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THEATER AND THEATRICALITY IN THEIR RELATION TO HISTORY AND THE ARTS IN THE NOVELS BY VLADIMIR SHAROV

Vladimir Sharov (1952–2018), a distinguished contemporary Russian writer, published nine quasi historical novels. Each of his novels suggests a different semi-fantastical version of Russian history that is locked into continuing cycles or — to use Sharov’s preferred word — “rehearsals” of violence. Theater and performance are a recurring theme in Sharov’s prose. In *Before and During* [До и во время], one of the main characters is Alexander Scriabin. In *The Rehearsals* [Penemuuu] Patriarch Nikon orders a play — a mystery-play about Easter — in which the amateur peasant actors are assigned roles from the Bible and replay these roles for generations. In *Should Not I Spare* [Мне ли не пожалеть], the opening section shows characters participating in Chekhov’s plays, and the main part of the narration tells the story of staging an oratorio. In the last two novels, several of the protagonists are theater directors. This article argues that for Sharov, theater is an apt metaphor for history and a basic ontological principle, because theater is an experience that can be documented but is never reproduced in exactly the same form. The article examines how Sharov brings out the power of the playwright, director, and actor to implement multiple and different scripts and life stories. Life and art in his works imitate each other through a constant multiplication of versions or rehearsals — “rehearsals” in its expanded sense as reinterpretations, revisions, rewritings, and continuations.

Keywords: Vladimir Sharov, Post-Soviet literature, historical novel, theater

Vladimir Sharov, a distinguished Russian author who died in 2018, published nine historical novels that blend facts and the fantastical in an extremely complex and convoluted way. He wrote about various periods in the history of Russia. Still, he always returned to his main theme, the traumatic memory of the catastrophic events of the 20th century with its revolutions and the Great Terror. Sharov explored their deep roots in the Russian messianism and the ferment stirred by the religious sects in the country. Each of his novels provides a different semi-fantastical version of Russian history — a history that consists of continual cycles or, to use Sharov’s preferred word, “rehearsals” of violence. In fact, as Caryl Emerson suggested in her review of Oliver Ready’s translation of Sharov’s second novel

aply titled *The Rehearsals* (Репетиции, 1992), Sharov's particular type of novel seems to recognize only the recurrent events and explores how and why these events recur.¹

Sharov's novels are often described as alternative history². However, Sharov considered himself a realistic writer. He insisted that his works were not embedded in a reshaped past but created to delve into intents, thoughts, attitudes and beliefs: the intrinsic phenomena and factors that govern people's behaviour and are very real aspects of life but hardly ever find their ways to textbooks³. Anna Berdichevskaya, in her essay on the last Sharov's novel *The Kingdom of Agamemnon* [Царство Агамемнона], suggests that the intricacy of his prose does not exceed the complexity of the life it describes⁴. The Russian cultural critic Dmitri Bykov has gone further, claiming that Sharov's "historical provocations" reveal the hidden mechanisms of Russian fate⁵. According to his English translator Oliver Ready, generically

¹ C. Emerson, *The Children of Catastrophes: On Vladimir Sharov's "The Rehearsals"*, "Los Angeles Review of Books", 27.11.2018, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-children-of-catastrophes-on-vladimir-sharovs-the-rehearsals/?fbclid=IwAR0zrrUGjG43PeXKTWJkASAcE_viqJRkjmVUoEYNY5RDGZpYeGOEsNjwo#! (21.02.2020).

² Harry Walsh, in one of the earliest reflections on Vladimir Sharov's novels in American scholarship, called them "allohistorical". See H. Walsh, *The Microcosmography of Russian Cultural Myths in Vladimir Sharov's Allohistorical Novels*, "Slavic and East European Journal" 2002, vol. 46, no. 3, p. 565–585. Mark Lipovetsky's preferred term is the "quasi-historical" (квази-исторический) novel. Muireann Maguire has characterized them as "historiographic metafiction". See M. Maguire, *Institutional Gothic in the Novels of Vladimir Sharov and Evgenii Vodolazkin*, "Canadian Slavonic Papers" 2019, vol. 61, no. 4, p. 420–438. <https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.lib.purdue.edu/doi/full/10.1080/00085006.2019.1648986> (21.02.2020). On representation of time in Sharov's novels see A. Габриэлова, *Рифмы и рефрены: художественное время в романах Владимира Шарова*, // *Владимир Шаров: по ту сторону истории*, ред. М. Липовецкий, and А. де Ля Фортель, НЛЮ, Москва, 2020, p. 586–614.

³ See В. Шаров, "Абсурд нашей жизни", интервью с Еленой Иваницкой, "Московские новости" 2002, no. 39, <http://www.litkarta.ru/dossier/absurd-nashej-zhizni> (21.02.2020).

⁴ Using Sharov's description of the post-revolutionary years as the time of great shakiness, when people's lives were taking unimaginable turns Berdichevskaya writes: "There is nothing more fantastic than the fate of a person during the times of great shakiness". [Нет ничего фантастичней, чем судьба человека во времена великой шаткости.] А. Бердичевская, *Пространство Шарова, или «великая шаткость»*, "Медведь", 07.04.2019, http://www.medved-magazine.ru/articles/Prostranstvo_Sharova_Ili_velikaya_shatkost.3033.html (21.02.2020).

⁵ See В. Шаров, "Что случилось с историей? Она утонула", интервью с Дмитрием Быковым, «Русская жизнь», 08.06.2007, <http://rulife.ru/old/mode/article/76/> (21.02.2020).

Sharov's novels do not belong to historical realism as conventionally understood, but rather to fantastic realism that allows the author to uncover deeper meanings and patterns in Russian history by virtue of creation and exploration of implausible and grotesque situations⁶.

Sharov has never published a play, and his preferred technique is a flow of "stories within a story". In his early essay on Sharov's novels, Harry Walsh noticed a "dearth of dialog and absence of chapter divisions."⁷ And indeed, Sharov did not like writing dialogues. According to Oliver Ready, "he liked to compare dialogue in fiction to the water in a fruit: it needs to be squeezed out"⁸. However, theater and performance are a recurring theme in his prose. In *Before and During До и во время*, one of the main characters is Alexander Scriabin. In *The Rehearsals (Penemuзuu)* Patriarch Nikon orders a play — a mystery-play about Easter — in which the amateur peasant actors are assigned roles from the Bible and replay these roles for generations. In *Should Not I Spare (Мне ли не пожалеть)*,⁹ the opening section shows the characters participating in Chekhov's plays, and the main part of the narration tells the story of staging an oratorio. In the last two novels by Sharov, several protagonists are theater directors. The opening pages of *Be as Little Children [Будьте как дети]* provides an overview of Russian participation in World War I through the productions of classical operas. In *The Return to Egypt [Возвращение в Египет]*, some characters participate in the stagings of Gogol's *Inspector General*. Even the works of visual art — such as a china set, painting by Alexander Ivanov, or decorated wood columns — are depicted not as freestanding artifacts but as props and scenery, a *mise-en-scène* where historical episodes are poised and ready to come to life. In all Sharov's novels, participation in an amateur theater is a sign and a necessary part of normal happy childhood and adult and family life.

