in the Stanislavsky tradition. Simonov, in particular, argued that it was time to reassert the "temporarily lost discipline of Vakhtangov's art" in Soviet theater to combat the "'sickness' of conformity." He differentiated Vakhtangov's emphasis on the

¹⁴Mikhail Ul'ianov, Privorotnoe zel'e (Moscow, 2001), 55-57.

¹⁵TsAODM, f. 3954, o. 1, d. 1, l. 148.

¹⁶Sergeeva and Litvin, Teatr imeni Evg. Vakhtangova, 45-46.

¹⁷Iurii Liubimov, Rasskazy starogo trepacha (Moscow, 2001), 184.

"artist's fantasy" from "contrived fantasticalities that lead the artist away from truth." He cited Vakhtangov's last discussion with his student assistants, where he declared that "true reality on the stage" was "the product of the artist's great imagination." Summoning all the tropes of socialist-realist criticism, Simonov claimed that Vakhtangov was inspired by the October Revolution to challenge "naturalism, facelessness, and grayishness in art." "Turandot" was proof that he succeeded.¹⁸

Simonov's rehabilitation campaign was not altogether altruistic. Simonov had a long rivalry with Boris Zakhava, an original vakhtangovets who, even when it was dangerous to do so, was publicly dismissive of Vakhtangov's "woeful critics who can't see past their own nose."¹⁹ Despite similar backgrounds in Vakhtangov's studio, Zakhava and Simonov had little in common. Born in Moscow in 1899, Simonov studied with the bass Fedor Shaliapin before transferring to Vakhtangov's studio in 1920. Although best known as a director, Simonov was among only a small number of actors who were entrusted to play the role of Stalin in Stalin's presence, which he did in Nikolai Pogodin's "Man with a Gun" in 1938. Simonov was an accomplished guitarist, and a rabid soccer fan who sometimes cancelled rehearsal so he could watch his beloved Spartak. Actors marveled at his friendly demeanor, and his penchant for surrounding himself with beautiful women. By all accounts, Simonov was frightened by Soviet power into "unspoken conformism." Iurii Iakovlev, a longtime actor at the Vakhtangov Theater, wrote that Simonov "seemed defenseless in front of cultural chinovniki, and powerless to understand their logic." Similarly, Vladimir Etush, another longtime actor at the theater

¹⁸Gorchakov, The Vakhtangov School, 201; and Simonov, Stanislavsky's Protégé, 145-46, 199, 232. See also Mikhail Ul'ianov's undated essay, "Zagadki 'Turandot'" in his collection, Vozvrashchaias' k samomu sebe, 133-41.

¹⁹Zakhava, Vospominaniia, 70.

who liked Simonov but sided with Zakhava in their rivalry, claimed that Simonov perfected the art of "double morals" to preserve a "more or less peaceful life" at the theater. When Ekaterina Furtseva, the Minister of Culture, criticized Iurii Liubimov's early productions at the Taganka Theater, Simonov made no gestures toward professional solidarity or friendship: "I am in absolute agreement with you, Ekaterina Alekseevna, absolute agreement!" Simonov once admitted to Etush that he regularly performed conventional Soviet plays only so cultural authorities would leave him alone when he took up more daring works. Nonetheless, Simonov was not immune to extraordinary acts of bravery. It was widely rumored that he left Moscow in 1938 so he could avoid signing a letter denouncing Meyerhold. When his son, Evgenii, asked him about it, Simonov confirmed the rumor, but jokingly claimed that he would have refused to sign a positive letter about Meyerhold as well. Similarly, when authorities shut down Aleksandr Tairov's Kamernyi Theater in 1949, often a precursor to arrest, Simonov invited Tairov to join him at the Vakhtangov.²⁰

In contrast to Simonov, Boris Zakhava was disgruntled with his role at the theater, and confident in his political abilities to do something about it. Born in 1896 in a military family that had become wealthy in the Tula arms industry, Zakhava was educated at a classical school in Orel and at the Third Moscow Cadet School. Even in the 1970s and 80s, Zakhava's privileged upbringing made the publication of his early memoirs

²⁰Iurii Iakovlev, Mezhdu proshlym i budushchim (Moscow, 2003), 37-39; idem., Al'bom sud'by moei (Moscow, 1997), 126; Vladimir Etush, I ia tam byl (Moscow, 2002), 273-80, Mikhail Ul'ianov, Rabotaiu akterom (Moscow, 1987), 146-52; and A. Anastas'ev, "Ruben Simonov," and the collection of essays by Zavadskii, Mansurova, Ul'ianov, and twenty-three other actors who worked with Simonov in Ruben Simonov: Tvorcheskoe nasledie. Stat'i i vospominaniia o R. N. Simonove, ed. N. G. Litvinenko (Moscow, 1981), 5-12, 315-528.

impossible, and may have been the reason why he joined the party in 1943.²¹ Zakhava helped convince Vakhtangov to open a studio in 1913, and was his assistant at the time of his death in 1922. He led the theater's pedagogical studio from 1925-39, and then as an elder who was "respected and feared," turned down an offer to become the theater's artistic director so he could take the helm of the Shchukin Theatrical School. As a "patriarch" of the theater, Zakhava considered himself to be Simonov's "equal," even though Simonov occupied the post of artistic director. Zakhava continued to direct plays at the Vakhtangov Theater in the 1950s, but was compromised by a string of mediocre productions, including an unsuccessful go at "Hamlet," and by the sense among actors that his plays, though highly professional, were "a tad insipid . . . and simply boring." As he was approaching retirement, Zakhava married a young woman who encouraged him to be a more assertive defender of old ways. With his wife's help, Zakhava assembled a group of people who were unhappy with Simonov's stewardship of the theater, and were "ready to use any occasion they could turn up to make their opposition public."²²