⁶ O. Ready, *How Sharov's novels are made: "The Rehearsals" and "Before & During"*, "Slavic and East European Journal" 2020, vol. 64, no. 1, p. 42–61.

⁷ H. Walsh, *The Microcosmography of Russian Cultural Myths in Vladimir Sharov's Allohistorical Novels*, "Slavic and East European Journal" 2002, vol. 46, no. 3, p. 566.

⁸ O. Ready, *Remembering writer Vladimir Sharov*, "The Moscow Times", 21.08.2018, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/08/21/remembering-writer-vladimir-sharov-a62594> (21.02.2020).

⁹ Title taken from the *Book of Jonah*, 4:11: "And should not I spare the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"

Describing theater, Sharov underscores the power of the playwright, director, and actor to implement multiple and different scripts and life stories — an artistic goal he achieves as a novelist by using the technique of a story-within-a-story. For Sharov, the theater is an apt metaphor for history and a basic ontological principle, because it is an experience that can be documented but never reproduced in exactly the same form. In this, theater mimics real-life historical experience. According to Mark Lipovetsky, Sharov’s theatrical connections and deeply rooted theatricality connect the writer with the neo-baroque movement in contemporary literature.¹⁰ Sharov’s “rehearsals” are related to Lipovetsky’s “iterations,” a larger underlying principle in postmodernist literature that Lipovetsky defines not as a repetition but rather as an absurd, “paralogical” shift that produces new, problematizing meanings,¹¹ Moreover, in his analysis of *Before and During* and *Shall Not I Spare* (referred by him as *Sooner or Later* and *How Could I Not Regret*, respectively), Lipovetsky notes that by mythologizing history Sharov can better discern the “rhythm of history” or its “discrete continuity”¹² — in other words, its performativity.

Discussing the current state of Russian history in his interview with Dmitry Bykov, Sharov consistently made theatrical comparisons. He justified his irony and grotesque, once again, in theatrical terms, stressing the inadequacy between the roles and the actors¹³:

Происходят некие «репетиции», здесь я, пожалуй, угадал жанр, — история не проживается, а разыгрывается, как пьеса, с достаточно произвольным и часто неадекватным распределением ролей. Относиться к ней без иронии невозможно, и потому главные страсти с государственной арены ушли в личные отношения. Или даже в душевные расколы отдельных лиц.

¹⁰ М. Липовецкий, *Паралогии: Трансформация (пост)модернистского дискурса в русской культуре 1920–2000-х гг.*, НЛО, Москва, 2008, p. 267.

¹¹ An iteration is not a repetition of the elements of similarity/contrast and not even the reiteration of the unique and the accidental; it is rather a recurrent, unpredictable, alogical (paralogical) absurdist shift that creates a random rhythm of dislocations, which in its turn bears new problematizing meanings. [*Итерация* — это не повторение элементов сходства/контраста и даже не повторяемость единичного ислучайного, а повторяющийся непредсказуемый, алогичный (паралогичный), абсурдный сдвиг, формирующий рваный ритм смещений, в свою очередь порождающий новые, проблематизирующие, смыслы]. Ibid., p. 238.

¹² M. Lipovetsky, *The Aesthetic Code of Russian Postmodernism*, 2012, http://cdclv.unlv.edu//archives/nc2/lipovetsky_pm.html (21.02.2020).

¹³ See В. Шаров, “Что случилось с историей? Она утонула”.

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Something like “rehearsals” are going on, and here I probably hit on the right genre — history is not lived through, but rather plays out like a drama, where the roles are distributed arbitrarily and not always adequately. It is impossible to treat it [history] without irony, which is why the main passions receded from the state arena into personal relations. Or even into inner schisms of individual persons.

Sharov further compares historical development to an act in a play.

Страна очень большая, информационная открытость сохраняется, границы прозрачны. А чтобы разыграть очередное действие всерьез, нужно обеспечить полную закрытость.

The country is very big, the exchange of information has remained open, the borders are transparent. In order to play out the next act properly, they need to guarantee complete closedness.

In the first part of this essay, I focus on *Should Not I Spare* in connection with the two novels that preceded it: *The Rehearsals* (Sharov's second novel), and *Before and During* (his third). The second and third novels have received more attention from the critics and have been translated into English. *Should Not I Spare*, his fourth, is less known; it was never republished or translated into other languages. This novel, however, is of particular relevance to my theme, because it is even more focused on theatricality. In the second part of this essay, I discuss the segment on *The Inspector General* in the novel *The Return to Egypt* and analyze how Sharov presents works of visual arts and architecture as a type of latent theater, or as scenery for potential *mise-en-scènes*.

REAL LIFE AS THEATER AND THEATER AS REAL LIFE

In Sharov's novels, a plotline very often begins with a character who intends to write a continuation for a famous book. In *Return to Egypt*, the protagonist, Gogol's descendant and namesake, is working on the second part of *Dead Souls*. He outlines Chichikov's life in later years and also mentions a possible future for Dostoevsky's Alosha Karamazov.¹⁴ The main story in *Should Not I Spare* starts in

¹⁴ Likewise, Alexander Scriabin, who is featured in *Before and During*, failed to finish his *Mysterium* but began another symphonic work, *The Preliminary Act*, designed as a prelude to *Mysterium*. This second work was also left incomplete.

a similar vein. In a bizarre turn of events, at the time of Stalin's death in 1953, the authorities decided to create a third part of the Bible, or a Third Testament, retelling the history of Russians as the new chosen people and including the lives of new prophets. One of these new prophets is Vladimir Leptagov, composer and director of the best Russian choir of his time and the last representative of a three-hundred-fifty-year-old family. Leptagov's ancestor was an educated Byzantine Greek, an allusion to both Biblical and Byzantine roots of Russian culture. To write a story of Leptagov's life, one assigns Alexei Trept — a journalist, choir member, and long-term NKVD informer. Of course, the dark irony of using State Secret Service files as a biographical source cannot escape the reader's notice. Sharov's sarcastic style is on display in how Trept justifies his work in the NKVD:

Работал я на них еще с самого начала двадцатых годов, в частности, был их человеком в хоре Лептагова, всегда писал правду, всю правду и одну только правду и всегда гордился, что они мне доверяют. Те, кто смотрят на это иначе, удивляют меня: если мы хотим, чтобы нами хорошо и справедливо управляли, государство просто обязано обладать всеведением и всезнанием. Мы, внештатные сотрудники, - как раз и есть глаза власти (17).¹⁵

I had worked for them since the very beginning of the twenties. In particular, I was their man in Leptagov's choir. I always wrote the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I was always proud that they trusted me. It never ceases to amaze me that there are people who have different views on the matter: if we want to be ruled in a good and just way, the state simply ought to know everything and be informed about everything. We, freelance collaborators, are the eyes of the authorities.