Their opportunity came in 1959, when the Vakhtangov troupe met with Galina Zueva, a deputy Minister of Culture, before going abroad on tour. The meeting was supposed to be a mere formality, where Zueva and Simonov would deliver pep talks; to be sure, "cardinal issues" were not on the agenda. After Simonov finished speaking, however, Zakhava looked at one of his allies, the actress Anna Orochko, asked if she were ready to begin, and then read a prepared text that was highly critical of Simonov. Zakhava claimed that the theater's repertoire did not conform to socialist realism, that

²¹Boris Zakhava, Kadetskii korpus (Moscow, 2000), 3.

²²Ul'ianov, Privorotnoe zel'e, 76; Etush, I ia tam byl, 295-301; and Iakovlev, Mezhd u proshlym i budushchim, 14-16.

Simonov ignored contemporary Soviet plays, that he was unfair in his distribution of roles to young actors, and that the theater was losing spectators. "Everyone sitting in the hall and in the presidium was struck dumb, confused, scared, and dismayed," Etush wrote. "They saw themselves tossed out on the street, standing on the sidewalk with an outstretched hand." Zueva, it seems, was also surprised, since she immediately ended the discussion.²³ Accounts of what happened next vary. Etush claimed that Zueva ordered Simonov to convene a theater-wide meeting the next morning. When Etush arrived at the meeting, he found several emergency vehicles parked outside, which he soon discovered were part of the coterie of Nikolai Mikhailov, the federal Minister of Culture, Aleksei Popov, the RSFSR Minister, and Dmitrii Polikarpov, the head of the Central Committee's Culture Department. Mikhail Ul'ianov, another longtime actor in the Vakhtangov troupe and a former Zakhava student, remembered a similar meeting, but claimed it took place after the traveling troupe returned from abroad. Iurii Liubimov recalled a smaller discussion that involved a carefully composed delegation from the Vakhtangov Theater, and Polikarpov, who had been ordered by the Central Committee to resolve the dispute, and whose sympathies were clearly with Zakhava, a communist who had distinguished himself directing socialist-realist classics like Maxim Gorky's "Egor Bulychev and Others" and Fadeev's "The Young Guard."²⁴

There is no disagreement about the result of the conflict. Shortly after the meeting with cultural officials, Zakhava was fired, and assigned to a full-time position as head of the Shchukin School. Liubimov claimed that Anastas Mikoian, a member of the Central

²³Etush, I ia tam byl, 302-04

²⁴Etush, I ia tam byl, 304-05; Ul'ianov, Privorotnoe zel'e, 76-77; and Liubimov, Rasskazy starogo trepacha, 200-01.

Committee Presidium, played a decisive role. Mikoian was close friends with the architect Karo Alabian, who until his death in January 1959 was married to the actress Liudmila Tselikovskaia. Liubimov recalled that Polikarpov said something offensive to Tselikovskaia during the meeting at the Central Committee, and that his "chivalrous feelings" for his future wife exceeded his "circumspection." He did not realize, apparently, that Tselikovskaia was more than capable of protecting her own honor as well as her friend Simonov. Among the casualties of the conflict were several longstanding friendships. Zakhava never forgave Liubimov for siding with Simonov, which he considered a personal "betrayal" since their acting styles were similar. Nor did he return to the Vakhtangov Theater before Simonov's death in 1968, despite the fact that the Shchukin School was just around the corner. Nonetheless, Zakhava did not retaliate against persons who spoke against him: if they moonlighted as teachers at the Shchukin School before the controversy, they were welcome to do so afterward. Simonov was also gracious. Zakhava, after all, was not just another stage director, but one of the theater's founders. After some time had passed, Simonov, "understanding the cruelty of [Zakhava's] punishment," asked Etush how his former rival was doing.²⁵

It was in this context that Simonov began to lobby for a revival of "Princess Turandot," an idea he had publicly dismissed only a few years earlier.²⁶ It is easy to understand Simonov's interest in the play: among other things, it would establish him as Vakhtangov's principal heir, an honor that had previously belonged to Zakhava. For decades, "Turandot" had stood as an impossibly high benchmark, a mocking reminder that youth and creativity go hand-in-hand. Iurii Iakovlev recalled that the backstage walls

²⁵Liubimov, *Rasskazy starogo trepacha*, 201-02; and Etush, *I ia tam byl*, 305-06.

²⁶Simonov, *Stanislavsky's Protégé*, 203.

at the theater were decorated with photos of the 1922 production, and that surviving cast members, understandably protective of the play, initially responded to Simonov's proposal with "some kind of mystical horror." Yet Simonov not only convinced them to support the revival, but to tutor new cast members. (One notable exception was Anna Orochko, who played Adelma in the original, and who sided with Zakhava in 1959.) Simonov allayed fears that a revival would denigrate the original by updating Vakhtangov's comedic elements to appeal to contemporary tastes. For the interludes, a crucial element in Vakhtangov's original production, he enrolled the help of Arkadii Raikin, a comic actor and director from Leningrad who excelled at the so-called "cabbage-pie shows" (kapustniki) that actors traditionally performed for each other during lent, when public performances and the consumption of meat were forbidden.²⁷

Simonov's production of "Turandot" was a critical success, despite the fact that he became so anxious during rehearsals that he asked Vladimir Shlezinger, one of the theater's permanent stage directors, to lead them. "You rehearse it, and I will come and stage it," he told Shlezinger before leaving. For the background, Simonov had an artist create a phosphorescent image of the wedding-cake skyscraper on Smolensk Square, just a few blocks west of the theater, thus creating the outdoor atmosphere of the commedia dell'arte, and fulfilling Vakhtangov's wish that the theater serve as a "window onto Arbat." Raikin encouraged Iurii Iakovlev, who played Altoum's secretary, Pantalone, to speak in an accent so heavy that spectators would "understand only one or two words, not more." During one interlude, Pantalone did nothing but read in his ridiculous accent the lead (and typically exhortatory) article from the day's newspaper. It turned out to be one

²⁷Iakovlev, Al'bom sud'by moei, 127; and Lanovoi, Letiat za dniami dni, 171. On kapustniki, see Smeliansky, The Russian Theater after Stalin, 21.

of the funniest moments in the play. The masked characters--Pantalone, Brighella, Truffaldino, and Altoum's high chancellor, Tartaglia--mimicked the iconic Dance of the Little Swans from Peter Tchaikovsky's ballet "Swan Lake," sang the popular song "Moscow Nights," which was made famous by the International Festival of Youth and Students that Moscow hosted in 1957, and used several innocuous stage props as instruments. They referred to Calaf, played by Vasilii Lanovoi, as "His Highness Vas'ia," humorously suggesting that some cast members were jealous of Lanovoi. Simonov also maintained the improvisational character of Vakhtangov's original. After Brighella (Mikhail Ul'ianov) accidentally brushed against Pantalone's beard during one performance, Pantalone pretended he was an offended woman on a crowded trolleybus: "Good heavens! What are you touching?" "The four of us," Iakovlev recalled, "Nikolai Gritsenko [Tartaglia], Mikhail Ul'ianov, and Maksim Grekov [Truffaldino], endlessly improvised things, forcing each other to get out of predicaments, to find witty answers to unexpected questions."²⁸

The Vakhtangov Theater took its revival of "Turandot" on the road to Greece, Germany, Bulgaria, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Austria, always performing in the language of spectators. Its success "grew from performance to performance," and was a transformative experience for many of the persons who were involved in the play. "Everything came together," Iakovlev recalled. "Everything worked out."

I felt like I was an entirely different person. . . . The success of "Princess Turandot" signified our blood relationship with our predecessors, brought us together with Evgenii Bagrationovich [Vakhtangov] himself, and lent us courage

²⁸Iakovlev, *Al'bom sud'by moei*, 128-32; idem., *Mezhdru proshlym and budushchim*, 57-59; Amaspiurants, *Printsess Turandot* 63, 10; Sergeeva and Litvin, *Teatr imeni Evg. Vakhtangova*, 60; and Vasilii Lanovoi, *Schastlivye vstrechi* (Moscow, 1983), 106-33.

in our search for the new, the unexpected, and at first glance, the unbelievable. As critics like to say, our old performances "ring" anew.²⁹

But Simonov's expectations that "Turandot" would transform the theater's "underlying atmosphere" were more difficult to realize. Soon after "Turandot" premiered, the theater reluctantly began work on Boris Voitekhov's anti-Stalinist play, "Rainstorm." Few could have anticipated the problems it would cause.

"Rainstorm"

The Vakhtangov Theater, according to Anatoly Smeliansky, was always famous for its "special relationship with the center of power." Smeliansky probably had in mind the extensive patronage relationships that the theater cultivated with political leaders in the 1930s.³⁰ Among all the fields of cultural endeavor, theater artists were particularly well-positioned to create these relationships. Contrary to literature, for instance, usually a solitary endeavor for both writer and reader, the act of theatrical creation was a public affair. Even though Ruben Simonov "could not distinguish a district party secretary from an ordinary instructor," he was a gifted schmoozer, and was always curious to know what dignitaries were in the audience whom he might "make into friends of the theater."³¹ Moreover, the party's desire to maintain control over staging guaranteed at least a modicum of interaction with cast members. It was common in the 1950s and 60s for prominent cultural officials to review performances with the theater's artistic council a day or two before opening. Their input, of course, was almost always unwelcome and

²⁹Iakovlev, Mezhdu proshlym and budushchim, 57; and idem., Al'bom sud'by moei, 130;

³⁰Smeliansky, The Russian Theater since Stalin, 30. Sheila Fitzpatrick has catalogued many of these relationships in Tear off the Masks: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia (Princeton, 2005), 190, 197.

³¹Sergeeva and Litvin, Teatr imeni Evg. Vakhtangova, 48; and Iakovlev, Mezhdu proshlym i budushchim, 39.

often ridiculous. Before the 1962 premier of William Gibson's "Two for the Seesaw," for instance, Aleksei Popov, the RSFSR Minister of Culture, told the theater that it was inappropriate for the actress Iuliia Borisova to play to role of Gittel, an "American prostitute," because Borisova was a member of the Supreme Soviet. (Gittel was actually a Bohemian dancer in New York.) The play was subsequently pulled from the repertoire under the pretext that the Sovremennik Theater had already produced it. Similarly, before the 1965 premier of Leonid Zorin's "Dion," a play set in Rome at the time of Emperor Domitian, officials from the Ministry of Culture complained about a reference to Domitian's residence on Granatovaia (Pomegranate) Street. To their ears, it sounded too much like Granovskii Street, the location of an apartment building in Moscow where party leaders had lived before Khrushchev ordered the construction of a community of ornate Italianate villas in Lenin Hills.³²