Although the main events take place in the first half of the twentieth century, the introductory story is set in today's Moscow and begins as a farce. The narrator Sasha is a Japanese language interpreter. The setting, an ironic reflection of the entrepreneurial spirit of the 1990s, is a tea-ceremony house and brothel for Japanese tourists that a "New Russian" businessman has just opened in Moscow. The hostesses present themselves as three sisters, advertised as Russian beauties with thick braids. They share the historic name Leptagov, but it is unclear if this is their real surname. The

¹⁵ Throughout this article, the citations from Vladimir Sharov's novels *Before & During* and *The Rehearsals* are referenced to their published English translations. The citations from other novels are referenced to their Russian editions, and all the English translations of these are mine.

idea of “three sisters” seems pleasantly authentic to the tourists, reminding them of Russian fairy tales and Chekhov’s play. As early as in the opening scene, the very concept of a genuine national spirit and national heritage, whether Russian or Japanese, is put in brackets of parody.

The “three sisters” not only graduated from the Institute for Oriental Languages but also took courses at a theater institute. There is nothing dreamy and idealistic about them; all three are shrewd and practical. Their duties at the Japanese teahouse include, among others, telling their life stories. There, their role-playing and storytelling reach the level of high art.

Девушки легко поддерживали разговор на любую тему, но, кроме этого, у каждой была и своя отдельная программа — вполне своеобразное смешение собственной судьбы или собственной истории с загадочной русской душой, русской идеей и прочим национальным колоритом. Изготовлено это было ловко и звучало естественно. Японцы, во всяком случае, оставались весьма довольны. Впрочем, не хочу ни на кого клеветать: отечество у нас удивительное и, возможно, то, что они рассказывали, было чистой правдой (2).

The girls could easily maintain a conversation on any topic, but, in addition, each of them had her own program — a completely original mix of her own fate or her own life story with the mysterious Russian soul, the Russian Idea, and other such details of national colour. It was all done artfully and sounded authentic. The Japanese, in any case, were totally satisfied. Well, I don’t want to slander anyone. Our fatherland is full of surprises, and it is possible that their stories were entirely real.

The truth behind their stories may be elusive, but all three underscore how much they are rooted in Russian history. The sisters’ ancestor supposedly came to Russia from Greece in the seventeenth century, and each sister had her own version and time frame of family history — her own script — each one focusing on the ancestor’s participation in a seminal historical event. The youngest, Sofia, would talk about the first Leptagov’s arrival from Greece to Russia with his uncle (being a bishop) at the beginning of the seventeenth century and his unending adventures experienced during the Time of Troubles. The second, Natalia, would focus on different Leptagov’s correction of liturgical books, thus laying the foundation for the Schism.¹⁶ The eldest sister, Irina,

¹⁶ Sharov considered Schism (Raskol) the seminal event and the greatest trauma in Russian history. See В. Шаров, “Каждый мой роман дополняет предыдущие”, интервью с М. Липовецким, “Неприкосновенный запас” 2008, no. 3 <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2008/3/li6.html> (21.02.2020).

tells Leptagov's story as that of a nineteenth-century *raznochinets*, the son of a sexton, physician by education, a revolutionary, and a member of the Russian anarchist group Land and Liberty. This three-part historical backdrop places Leptagov's ancestors at the epicenter of cultural shifts in the 17th and 19th centuries and makes him an "heir" with a sequence of "footsteps" to follow, thus preparing the reader for the main part of the story, set in the twentieth century.

However, the narrator Sasha notices that the sisters' stories exactly match the scenes of the Leptagov family history shown in pictorial form on the celebratory dinner set, which again casts a shadow on their credibility. Importantly, Sharov treats the paintings on this gigantic china set for 96 people as a genuine historical source as well as potential *mise-en-scènes*. It turns out that the pictures were based on Trept's biography, and the china set was a gift to Leptagov for his 75th birthday and for 350th anniversary of the Leptagov family in Russia. The entire transaction was possible only because the china factory director was the senior Trept's friend and a choir member himself. Here "choir" already begins to sound like a "ruling party." Sharov shows how a supposedly authentic family history acquires multiple unreliable versions or mirror reflections, from written biography to pictorial biography to oral history told by false heirs until it is very difficult to tell truth from fiction.

The three sisters also liked telling how they were once actresses in an experimental theater led by a young avant-garde director. This director planned to stage all Chekhov's plays in his original interpretation. The plan was, among others, to extend the time span of the scenic events by twenty to thirty years; in the case of *The Cherry Orchard*, for example, he wished to show how the main characters evolved and what happened to them after the revolution. Lopakhin, who acquires Ranevskaya's estate at the end of Chekhov's play, marries Varya and then loses the estate during the Revolution. In the 1930s, Lopakhin is arrested as a kulak (a wealthy peasant declared an enemy of the socialist state), and his entire family eventually ends up logging trees in a labor camp. Trofimov and Anya, on the other hand, do very well. After the revolution they marry and both have distinguished Party careers. Both manage to die peacefully in 1934. However, the above project of "completing" *The Cherry Orchard* never reached the stage, and the sisters refuse to provide any specific information about the director. Thus doubt is cast on the veracity of the whole story.

In another unrealized project, the mysterious avant-garde director wished to explore whether theater could foretell the future. He would stage a play about a famous contemporary philosopher and dissident, whose life had turned out exactly as predicted. In his youth in 1930s the man commits an insignificant offence. The secretary of his Komsomol cell, a fanatical girl, denounces him in an agitated speech, and in a state of shamanic-like ecstasy foretells the key events of his life, including prison, camps and emigration. Now, this philosopher is asking himself whether this zealot girl was a prophet who had conveyed God's will and thus confirmed that his fate had been preordained; or had she acted all by herself? In this latter case, he would like to know why she had acted in that way. Unfolding this fantastic scenario, Sharov tries to understand to what extent human lives are preordained and whether human beings *lack* agency. The same theme — the role and legitimacy of prophets — is taken up in the main part of *Should Not I Spare* by the musician Vladimir Leptagov.

**SHOULD NOT I SPARE: LEPTAGOV'S TITANOMACHY
AND SCRIBIN'S MYSTERIUM**

Alexander Scriabin is a major protagonist in the novel *Before and During* in which Russia is entangled in World War I and on the verge of a revolution. Called “the apostle and prophet of the new world” (258), Scriabin is first introduced as a prospective leader of the party of Fedorovians, followers of the Russian philosopher Nikolai Fedorov and ardent revolutionaries. Fedorovians choose Scriabin as their leader, since “they had always been astonished by Scriabin's mighty symphonic gift, his ability to score for dozens of different instruments in such exhaustive detail that, in the end, their voices merged into a perfect unity in which, furthermore, everything was so complete. So polished, that to break up and fragment this voluntary concord seemed quite impossible” (253). Thus Scriabin, a composer singularly able to bring together discording voices, could be cast as a messiah and lead the revolution.¹⁷

¹⁷ More on Scriabin in *Before and During* see П. Димова, *Революция как космическая мистерия: Скрябин в романе «До и во время» В. Шарова*. // Владимир Шаров: по ту сторону истории, ред. М. Липовецкий и А. де Ля Фортель, НЛЮ, Москва, 2020, p. 548–585.