Despite the occasional nuisance, there were advantages to these contacts. Ekaterina Furtseva, the head of the Moscow Party Committee and a member of the Central Committee Presidium in the 1950s, was reputedly so impressed with the Vakhtangov's production of Shakespeare's "Two Gentlemen of Verona" that she took a special interest in the welfare of cast members. When Vladimir Etush, who played the role of Launce, heard about Furtseva's concern, he called her on the telephone, explained his cramped living conditions, and quickly received a new sixteen square-meter apartment in the Hotel Ukraine building. He later claimed he was reluctant to ask Furtseva for help until he heard that the film actor Mark Bernes had successfully done the same. Likewise, when the husband of the actress Valentina Bagrina, a high-ranking

³²Iakovlev, *Al'bom sud'by moei*, 127; and Ul'ianov, *Privorotnoe zel'e*, 96.

ministerial official, was arrested in the late 1940s, Andrei Abrikosov and Anatolii Goriunov secured a personal meeting with Viktor Abakumov, the head of the NKVD where the theater had longstanding ties.³³

There appears to have been a mostly tacit code at the Vakhtangov Theater governing these sorts of interactions. It was acceptable for individuals to petition higher officials for material assistance and artistic latitude. And it was acceptable, of course, for cultural officials to review plays before their public premier. But it was unacceptable for individuals at the theater to take internal disputes to outside officials. Even among Boris Zakhava's friends, for instance, there was a feeling that it was inappropriate for him to "throw trash out of the hut," a folk proverb that corresponds to Anthony Trollope's prohibition against washing dirty linens in public, by taking his dispute with Simonov to higher officials. Some even feared that Zakhava had jeopardized the existence of the theater by caging the dispute in ideological terms.³⁴ And finally, it was unacceptable for cultural officials to initiate the production of plays. According to a Ministry of Culture decree in August 1956, repertoire was the purview of artistic soviets and party organizations at individual theaters. In principle, theaters were free to choose their repertoire from domestic and foreign plays that were approved for Soviet audiences by the All-Russian Theatrical Society. In reality, of course, there were a myriad of external pressures that affected repertoires. Nonetheless, cultural officials mostly honored the limited autonomy of theaters: they instructed theaters what not to perform, and let them decide what to perform.

³³Etush, *I ia tam byl*, 90, 145-46, 162-63. On the theater's ties with the secret police in the 1930s, see Jelagin, *Taming of the Arts*, 33, 44-47.

³⁴Etush, *I ia tam byl*, 302.

"Rainstorm" was controversial because the latter two prohibitions governing contact between political officials and theater employees were violated. The play's author, Boris Voitekhov, had lived on the fringes of the Soviet theatrical world for several decades. Born in 1911, Voitekhov was best perhaps best known at the Vakhtangov Theater as the second of Liudmila Tselikovskaia's five husbands. During the war, Tselikovskaia left Voitekhov to marry the actor Mikhail Zharov, initiating a famously bitter divorce. Voitekhov's credentials as a dramatist were modest. He wrote the play "Pavel Grekov," which premiered in 1938, and reputedly co-wrote with the satirist Leonid Lench an unpublished and un-staged play about a Soviet official in charge of grain requisitioning in Tajikistan. According to one of Voitekhov's friends, the latter play nearly cost both writers their lives during the Great Purges. Voitekhov worked as a journalist during the war, and wrote a series of famous dispatches for Pravda from Sevastopol, which fell to the Nazis in 1942 after a 250-day siege.³⁵ Voitekhov's dispatches were the basis for a script he co-wrote for a 1944 film about the siege. After the war, Voitekhov was the chief editor of the Komsomol journal Smena until he was arrested and sent to the gulag. After he was released and rehabilitated, Voitekhov became editor of a new weekly magazine called RT about Soviet radio and television broadcasting. Despite its seemingly mundane focus, Voitekhov used the journal as a forum for repressed writers from the Stalin period and future dissidents, which was probably the chief reason why his tenure ended after only twenty-eight issues.³⁶

³⁵These were translated into English as The Last Days of Sevastopol, trans. Ralph Parker and V. M. Genne (New York, 1943).

³⁶Nikolai Mitrofanov, "Redaktsiia v dome Gogolia: Teni i siluety tridsat' let spustia," in Arbatskii arkhiv, 439-48.

Voitekhov appears to have written the bulk of "Rainstorm" sometime between 1957, when the play's final scene occurred, and 1962, when the Pushkin Theater in Leningrad refused to perform it. The play was never published; it exists today only as an archival manuscript in four redactions that date from 1964-66. The differences between the redactions are substantial, particularly in the third scene that was the target of most criticism. The play is set in 1946, 1953, and 1957, and tells the story of the Golovkin family. The family's patriarch, Zakhar Spiridonovich, is a political official, first the chairman of an oblast executive committee, and then the secretary of the oblast party committee and a member of the Central Committee. His family members are honest Soviet citizens who manage to preserve their faith in Soviet ideals despite Stalinism. They are a "living reproach" to the "ghosts of the past": persons who emerged from the Stalin era with "unclean consciences" because of their complicity in repression and bureaucratic arbitrariness.

The meaning of the play, barely opaque in the first two acts, is fully transparent at the end. The third act, set in a passenger terminal at a steamship port in June 1957, is structured around three overlapping discussions, each plainly didactic. The first involves the character Andrei, an inveterate Stalinist and longtime secretary of a district party committee who recently learned that he was not re-elected to a seat on the oblast committee. Andrei attributes his political misfortune to the fact that he "did not change colors, and did not kick the banner" under which he lived his "entire life." He holds the "revisionist" Golovkin responsible for his fate, and warns that "there will be arrests. . . . And there will be executions" when Stalin rises from the grave. The second discussion, a counterpoint to the first, focuses on Gleb Il'ich Irmin, a Frenchman who has just arrived

at the steamship terminal as a new Soviet citizen. When Irmin worriedly presents his new passport for inspection, his friends remind him to show it proudly, since it was forged in the fires of revolution. As Golovkin's daughter plays the "International" on a piano, the characters thank Kuz'mich, an old Bolshevik who will soon be celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of his entrance into the party. The final discussion involves Pliushchev, a longtime friend and aide to Golovkin, who confesses that he was once an informant for the secret police, and that he made up terrible lies about Golovkin and others to save his own life. As the curtain falls, Golovkin receives a letter from Moscow informing him that "careerists and schismatics have gathered an arithmetic majority" in the Central Committee Presidium, a reference to the unsuccessful coup against Khrushchev that the "antiparty group" staged, and that he should fly to Moscow at once for an emergency Central Committee meeting. Before Golovkin departs, he forgives Pliushchev and explains the meaning of the play's title to Andrei, who believes that the events in Moscow have proved him right:

Do you understand what a rainstorm is? There is a rainstorm of nature. And now there is a different kind of rainstorm . . . a rainstorm that frees the soul, mind, and energy of man! . . . This rainstorm will wash away your arithmetic majority and the stain from our inheritance. . . . It will wash it away because our goal is not indigence, but rich communism, wealth . . . for everyone!³⁷

³⁷Ellipses, present in the original, designate dramatic pauses rather than elided material. Quoted materials in this and previous paragraphs were drawn from the second redaction of the play (RGALI, f. 2329, op. 25, d. 1148, ll. 55-77) from 1964. This material corresponds to a synopsis of the play that circulated in the Central Committee in January 1965 (RGANI, f. 5, o. 55, d. 106, ll. 195-99.), and thus appears to have been the version that the Vakhtangov Theater produced. The first redaction of the play (RGALI, f. 2329, o. 25, d. 1147, ll. 11. 1-79), which is also dated 1964, differs in only minor ways. In later redactions from 1965, Voitekhov substantially revised the final scene, including the block quote (RGALI, f. 2329, o. 25, d. 1149, ll. 61-94; d. 1150, ll. 61-92).

Even by the standards of socialist realism, "Rainstorm" was hokey. One of its critics referred to it as a "political play," which was a polite way of saying that it lacked the essential components of good drama: character development, a plot line, and dramatic tension. When the artistic soviet at the Vakhtangov Theater read the first redaction of the play in November 1963, only one member voted for production; the rest, though sympathetic to the play's political message, politely cited grave problems in the third act. In December 1963, for reasons that were then unclear, Furtseva ordered the theater to resume production of "Rainstorm," promising that Voitekhov would rectify the problems that the artistic soviet had noted. In the spring of 1964, Voitekhov offered the theater a slightly revised version of the third act (the second redaction), and the theater premiered the play on May 6. After three awful performances, the theater pulled "Rainstorm" from the stage, prompting Furtseva to summon administrators to discuss a new timeline for production. Simonov asked that "Rainstorm" be delayed until after the theater premiered Mikhailo Stel'makh's "Truth and Falsehood" in February 1965 so Voitekhov would have adequate time to make more thorough revisions. Furtseva instead ordered that the play be ready by October 31, 1964.³⁸

Furtseva's insistence that the Vakhtangov Theater perform "Rainstorm" changed the nature of the theater's opposition to the play. Whereas members of the artistic council had previously voiced doubts about the literary merits of the play, Nikolai Timofeev, the secretary of the theater's party organization, now complained that the "leadership of the Ministry of Culture SSSR does not aid normal creative work, which limits the theater's initiative and disorganizes its work schedule." On October 17, immediately after the

³⁸TsAODM, f. 3954, o. 1, d. 8, ll. 131, 137.

Vakhtangov troupe had returned from performances in Greece, the theater's party organization used Khrushchev's removal from power three days earlier as a pretext to again complain to the Ministry of Culture about the play. The theater, after all, had still not received Voitekhov's revisions to the third act (the third redaction). The Ministry notified the theater that Voitekhov would finish the revisions by October 19, and indicated that the original schedule should be honored. Nonetheless, even at the final dress rehearsal for officials from the federal and republic Ministries of Culture and the Central Committee on October 27, Voitekhov's revised script was absent, forcing the cast to read from the already discredited second redaction.³⁹

By all accounts, the rehearsal on October 27 was a disaster. Two days later, Aleksei Popov, the RSFSR Minister of Culture, wrote a letter to the Central Committee describing the extraordinary discussion that occurred after the play, when cast members and administrators unanimously asked that Furtseva's order be annulled. The Central Committee representative at the rehearsal filed his own report on November 3, which detailed "Rainstorm's" unusual history, and contrary to earlier criticisms, condemned Voitekhov's politics. In January 1965, Dmitrii Polikarpov, head of the Central Committee's Culture Department, notified Popov that the party supported his request to cancel the play, and indicated that Furtseva "no longer insisted" on its production."⁴⁰ In all likelihood, Polikarpov was most concerned about the politics of "Rainstorm." The idea that Khrushchev was a defender of party unity against "careerists and schismatics" had simply become impolitic in the aftermath of his dismissal. This point did not escape critics at the Vakhtangov Theater. They cast Furtseva's interference as an example

³⁹TsAODM, f. 3954, o. 1, d. 8, ll. 131-32.