Scriabin is depicted as a greater revolutionary than Lenin because of his *Mysterium*¹⁸. But later in the novel Scriabin meets Lenin, whom he recognizes as the true revolutionary leader and Russia's Messiah. Their meeting takes place on the waters of Lake Geneva in Switzerland, in a bizarre scene when Scriabin, like John the Baptist, greets Lenin the Messiah. Scriabin in his turn also has a precursor, his own John the Baptist, Sergei L'vovich (Tolstoy?, 251). Thus Sharov continues to interpret the history of the Russian revolution in a circular fashion, as a chain of predictions, "rehearsals" and "re-enactors."

In *Should Not I Spare* Scriabin's name is never mentioned. Nevertheless there are striking similarities between Leptagov's only composition, the oratorio *Titanomachy*, and Scriabin's *Mysterium*, as well as certain biographical parallels between the two musicians.

As regards biography: Leptagov's 1910 Volga trip resembles Scriabin's Volga trip with Sergei Koussevitzky's orchestra in the same year.¹⁹ Leptagov and his choir travel on a steamship with the name *The City of Kitezh*. According to legend, the city of Kitezh sunk underwater to protect it from the invading Mongol horde. It would seem like an ill-omened name for a ship.²⁰ This trip inspires Leptagov to create his giant *Titanomachy* in celebration of the great technological achievement of the time — the ship *Titanic*. He hopes to perform this oratorio on the *Titanic*'s maiden voyage in 1912. Leptagov's oratorio is based on Greek mythology, on a successful "revolution" of sorts: the cosmic battle of the aged Titan gods and the young Olympian gods, the eventual removal of the older gods and the establishment of a new world order. This mythological plot, performed by a chorus, introduces the theme of Greek tragedy and submission to fate. The oratorio also includes elements of English and Scottish sea lore and folk music. The revolutionary spirit of the *Titanomachy* is intended to glorify the technological breakthrough of Anglo-Saxon engineering and Western civilization and probably to reflect Petrine interests in shipbuilding and Western culture.

¹⁸ See O. Ready, *How Sharov's novels are made...*

¹⁹ Л. Сабанеев, *Воспоминания о Скрябине*, Классика XXI, Москва, 2000, p. 45–46.

²⁰ This is not a product of Sharov's imagination — a ship with such a name did exist. What is more important, the sinking city of Kitezh as an allegory of the revolutionary Russia appears in Sharov's novel *Be Like Children*. In the introduction to this novel reference is made to Rimsky-Korsakov's 1904 opera *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh*, and the final scene depicts an endless procession of Russian revolution victors and victims descending underwater in Lake Svetloyar. But the imagery here is complex: in the original medieval legend the city sunk to protect its inhabitants and not to destroy them.

Leptagov, who can now be compared to a Greek coryphaeus, fails to finish this oratorio on time (just as Scriabin had failed to finish his *Mysterium*)—and then the *Titanic* sinks. As a result, Leptagov, for the rest of his life, suffers massive guilt, blaming himself for somehow predicting and inflicting this disaster. Here again we see how Sharov subtly brings into play the theme of the power of art and the artist to influence or predict the future. There is also some irony in the fact that a symbol of technological advancement, the *Titanic*, sinks to the bottom, but the ship *City of Kitezh* stays afloat.

Subsequently in the novel, Leptagov moves out from Moscow and St. Petersburg and goes east into the small city of Kimry, located on the Volga river, closer to the heart of ethnic Russia. His choir in St. Petersburg is made up of the former high-school students; the first performance of *Titanomachy* took place in the school auditorium. Now, the choir both grows in size and matures in age, and its sections begin to look more and more like political parties. At the beginning, it was supposed to be an all-male choir. In order to include some voices in the necessary higher registers, Leptagov invites the members of the religious sect of *Skoptsy* (the self-castrated).²¹ Moreover, while Leptagov is ill, under cover of the choir's lower voices, a separate group of SR²² terrorists is formed. Through all these trials and relocations, Leptagov remains a beloved choir leader. In Kimry, the choir, now gigantic in size, performs *Titanomachy* standing on both sides of the Volga River. This epic spectacle can be interpreted in multiple ways. The choir relocates out of the capital to “Mother Volga,” glorified in innumerable folk songs; by doing so, it moves closer to its Russian roots. From a city building, a historic and time-specific location, it migrates into a natural setting, an eternal location, a place of timeless nature and centuries-old history.²³ We often see in Sharov's novels how the events set in historical time take place in cities or inside buildings. When the action shifts to mythological and cyclical times, events happen in the lap of nature.

Among the similarities between *Titanomachy* and Scriabin's symphonic poem *Prometheus* (whose main character is himself a Titan)

²¹ Скопцы (Skoptsy), or the castrated, a Russian religious sect who practiced self-castration in order to overcome lust.

²² Эсеры (SR or Esers), members of the Party of Socialists-Revolutionaries, a prominent party in prerevolutionary Russia.

²³ For an overview of Sharov's non-fictional essays on the dynamics in Russian history between the capital and the provinces, see the review essay by C. Emerson, *Vladimir Sharov on history, memoir, and a metaphysics of ends*, “Slavic and East European Journal” 2019, vol. 63, no. 4, p. 598.

are themes taken from Greek mythology and a rebellion against the gods. But even more, *Titanomachy* reminds one of Scriabin's unfinished *Mysterium*. Scriabin intended his *Mysterium* to be a weeklong performance—his mystical, synesthetic experiment with music, singing, dancing, lights, colors and aromas, set in a dedicated temple in the Himalayas on the shore of the river Ganges, according to Scriabin the “cradle of mankind” (*Before and During*, 249). Similarly, Leptagov's *Titanomachy* swells up into a gigantic enterprise, performed in a quintessential “Russian” location in a natural setting near the Volga River. At the same time, Leptagov's choir serves as an allegory of the ruling revolutionary party after the revolution, with its combination of sectarians and terrorists.

Eventually, Leptagov's oratorio, like Scriabin's *Mysterium*, expands its scope, encompassing both humans and nature. His choir ultimately includes the voices of animals, such as bellowing cows and bulls, as well as the natural sounds of wind, water, and thunder. One of the most moving and also surreal scenes of *Should Not I Spare* is an uprising of mistreated cattle (118–24). Here Sharov directly connects collectivization and the Great Terror. The protest of starving cows and bulls, a parable of collectivization and state-provoked famine among the peasants calls to mind horses dying from malnutrition in Andrei Platonov's novel *The Foundation Pit* [Котлован] and his Terror-Famine play *Fourteen Little Red Huts* [Четырнадцать красных избышек]. This detail seems to refer to the episode in the *Book of Jonah* (3:7–8), where both people and cattle in Nineveh participate in universal repentance.

The revolutionaries in *Before and During* appreciate Scriabin's ability to unite different instruments into one voice. For Leptagov as a messianic leader, the vocal genre of the oratorio is a most suitable musical form, and Leptagov works here directly with human voices. There might also be a linguistic parallel. The word *партия* [partiiia] in Russian means both a party and a part (or role) in a musical or vocal work. Also, the verb *нeмь, занeмь*, in prison argot means to confess or to report on someone. When Alexei Trept, the police informer and biographer of Leptagov, admits that often it is easier for him to sing than to speak (14), he is, in fact, admitting that he is a canary; these words can be interpreted in both a musical and a political sense since singing, i.e. informing has now become the preferred form of communication. Even a political leader as renowned as Menzhinsky, who after Dzerzhinsky's death was appointed the head of the Cheka,

speaks by singing an aria. As the scope of the choir increases, it indeed starts representing the fusion of religion and Secret Services: it includes the two main revolutionary forces — the sectarian Skoptsy who as eunuchs have high voices, and the militant and violent SRs (Socialists-Revolutionaries), whose voices are low. Leptagov's life after the revolution is thus thoroughly intertwined with the NKVD. The journalist Trept who is writing his biography is an old NKVD informer, as are choir members. The boundaries between the henchmen and the victims fade away.