⁴⁰RGANI, f. 5, o. 55, d. 106, ll. 193-99.

"subjectivism," a word that Khrushchev's opponents in the Presidium used to describe his supposedly harebrained schemes. They claimed that Furtseva "behaved aggressively," that she was "unnecessarily insistent," and that she refused to take their concerns about the play seriously. For the most part, they were convinced that they were innocent of the debacle. Even though the theater's party members were obliged to criticize their meek opposition to Furtseva, they wanted to make sure that the district and city party committees understood that they had always opposed the play.⁴¹ Similar sentiments could be found in the party organization at the Moscow Section of the Union of Writers, where "Rainstorm" came up in a discussion about Khrushchev's dismissal. "I know how Ekaterina Furtseva pressured the Vakhtangov Theater to stage this play, as some colleagues in literature are fond of patronage (patronazh)," one writer noted in November 1964. "What a terrible situation befell the theater on account of this play. But what could it do? Money was wasted and the play was rubbish." Like Khrushchev's subjectivism, "Rainstorm" was an example of meddling from above that made it difficult "for writers to think of themselves as communists."⁴²

Given the Vakhtangov's "special relationship with the center of power," it is not surprising that critics of "Rainstorm" saw Furtseva's advocacy as an example of patronage. They assumed that Voitekhov had asked Furtseva for help finding a stage, and that Furtseva, thinking "Rainstorm" would polish the reputation of her boss, jumped at the opportunity. The truth was more complex and less flattering for a theater that thought itself innocent. A fuller account of the play's unusual history came out in March 1965, when the theater's party organization heard a complaint about Isai Spektor, the

⁴¹TsAODM, f. 3954, o. 1, d. 8, ll. 104-11.

⁴²TsAODM, f. 88, o. 45, d. 23, ll. 170-71.

Vakhtangov's administrative director and the husband of the actress Iuliia Borisova. The complaint alleged that Spektor had exceeded "his prerogatives" by dictating the theater's "artistic policies," and that "at the head of the theater there should be artists, not administrators." Few persons would have disagreed with the latter assertion. The chief moral of "Rainstorm," after all, was that officials should heed the "will of the collective." As Vladimir Shlezinger noted, "our error with 'Rainstorm' lay in the fact that we were forced to perform it."⁴³ But whether Spektor was guilty of the same crimes as Furtseva was an entirely different question that plunged the theater into its worst crisis since Zakhava's firing in 1959.

Shlezinger was the first to suggest that there was more to the charges against Spektor than "naked administering." He indicated that there was a group within the theater that was "in the practice of going around the collective, straight to the ministry," and was responsible for "the upheaval we have endured." Referring to "Rainstorm," he claimed that this group had written a letter to the Ministry of Culture "without consultation with the collective." Now the "same thing" was happening with Spektor, who had been targeted by a handful of persons who held a grudge against him. It is not clear how much Shlezinger knew about "Rainstorm"; he admitted only to having heard "rumors" about how the Vakhtangov Theater got stuck with the play. It is clear, however, that he overstated the number of proponents that the play enjoyed. In truth, Shlezinger's "group" comprised one person: the actor Mikhail Astangov (Ruzhnikov), the sole member of the artistic council to endorse "Rainstorm" in 1963, and the director of the play in 1964. Despite being outnumbered, Astangov's vote carried a great deal of weight.

⁴³TsAODM, f. 3954, o. 1, d. 9, ll. 2, 4, 12-13.

Astangov studied with Fedor Shaliapin in the early 1920s, and had a successful career at the Revolution and the Mossovet Theaters before coming to the Vakhtangov in 1945 with his wife, the actress Elena Adomaitis. As a vakhtangovets, Astangov was thrice the winner of the Stalin Prize (1948, 1950, and 1951), and was named a "People's Artist of the Soviet Union" in 1955, the highest distinction for a Soviet cultural figure.

Nonetheless, Astangov was one of the few actors at the theater who did not study with Vakhtangov or at the Shchukin School, and was always pegged by his colleagues as an outsider. This perception--which was reinforced by his reserved demeanor and the relatively small circle of friends that he kept--would prove costly.⁴⁴

Astangov confessed his role in "Rainstorm" soon after Shlezinger fingered a non-existent group. He said that he agreed to look at "Rainstorm" as a personal favor to Voitekhov, who had been a friend since 1938. He asked Furtseva and Nikolai Egorychev, the powerful secretary of the Moscow Party Committee, for help finding a stage in Moscow after the Pushkin Theater cancelled the play. Furtseva, apparently misinterpreting his request, asked what his colleagues thought of the play, and whether he would be willing to move to the Malyi Theater if they rejected it. Astangov then endorsed "Rainstorm" at a meeting on theater repertoire that the Central Committee's Ideological Commission sponsored in November 1963. He claimed after the fact that he spoke only in a personal capacity, but his caveat must have eluded Furtseva. "I am saying this so that you'll see that there was no force or compulsion from the ministry. Blame me, because if it weren't for me, none of this would have happened."⁴⁵ This was clearly not the sort of

⁴⁴TsAODM, f. 3954, o. 1, d. 9, l. 14; and Etush, I ia tam byl, 100, 104-06.

⁴⁵TsAODM, f. 3954, o. 1, d. 9, ll. 37-42. The stenographic record of the Ideological Commission meeting was published in abridged form in E. S. Afanas'eva, V. Iu. Afiani, L. A. Velichanskaia, Z. K.

confession the theater wanted to hear. By placing the blame on himself, Astangov effaced the guilt of his patron, Furtseva. He also suggested the whole debacle was the product of a few misunderstandings. Simonov, who had known Astangov since their days in Shaliapin's studio, was outraged by what he considered half-truths.

Everything is your fault. Everything depended on you: you suggested the play; you sponsored it; and in reality, the Ministry of Culture was not culpable, because the initiative came from Mikhail Fedorovich, even at a wide forum like the ideological [commission] meeting. . . . As the theater's artistic director, I demand answers from you. Do you understand?⁴⁶

Astangov never had an opportunity to give a fuller account. A month after his clash with Simonov, he died unexpectedly of peritonitis.

The case involving Spektor pertained to similar questions of outside meddling. The theater's employees met with the party organization on March 11, 1965 to discuss Spektor's stewardship of the theater. According to one actor, not since 1914 had the entire theater gathered for an event. The focus of discussion was a meeting at the Ministry of Culture in late 1964, where Galina and Larisa Pashkova, Andrei Abrikosov, and Liudmila Tselikovskaia reputedly asked Furtseva to fire Spektor, because Iuliia Borisova, Spektor's wife, had an unfair advantage in the competition for salary and roles. Their concerns were not unique. "Borisova is a very gifted actress," one critic admitted, "but if she weren't Spektor's wife she wouldn't have achieved such heights. Even Shchukin did not occupy such a privileged position in the theater as Borisova, and he was the most talented actor

Vodop'ianova, and E. V. Kochubei, Ideologicheskie komissii TsK KPSS, 1958-1964: Dokumenty (Moscow, 1998), 293-381. Astangov's speech was not included.

⁴⁶TsAODM, f. 3954, o. 1, d. 9, l. 65.

of our time." Abrikosov and Tselikovskaia also complained that Spektor had an unusual amount of influence over artistic affairs. Nonetheless, Spektor's critics faced several significant obstacles in their campaign to remove him. Spektor was widely considered a competent administrator, and some people resisted calls to fire him simply because they thought it would be impossible to hire anyone as skilled. Moreover, Spektor was a graduate of the Shchukin School, and despite his administrative posting, was no dilettante in artistic affairs. Finally, Spektor was a member of the party and had spent twenty-nine years at the Vakhtangov Theater. His wife was a delegate to the Supreme Soviet and a "People's Artist of the RSFSR." In short, Spektor was not an adversary who could be taken lightly, which may have been why his adversaries tried to enlist Furtseva's help. They did not anticipate the problems this would cause.⁴⁷

The chief obstacle that Spektor's opponents faced had nothing to do with Spektor himself. Rather, it was the sense that their meeting at the Ministry of Culture in late 1964 was inappropriate because it pertained to theater-wide affairs, and had not been cleared by the artistic soviet and the party organization beforehand. To mitigate this perception, Tselikovskaia claimed that she was "summoned" to the Ministry, a choice of verbs that drew several requests for clarification. Similarly, Abrikosov insisted that no Soviet citizen was "prohibited from going where he wants," and asserted his "right" to visit Furtseva or any other political figure. Abrikosov's principled stand managed only to offend colleagues who thought he was trying to mask his own behavior. Referring to the period following Khrushchev's dismissal, Mikhail Ul'ianov claimed that Abrikosov had manipulated a "particular moment to knock off another person," which was "not good,

⁴⁷TsAODM, f. 3954, o. 1, d. 9, ll. 27, 79, 153.

nor honest." The one thing everyone agreed on was that the theater's "collective" was in poor shape. Spektor's friends wondered what the purpose of a politically empowered "collective" was, which was one of the chief achievements of the thaw, when it was so easily subverted by disgruntled individuals. Nikolai Timofeev, an actor and the secretary of the theater's party organization, claimed he was "highly distressed" that Abrikosov, Tselikovskaia, and the Pashkova sisters failed to bring their concerns to the artistic soviet and the party organization first. For his part, Abrikosov claimed that he was afraid of the response if he shared his concerns about Spektor: "I knew that if I spoke in the collective, you would say to me: 'Why are you saying this? Are you the chief director? The administrative director?'"⁴⁸

Furtseva did not fire Spektor. Instead, she offered to promote him to deputy director of the Goskontsert, the government's ticket and booking agency. When Spektor declined the offer, Furtseva called Simonov and Timofeev into her office to reassure them that Spektor was being transferred, not fired, and to stress that "he should not decline the higher post that has been offered to him." Despite Furtseva's pressure, Spektor refused to leave the Vakhtangov Theater, and even got Aleksei Popov, the RSFSR Minister of Culture, to support his position. After Furtseva met with Spektor a second time to ask him to reconsider, she dropped her request altogether, leaving Spektor's fate to the "collective." Of the ten persons in the theater's party bureau who later sat in judgment of Spektor, only one voted to dismiss him from the post of administrative director.⁴⁹

⁴⁸TsAODM, f. 3954, o. 1, d. 9, ll. 27-28, 59-60, 76, 88.

⁴⁹TsAODM, f. 3954, o. 1, d. 9, ll. 151-52, 155.