Should Not I Spare ends in 1939 when it becomes clear that collectivization has been a disaster and the day of penitence and last judgment is nigh. The Skoptsy sect takes the initiative and organizes a movement of national repentance. Here Sharov provides a grotesque and surreal vision of political and temporal reversal: the former wealthy peasants, or kulaks, return from the labor camps and exile, and their property is restored to them. The Chekists, poor peasants, and kulaks raise their collective voices in a phantasmagoric chorus singing of repentance and mutual forgiveness. Finally, everyone has the hope of being forgiven, just as in the conclusion of the *Book of Jonah*, which gives the novel its title and where God spares the city of Nineveh of His wrath. In the final scene, however, Leptagov, like Moses, leads his choir-chorus of peasant-victims and Chekists-torturers through burning peat bogs as if through the flaming inferno to universal penitence and is granted a vision of the Burning Bush. History comes full circle. The Russian people, like the chosen people of the Old Testament, are brought back to the beginning of Biblical history, to the Crossing of the Red Sea in the Exodus. The cycle will begin again, but now Leptagov's role as an artist, prophet and messiah is complete.

ARCHITECTURE AS SCENERY

This passage is reminiscent of the teaching of the intellectual mystic Ilyin, a character in *The Rehearsals* (20–21) whose task was attempting to understand God. This understanding is itself presented in spatial terms, with wide-open expanses and opaque corners. Ilyin compared this process to building a temple and looking for appropriate stones. The inside of the temple would be an undivided space, conducive to different interpretations:

As he tried to elucidate what it was that had come with Him into the world, that had been proclaimed by Him to the Jews and other nations, Ilyin consciously avoided dividing the temple of his understanding into side chapels and altars, and merely laid the cornerstones of his faith; he built the frame but not the walls or the roof, keeping everything as it might be in the desert — open to the four winds. (20–21)

If a cathedral building can be interpreted as a model of the entire cosmos, then Leptagov here creates different versions or “rehearsals” of his own universe and universal Temple. His personality expands beyond the boundaries of a musician or an author, and he tries on roles belonging to different types of artists. A writer’s or a musician’s imagination is unlimited; a theater director, however, knows constraints in the surrounding reality, as well as in the script, building, scenery, and actors.

Обстоятельства заставили его сократить, сузить то поле, где он был свободен, он словно ушел от писательства, где всё во власти автора, к театру, театральной режиссуре, где режиссер, оставаясь диктатором, бесконечно зависим и от пьесы, и от актеров, и от музыки, и от художника (46).

The circumstances forced him to reduce, to narrow down the field in which he was free. He seemed to have departed from the realm of writing where the author holds absolute power and chose theater, theatrical directing, where the director, while remaining a dictator, is nevertheless fully dependent on the play, actors, music and the stage designer.

The comparison between organizing a choir and building a temple recalls Nikolai Fedorov’s philosophy of art. Fedorov formulated a concept of architecture as the highest form of human art, higher than music and theater. A temple, according to Fedorov, is a model of the universe because it connects earth and heaven.

Искусство священное есть воспроизведение мира в виде храма, соединяющего в себе все искусства, причем храм, как произведение зодчества, живописи и ваяния, становится изображением земли, отдающей своих мертвецов, и неба (свод храма и иконостас), населяемого оживленными поколениями, а как вместилище пения, точнее отпевания, храм есть голос, под звуки которого оживает прах на земле...²⁴

Sacred art reproduces the world as a temple that combines in itself all arts. Thus, the temple, being a work of architecture, painting, and sculpture, becomes a representation of both the earth that gives away its dead, and heaven populated by

²⁴ Н. Федоров, *Искусство подобий (мнимого художественного восстановления) и искусство действительности (действительное воскрешение)* // Н. Федоров, *Сочинения*, Мысль, Москва, 1982, р. 563–564.

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the revived generations (the vault and the iconostasis). As a vessel for the sacred songs, strictly speaking for obsequies, the temple is a voice to whose sound the dust comes back to life on earth...

Here lies an important difference between Fedorov and Sharov in understanding art. Fedorov values static and finite architecture, a “hard” art, while Sharov prefers a living, moving, developing, and ever-changing theater performance. For Sharov, architecture is a form of “stage design” that can serve as the backdrop for historical events, and sculpture and painting are parts of the *mise-en-scène* that can be revived at any moment.

Sharov compares the director to a dictator, adding a political dimension to this image. Political leaders can be like directors, only their scenery is real architecture, and their actors are real people. In *The Rehearsals*, Patriarch Nikon, like a dictator who uses people as his actors, allows Sertan to hire only peasants for the roles in their production, and he perceives new buildings and landscape in a theatrical sense. Observing the construction of a real new cathedral, he sees it as scenery for a gigantic stage set.

It turned out, remarkably enough, that Sertan’s selection of actors, his sketches, and *mise-en-scène* excited Nikon even more than the construction of the Church of the Resurrection. The latter was only a fraction of the enormous task conceived by Nikon and led by Sertan. Nikon and the monks, along with hundreds upon hundreds of hired laborers and volunteers, were, it seemed, merely erecting the scenery for the spectacle that Sertan was directing (117).

Since the purpose of the Passion play is to entice Christ back to earth for a Second Coming, the stage setting stands in for the necessary physical environment, and having scenery is equivalent to having a real location. Even when Sertan loses all his actors during the Cossack-Polish war, the theater does not disappear, because his artist Martin is still with him. The two of them are able to save and restore the scenery from their theater. Actors can always be recruited en route. Later on, when Sertan is taken to Moscow and asked whether he can stage a play, the authorities take him to the treasury and show him his own scenery (89). Now, the director is able to create a new *mise-en-scène* and to begin a new period in the theater’s life.

In *Should Not I Spare*, likewise, theatrical memories immediately conjure up architectural parallels. Alexei Trept, a failed artist and theatrical set designer, perceives his entire existence in theatrical terms and experiences nostalgia for the theater of his youth. He

describes his room of fifteen years in a communal apartment as “saturated with harmless theatricality” (В комнате, в которой я живу уже пятнадцать лет, с поздней зимы сорок седьмого года, всё пропитано безобидной театральностью, 13). That reminds him of the early years of the choir and of the good old times before the revolution, when this building housed an excellent amateur theater, and when the choir was smaller and still performed inside. “Harmless theatricality” here refers to the early days of both the choir and revolutionary politics, in both instances more idealistic and naïve in scope. This ornate home with its rich mix of styles, gilded fireplace, and gothic staircase resembled a beautiful old theater. However, today the house is in disrepair and falling apart.

Дом, конечно же, умирает; третий этаж вообще пуст, там обвалились стропила и жильцов переселили в другие места, говорят, что то же скоро ждет и нас. (13).

Certainly, the house is dying; the third floor is already empty, the rafters collapsed, and all the residents have moved to other places; rumors are that we will soon follow them.

The house here clearly symbolizes the country in collapse. Another sign of decay is the disintegration of amateur theaters, where non-professional actors could rehearse and experiment and where theater was a truly communal experience.

The interaction of spatial and static arts with temporal and dynamic ones is a constant refrain of Sharov’s writing. When writing about architecture, he likes to describe it as almost tangibly alive. In *Should Not I Spare*, cities and streets are compared to human communities as follows:

Он свято верил, что дома живые; как люди, они рождаются, живут и умирают. Улицы же — это некое сообщество, или стая, где одно поколение сменяет другое и, если хочешь уцелеть, сохранить место под солнцем, надо драться. Впрочем, говаривал он, некоторым зданиям случается выбиться и в вожак. Он любил сравнивать улицу с государством, в котором периоды медленных, спокойных реформ кончались всё сметающими революциями, и жалел дома, которые каждый раз слезливо и рахитично пытались доказать, что они не чужие, не враги этой совсем другой улице, что они рады новым товарищам и им хорошо с ними (13).

He fully believed that houses were living things; like people, they are born, live and then die. Consequently, the streets are like communities, or animal herds,

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where one generation replaces the previous one and if you want to survive, to keep your place on earth, you must fight. However, he used to say that occasionally some buildings happen to become gang leaders. He liked to compare a street to a state, where periods of slow and quiet reforms end up with all-sweeping revolutions, and he pitied the tearful and rickety houses that every time tried to prove that they are not alien, not enemies to this entirely different street, that they are glad to have new friends and they feel comfortable around them.

The above paragraph may be considered as Sharov's manifesto concerning his views on both art and history. It is because the author explains how architecture can serve as a metaphorical representation of people and history; it can be both scenery or backdrop and an active participant in historical development. He also suggests the existence of a certain universal pattern in life, be it the life of a state or of an art movement, which consists in the sequence of long and slow intervals of steadiness interrupted by short periods of extreme violence or change. The paragraph refers to Nikolai Gogol's essay of 1831 in which he stated that each building ought to have a distinct personality and be an act of opposition to architectural conformity. It also reminds us of Gogol's reflections on architecture as a chronicle of the world ("letopis' mira") and as ultimate memory that can give voice to the nations after they are long gone²⁵.

STAGING GOGOL

Sharov returns to the theme of theater as well as to the topic of a major work of art that needs continuation in his eighth and penultimate novel, *Return to Egypt* [Возвращение в Египет, 2013]. The protagonists of this novel are direct descendants of Gogol. They believe that if Gogol had successfully finished *Dead Souls*, Russian history would have taken a less violent turn. Early in this novel, Sharov includes an episode concerning staging *The Inspector General*. Every summer, one of Gogol's great-grandnieces invites all her descendants to her country estate Soimenka where they stage one of Gogol's works; this becomes a favorite summer ritual for the whole family. Its goal, in line with Sharov's view of amateur theater as a tool for the preservation of living memory, is to honor their famous ancestor. Moreover, the event is intended to preserve Gogol's spirit so that to create

²⁵ N. Gogol, *On Present-day Architecture*, in: N. Gogol, *Arabesques*, transl. A. Tulloch, Ardis, Ann Arbor, 1982, p. 132.

a bond between relatives and identify the most talented “legitimate heir” who might follow in their famous ancestor’s footsteps and write the continuation of *Dead Souls*. Producing a theatrical performance is a family affair, all the actors are amateurs, and only the director can be an invited professional (there are uncanny resonances here with Sharov’s *The Rehearsals* where the peasant families continue to act, and re-act, the Passion of Christ during three hundred years of Russian history — from the reign of Tsar Alexis to Stalin’s gulag). These productions establish a template, or early version, of the search for God and the Promised Land, a search that occupies the main characters throughout the novel.

The Inspector General is of particular interest to Sharov as another Gogol’s work that had a continuation. Gogol finished the first version of the play in 1836. He returned to it ten years later, in 1846, and wrote an addition in dramatic form, known as *The Denouement* [Развязка]. Two productions are planned in Soimenka, focusing on both versions. The first one takes place during the summer of 1915; the second is planned for the summer of 1916, but because of the War it never gets beyond the preparatory stage or “rehearsal of the rehearsal.”

For the 1915 production, the director Blotsky interprets the plot of *Inspector General* as an ironic and even blasphemous paraphrase of the Book of Exodus. Pathetic Khlestakov, who personifies the Chosen People, tries to reach the Promised Land that is his family estate. However, he is stuck in the city N. as if in the middle of a desert. He is hungry, and the invitation from the Mayor arrives like a miracle from God, saving Khlestakov from starvation. The bribes are similar to Egyptian gold, the Mayor seems to be a pharaoh, and Khlestakov is finally able to flee, just as the Israelites escaped from their persecutors. As if the young Gogol wrote this role for himself, Khlestakov here is cheerful and open, kind and a little simple-hearted. Rather than a moralistic and satirical comedy, the play is presented as a folktale about the miracle of Exodus. Khlestakov-Gogol is not a prosaic compulsive liar, but rather a poet who unleashes his imagination in search for God. This production was very successful, and the younger generation and all the participants fondly remembered it.

Sharov interprets Gogol himself as a thoroughly theatrical personality, an author-actor who stages his own life and turns it into a series of rehearsals.

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По своей природе Гоголь был актером; способность к почти мгновенным перевоплощениям (а любой актер, говорил Блоцкий, в столь разных видах представляется, что часто не единым человеком является), способность так вжиться в роль, что она делается уже не личиной, а ликом — всё это было дано ему свыше. Без этого Гоголь просто не мог жить и, надолго застряв в одних и тех же декорациях, заболел... И вот однажды, не имея больше сил терпеть, он срылся с места, уезжал, бежал, куда глаза глядят... Чаше других стран мы находим его в Италии, в Риме. Этот вселенский город, разом и Вавилон, и Иерусалим, был для него и кулисами, и гримерной. Здесь он выздоравливал, оживал. Здесь же выбирал себе новую роль и выстраивал новую мизансцену. Лишь затем возвращался обратно в Россию и начинал репетиции (124).

By nature, Gogol was an actor; the capability for an almost instantaneous re-embodiment (as Blotsky used to say, every actor is incarnated in so many forms that he or she ceases to be a single person), the capability to identify with a role to such an extent that it becomes not a mask but a true face — all that was given to Gogol by the Maker. He simply could not live without that, and when he got stuck for a long time in the same scenery, he fell ill... And at some point, no longer being able to tolerate that, he sprang up, left the place, escaped wherever his feet would take him... More often than in the other countries, we find him in Italy, in Rome. For him, this universal city, being simultaneously Babel and Jerusalem, was both the wings and the make-up room. There, he could return to health, could revive. There, he could select a new role and build a new *mise-en-scène*. Only after that, he was ready to return to Russia and start the rehearsals.