On the surface, the Vakhtangov "collective" outmaneuvered Furtseva twice in late 1964 and early 1965. There is little doubt, however, that the controversies surrounding "Rainstorm" and Spektor were highly dispiriting, even for the victors. Nikolai Timofeev admitted in a report to the party organization that Tselikovskaia and Abrikosov's visit with Furtseva in late 1964 produced a "nervous and unhealthy atmosphere in the theater," especially since it came on the heels of a similar meeting between Astangov and Furtseva. The problem was not simply Furtseva's meddling, but the realization that she did so at the request of persons within the theater. "Not everyone in the theater is equal," one party member noted. "The sun does not shine on all." This was not a new problem. One of Boris Zakhava's old friends pointed out that Zakhava and Orochko were fired under similar circumstances in 1959, an imperfect comparison, since Zakhava initiated the contact with ministerial officials that led to his dismissal. But the broader point was undeniable: despite a decade of reform, and the optimism engendered by the revival of "Princess Turandot," "subjectivism" was not the sole affliction of Stalin, Khrushchev, and Furtseva. "To settle a score by going to the Minister," Mikhail Ul'ianov noted at the party meeting devoted to Spektor's alleged sins, "is not a 1964 position or a 1965 position. . . . I am not accusing you of anything, only that this was never our [position] through all this history, which, by the way, dear Andrei L'vovich [Abrikosov], is what got you in hot water. . . . Do you understand what you have done?"⁵⁰

Even though Astangov and Abrikosov violated the theater's tacit code governing interaction with political leaders, patronage was so embedded in the history of the theater that no one bothered to ask whether it was possible to condemn one sort of interaction,

⁵⁰TsAODM, f. 3954, o. 1, d. 9, ll. 59-60.

like Astangov's promotion of "Rainstorm," and permit another, like Etush's request for a larger apartment. In fact, the opposite was true. Vakhtangov actors defended the "right" to petition political leaders for assistance at the same time that they condemned Astangov and Abrikosov for doing so. "Our Soviet system forbids no one from appealing to any level of authority," Nikolai Timofeev argued, "and we do not have the right to incriminate in this regard. A revolution occurred in the name of this, and hundreds of thousands of people perished." The difference between exercising a fundamental Soviet right and circumventing the will of the collective lay in the nature of the matter at hand. But as Astangov discovered, the line separating personal and collective issues was often hazy and perilous.⁵¹

The controversies at the Vakhtangov Theater straddled the divide between the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras. For "Rainstorm" the context was especially significant. If Khrushchev had remained in power, it is not hard to imagine Furtseva continuing to defend the play, even after the disastrous rehearsal at the end of October. Khrushchev's dismissal not only forced Furtseva to withdraw her support, but made it possible for Vakhtangov employees to criticize her openly. At the party meeting in March 1965, Vladimir Shlezinger referred to Aleksei Rumiantsev's famous article in Pravda, where he argued that both Khrushchev and Stalin had a penchant for "subjectivism and arbitrariness," and indicated that the new Kremlin leadership would do a better job of honoring the expertise and autonomy of the intelligentsia.⁵² Rumiantsev's first assertion came as no surprise to anyone at the Vakhtangov Theater. His second assertion had yet to be proven, and that was the crux of the problem. Suffice it to say that Furtseva's meddling

⁵¹TsAODM, f. 3954, o. 1, d. 9, l. 28.

⁵²A. Rumiantsev, "Partiia i intelligentsia," Pravda, 21 February 1965, 2.

suggested that habits honed by Stalinism were hard to unlearn. Simonov promised that "Turandot" would transform the theater's "underlying atmosphere" for the better.

Timofeev, in contrast, warned that meddling from above had done the opposite. What little optimism remained at the Vakhtangov Theater after "Rainstorm" disappeared when the Ministry of Culture retracted the repertory autonomy that had existed since 1956: beginning in 1967, all new productions had to be cleared by the Ministry before any work could begin. No matter how the new legislation was spun, actors and administrators realized that it legitimized the sort of interference that had caused so many problems two years earlier. Intrusive "chinovniki" were the theater's "misfortune," the actor Nikolai Plotnikov said in 1967. "How can it be that I understand [the theater] worse than people who sit around [at the ministry]. I think artists understand these affairs better than they do."⁵³

The result, of course, was a restorative nostalgia that was thwarted soon after it began, and the realization, to borrow a verse from Okudzhava's poetry, that "the past is impossible to bring back."⁵⁴ It seems unlikely that Okudzhava had events at the Vakhtangov Theater in mind when his poetry shifted from the optimistic, celebratory tones of the 1950s, to his melancholy verses of the 1960s. It is clear that the myth of the Arbat captured the experiences of many persons during thaw, especially those who responded to Khrushchev's call to restore "Leninist norms" to Soviet politics. Indeed, "Princess Turandot" was not the only case of restorative nostalgia that was thwarted in the Arbat. A few blocks north of the theater, eight shiny glass and concrete skyscrapers were constructed in the 1960s, a project so modern and Western-looking that it seemed

⁵³TsAODM, f. 3954, o. 1, d. 10, l. 82ob.

⁵⁴Okudzhava, Stikhi, rassказы, povesty, (Ekaterinburg, 1998), 17 ("Byloe nel'zia vorotit' . . .").

out of place in a city that still retained much of its nineteenth-century appearance. Few people realized that Novyi Arbat, as it was called, also sought to recapture something from the 1920s. It too was unsuccessful, albeit for entirely different reasons.