At the later period during the 1840s, after his sojourn in Rome and his travel abroad, Gogol assumes a different life role. His Rome stay, and his own philosophical and religious search resulted in a new interpretation of his previous works. For the 1916 production Blotsky, following *The Denouement* of 1846, focuses on the silent scene, now interpreted as an image of the human soul, where motionless officials represent human sins. This production foregrounds the character of the speechless official whom Gogol calls human conscience and who now represents Gogol himself. However, this second production is interrupted by the war. Opinions about the production of 1916 are divided. The actors and the younger generation are reluctant to accept Blotsky's new interpretation. The director now sides with the general public that finds Gogol's satirical depiction of the city N. biased and without any basis in real life. If the previous staging showed the man striving to find God, this time Blotsky wants to show God descending to earth. God fails to find any chosen people but instead finds the kingdom of the Antichrist, where everyone has plunged into sin. The speechless official thus becomes a Christ-like figure; the city N. with

its corrupt residents now represents the kingdom of the Antichrist; the city officials in the silent scene are petrified out of fear and awe of God. In this interpretation, the silent scene resembles the famous painting by Alexander Ivanov, *The Appearance of Christ Before the People*, where the artist shows how the crowd was struck dumb at the sight of Christ. We know that in real life Gogol and Ivanov were friends; Gogol wrote a letter in support of Ivanov and his controversial painting, which was published in the *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* [Выбранные места из переписки с друзьями]. To director Blotsky, the silent scene and the painting are companion pieces; they form a diptych describing a crucial moment in the Sacred History. Thus *The Inspector General*, which reflects Gogol's admiration for medieval art, becomes not just a comedy but a mystery play.

The characters assume different roles in these productions. Khlestakov is a poet, actor and messianic leader, as well as a bit of the simple-hearted but lucky fool (*durachok*) from Russian folktales; Gogol himself is a poet and actor and Christ and God, and Blotsky, the artist and director, becomes a revolutionary prophet.

While preparing for the 1916 staging, Blotsky joins a revolutionary party, and he envisions this production as a rehearsal for the revolution:

Раньше другого, говорил он, мы должны понять, что Развязка не есть простое дополнение к пьесе, она рычаг для коренной переделки мироустройства старого «Ревизора» (130).

First of all, he said, we need to understand that the Denouement is not a mere addendum to the play, but rather a lever for fundamental reform of the whole world order in the old version of *The Inspector General*.

Later in the novel, Blotsky stages another play, an allegory called *The Promised Land*, which shows nothing but mass scenes of Red Army soldiers in rags and covered with blood, unsuccessfully trying to climb a mountain of mirrors. The sins reflected in the mirrors interrupt their quest for entering the Promised Land.

It is easy to see in this allegory that the Russian revolution itself has become the quest for finding the Promised Land and the continuation and culmination of Gogol messianic impulses as expressed in *Denouement*. The productions of *Inspector General* play out as rehearsals for the religious and philosophical quests in *Return to Egypt*.

THEATER AND OTHER FORMS OF ART

Sharov often compares theater and other forms of art. In *The Raising of Lazarus* [Воскрешение Лазаря 2003], the narrator reflects on the difference in longevity between theater and literature:

Я... подумал, насколько не похоже живут разные искусства. Театр — бурно, и, несмотря на лицедейство, на редкость искренно. По-видимому, это вообще самое благодарное из искусств. Нигде актер, да и режиссер тоже, не получают так много и так сразу. Сравни зазор между автором книги и тем, кто его читает, — как долго здесь идет обратная волна и какой ослабленной доходит. А в театре — все рядом, часто границы просто нет. Но зато спектакль живет недолго, книга, конечно, вещь куда более долгоиграющая (20).

I thought ... that different art forms live totally different lives. Theater life is stormy and, all the pretence and make-believe notwithstanding, very sincere. Apparently, it is the most gratifying of the arts. Nowhere else the actors, as well as directors, receive as much and as fast. Compare the gap between the author of a book and the person who reads it — how long does it take the returning wave to move back, and how much weaker does it arrive? In the theater, by contrast, everything happens immediately, such gap often does not exist at all. Yet there is a price: performance lives short whereas a book is, of course, a more long-playing phenomenon.

The advantage of theater is that it allows for swifter and closer interaction between the artists and the public. Theater experience is more life-like than other arts. Even as individual performance is short-lived, the life of theater continues as performances and rehearsals go on, and, in a way, this life never ends as long as theater exists. Writing about other types of art, Sharov again selects unfinished works that allow for some kind of further development. Then, he interprets them as *mise-en-scènes* that have internal dynamics and potentials for showing action, waiting to be re-animated into moving things.

Since Ivanov's *Appearance of Christ Before the People* had been left unfinished, it is not a surprise that Sharov imagines a continuation for it. He describes how two art students, copying Ivanov's drafts for the painting, discern dozens of the dead risen from their graves on a large tree in the foreground (*The Return to Egypt*, 475). One of the students arranges the drafts in chronological order and can see how the original *Appearance of the Messiah* morphs step by step into *The Final Judgment* and then into the *Second Appearance [or Second Coming]*, transforming itself into a picture of the End of the World.

Ivanov thus emerges as an artist-prophet, like Gogol, Scriabin, and the imaginary director Blotsky.

In another example, in *Return to Egypt*, the character Uncle Valya is an artist living in self-imposed exile in Central Asia and both preserving and creating the works of art. First, for the museum in the city of Nukus, he collects the rejected works of avant-garde art, which were languishing and “slowly dying” of cold, humidity and neglect in storeroom-prisons in the entire country. Now, he offers them a new life and begins to exhibit them. When Uncle Valya moves to the desert city of Khiva, he creates graphic sketches for the ornament on the wood columns that was supposed to adorn the façade of a local government building.²⁶ Wood in the desert is especially precious as a living and breathing material. The columns are decorated with intricate plant designs, but, as the viewers get closer, they can see that what looks like plants are, in fact, delicately engraved scenes of human history ready to come to life. This episode occurs in this very long novel for the first time quite early on (173–86), and for the second time closer to the end (578–79), with a different version of the ornament. In the second occurrence, the two columns are intended to represent French and Russian Revolutions ready to break out. However, the whole project is left unfinished, like history itself, as if allowing for further development.

A work of art in Sharov’s novels can conceal a coded message, that is, a second hidden meaning or additional version, a “rehearsal” that translates the message from one art form to another. In *Before and During Lenin* creates a secret code to transcribe Scriabin’s *Mysterium* into a work of olfactory art that is a composition of smells. Likewise, in *Return to Egypt*, Sharov interprets Malevich’s *Black Square* as a coded scenery and grotesque mise-en-scène:

Дядя Валя пишет, что известный художник Казимир Малевич, который преподавал им с Колодезевым во ВХУТЕМАСе, будучи арестован в 1926 году, на допросе показал, что те его картины, которые в течение последних шести лет с 1918 по 1924 год были проданы на Запад, на самом деле являлись зашифрованными посланиями. Адресат — английская разведывательная служба МИ-5, внештатным агентом которой он является в 1912 года. В работах, так или иначе относящихся к фигуративной живописи, информация о советской армии и промышленном потенциале кодировалась цветом, отдельными деталями и их взаимным расположением на холсте. Что

²⁶ This passage also reminds us of Gogol’s reflections on the similarities between trees and columns in his *On the Present-day Architecture*, p. 124.

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же до абстракций, в частности, вывезенного недавно частным коллекционером Горнфельдом «Черного квадрата», то это сделанный по заказу МИ–5 анализ общего положения дел в стране (476).

Uncle Valya writes that Kasimir Malevich — a well-known artist being his and Kolodezev's teacher at VKhUTEMAS — after his arrest in 1926, confessed during an interrogation that those of his paintings that were sold to the West were, indeed, encrypted messages. The addressee was the British intelligence service MI–5 whose secret agent Malevich had been since 1912. In his works that more or less belonged to figurative painting, information about the Soviet army and industrial potential was smartly indicated by color as well as by details and how they were located one against another on the canvas. Also his abstract works, in particular *The Black Square* that was recently taken out of the country by the private art collector Gornfeld, were the analyses of the overall situation in the country made at the request of MI–5.

In all those seemingly static works of art, then, we can discern an inner theatricality. Even such an unexpected case as the painted china dinner set from *Should not I Spare*, whose 96 pieces show images of historical events, present scenery for different life stories or scripts for the three sisters.

Theatrical performance is among the most fleeting of the arts, but Sharov finds a way to tie theatrical metaphors not only to the historical themes of history but also to memory and remembrance. In *The Rehearsals*, when Sertan starts rehearsing the scenes from the Gospels with the peasants and explaining to them how to play the Israelites, he remembers how many years ago in Poland he had to deal with real Jews. He also recalls his long-dead wife Annette and grasps the interplay between Gospel stories and real life. He had bought Annette from her father as a twelve-year-old girl, and in Pygmalion-like manner formed her into an actress.

She owed not only her gait but her every movement, her every gesture to his training.... Moreover, he taught her how to think and speak, and, for that matter, feel... he was able to explain to her not only what the protagonists were saying in the plays in which she performed but also things that could never have found their ways into drama... (149)

Annette is an actress by nature, and theater is her real life, but after she falls in love with a young Jew called Ruvim, her story takes a Gospel-like turn. Physically, Ruvim looks very much like Christ, and in association with him, Annette becomes a Maria Magdalene character. After the Cossacks murder Ruvim and other Jews, Annette

goes to the city garden where the slaughter took place, finds his body, and gives him a proper burial. Thus, real-life and theatrical performance mirror each other in endless cycles; memory both reinforces theatrical performance and is reinforced by it, retaining the flow of history in all its human complexity and diversity.

The narrator in *The Raising of Lazarus*, a novel that deals with issues of memory and the resurrection of the dead, describes an old friend of his father, the theater critic Gruber. That Gruber fiercely loved theater. He used to attend every Moscow performance and personally knew all the actors.

И вот Грубер помнил и первый состав, и второй, и кто как играл, что получилось, а что нет. Даже помнил, кого на чье место ввели. Рассказывал он о театре здорово, и я вдруг подумал, что вот Грубера не станет, и вместе с ним сразу умрут сотни актеров со всеми своими ролями и сотни постановок с их режиссерскими находками, декорациями, светом, потому что он последний из живых, кто это видел и помнит. Так, по отдельности кое-что, конечно, останется в архивах, в запасниках, но как часть спектакля, для которого единственно и делалось, уже никогда жить не будет. Меня тогда поразило, сколько людей от него зависят, сколько человек, наверное, сейчас молятся, чтобы он не умирал, жил и, вот как сейчас нам, рассказывал (19–20).

Gruber remembered both the first and the second cast, who played whom, what worked well and what went wrong. He even remembered who was introduced as a replacement. His stories about theater were wonderful, and I suddenly thought that the death of Gruber would take with him hundreds of actors with all their roles and hundreds of productions with their directors' ideas, stage designs, and lighting: it was because Gruber was the last of the living who saw and remembered those people. I was surprised then how many people depended on him. Many people probably pray that he would not die but instead remain alive and continue telling his stories.

Gruber remembered the dynamics of theater as a continuation of performances, in a state of permanent “rehearsals” or constant change. At the same time, as a storyteller, he was always performing. To keep theatrical tradition alive, one requires memories, stories, and rehearsals.

Sharov focuses on the more lasting and tangible elements of theater — namely, the director's plan and stage design. When he turns from theater to the other types of art (sculpture, painting or music), he always underscores its unfinished, living character, the possibilities for new and revised versions, or its inner qualities as a scenery for the future productions.

Even the process of reading can be compared to rehearsals because for Sharov his creations are like scripts that become real novels only after being absorbed and revived by a reader.²⁷

CONCLUSION

Perceiving the world as theater was natural for Sharov. His old friend, a theater director Vladimir Mirzoev, remembered that, apart from being a writer, Sharov could be a gifted actor. Particularly in the company of good friends, he liked to try out his plots on them.

В приватном общении он был необыкновенно легким и щедрым рассказчиком, не боялся выбалтывать свои идеи, тестировал их на близких друзьях.... Обычно это была фантасмагория, мастерски стилизованная под документальный рассказ, по сути, готовый актерский номер. Ей-богу, Шаров мог неплохо зарабатывать как стендап-комик, если бы не тушевался в присутствии людей малознакомых.²⁸

In private, he was an extraordinarily easygoing and generous storyteller; not afraid of babbling out all his ideas, testing them out on his close friends... Usually, it was some sort of phantasmagoria, skillfully stylized as a true story, but it was actually a prepared theatrical number. In truth, Sharov could have made a decent living working as a standup comic, if he weren't so shy with people he didn't know well.

The writer's own "theatrical performance" was an important part of his creative process. In Sharov's version of the world, history can be compared to rehearsals, which are never mere repetitions because every time they can involve different actors, directors, and versions of scripts. His characters follow "in the footsteps" of their ancestors. In other words, they do perform the already existing versions of their

²⁷ "Слова ведь только пишутся в одиночестве, а романом становятся в соавторстве с читателями, когда человек, если прочитанное хоть как-то его трогает, пропустит их через свою жизнь. Особенно интересно смотреть на свою вещь глазами художника. Они думают не только головой, но и рукой, в итоге их глаз и тоньше, и неожиданней" [Words are written in solitude, but they become a novel only in co-authorship with a reader, when a person, if moved by a story, perceives it through the prism of her own life. It is especially interesting to look at your own work through the eyes of a [visual] artist. They think not only with their head, but also with their hand, and as a result their view is more subtle and unexpected] ("Absurd nashei zhizni").

²⁸ В. Мирзоев, "Мы все умираем детьми". Памяти Владимира Шарова, "Сноб", 07.04.2019, <https://snob.ru/entry/175131/> (21.02.2020).

roles. Life and art imitate each other through a constant multiplication of versions or rehearsals — “rehearsals” in its expanded sense as reinterpretations, revisions, rewritings, and continuations. This dramatic patterning principle is the life-giving energy of Sharov’s world, which flows from history to art and, ultimately, to human life.

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