

THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF THEATER CRITICS IN THE 1940S SOVIET UNION “REGARDING ONE ANTIPATRIOTIC GROUP OF THE THEATRICAL CRITICS”

Maia Kiknadze

Keywords: *anti-critics, resolution, Soviet propaganda, repertoire politics*

In the 1940s Soviet Union, the Communist party and Soviet government paid special attention to and maintained control over ideological processes. In this context, focus was made on literature and arts in general, including theater as one of the important tools of Soviet propaganda.

The state regulated theater activities and defined creative work, artistic styles, and repertoire-related policies. In this context, the Central Committee (b) issued the August 26, 1946 Resolution on the Repertoire of Drama Theaters and Steps to Improve Them.¹

This regulation, above all else, reflected the general situation in theaters and changes repertoire-related policies, also instructing to correct identified flaws. According to the party, strict control over repertoire-related policies was determined by theater repertoires' failure to meet the objectives of educating workers, as most of the plays created false, distorted impressions about Soviet life. The regulation covered other issues (Soviet and foreign dramaturgy, playwright/theater relationship), including theater critics assigned by the government to a particular mission in the “struggle on the ideological front.” According to the regulation, theater criticism must be carried out in a principled, Bolshevik manner and excel in performing its propagandistic role. Theatric critics, in newspaper and magazine articles, must criticize plays promulgating ideas unacceptable to the party. It is their loyal, unprincipled attitude that is believed to be the reason behind the unsatisfactory state of the repertoire. “Individual critics, while assessing the plays and performances, are not guided by the interest of ideological and

artistic development of Soviet dramaturgy and theatrical arts, hence not by the interests of the state and the people, but by cronyism and personal interests,” one of the provisions states.

Newspapers and magazines published in Russia—such as “Theater”, “Literary Magazine”, “Soviet Art”, “Izvestia,” and others—instead of contributing to the development of Bolshevik theater criticism, undermined this process, which is why editorial offices were obligated “to attract... politically mature, qualified theater and literary critics to publish their articles on new plays and performances in a systematic manner, to engage in a decisive battle against apolitical sentiments and ideological void.”

Thanks to the importance of said provision to the theater community, it served as a major manual. All Soviet theaters, playwrights, and critics were obligated to observe its every regulation and instruction.

A few years later, the problem resurfaced, with the Bolshevik party, unhappy with a particular group of theater critics, publishing a critical slamming this group.

The letter “regarding one antipatriotic group of theater critics² clearly defined the purpose of criticism and critics in the communist society. The role and importance of theater critics was outlined, defining the hierarchy (through the means of press), to spread the artistic “action of the scenic features.” True Soviet critics should be patriotic and loyal to socialist art, proudly commending each new play and creating a new image of the Soviet person.

The position of the official newspaper reflected the

¹ Большевик, О репертуаре..., 1946, с. 45

² Большевик, О репертуаре..., 1946

spirit of the government and party and was guided by their instructions. Alongside arguing the importance of criticism, the letter exposed “miserable critics” enjoying protection from the Union of Theater Critics at the Russian Theater Society³. The Soviet state, refusing to turn a blind eye, decried these theater critics, and called them antipatriots, “despicable persons unworthy of being called Soviet, cosmopolites without kin, ideologically bankrupt.” “These critics ignore Bolshevik principles and ultimately embarrass the country.”

This accusation was hard to hear. The party should explain itself. What did the government by the antipatriotic activities of these critics? The newspaper made public statements about it and cited numerous arguments to reinforce its position by citing the critics’ statements, quotes, and facts, and making its own conclusions.

For example, the newspaper did not share the critics’ assessments of specific plays and playwrights. In assessing Gorky’s play *The Philistines*, I. Yuzovsky stated that the character of Nil violated the logic of the play and called him “an imperfect figure.” The newspaper gave a stern answer and shared its opinion to the society: “The critic covers his anti-revolutionary, antipatriotic essence and tries to humiliate the noble character of one of the first worker revolutionist Bolshevik, drawn by the proletarian writer Gorky.” Critic Yuzovsky was blamed for many other things. At first, he mocked the concept of A. Surovy’s play *Far from Stalingrad*, followed by criticism hurled against Stalin Prize laureates. He slammed B. Chirkasov’s play *The Winners* and the role of Zoya in the play *Tale about Truth*, for which actress N. Rodionova was awarded a Stalin Prize. The party kept its composure in responding to Yuzovsky’s and called his writing “miserable scribblings.”

Similar to Yuzovsky, the party also dealt with A. Gurevich who, unlike Yuzovsky, used “covert tactics.” This distinction lies in that critic “maliciously trying to cut down and discredit Soviet dramaturgical classics by using Turgenev’s weight and reputation.”

Gurevich also criticized Ivan Shadrin’s character in the play *The Man with the Gun* whom he claimed to have multiple personality disorder. “Shadrin is carried away by revolutionary waves, flicking in helpless resistance,

before surrendering to its powerful flow.” The newspaper commented on critic’s assessment: “It is a story of a peasant soldier meeting with Lenin, a person whose consciousness is awakened by a Bolshevik worker.” As for the newspaper, the Theatric Critics’ Union at the Russian Theatric Society harbored those ill with “ugly ideations,” who “try to cover their vice content with their incomprehensible, intentionally equivocal language, pretentious scholarly phrases.... They tried to twist public opinion on Soviet dramaturgy.”

Antipatriotic critic A. Borgachovski, consciously avoiding writings distorting Soviet reality and portrayals of the Soviet people, criticized A. Sophronov’s play *Muscovite Character* and Maly Theater’s executive director Zubov. The critic tried to discredit O. Korneichuk’s play *In the Steppes of Ukraine*, also N. Virta’s *Our Daily Bread*, Surovy’s *Great Fate* and others. Critic L. Maliugin fought against deeply patriotic writings commended the public, such as *Great Power* by B. Romashov, *Our Daily Bread* by N. Virta, *In the Same City* by A. Sophronov. “The malicious views” of antipatriotic critics (Borschagovski, Gurevich, Yuzovsky, Boiajev) “nourish any kind of strange distortions for people... wickedly hissing and rustling everything that is good in Soviet dramaturgy, having nothing good to say about plays like *Great Power*, *Muscovite Character*, *Our Daily Bread*, or *Great Faith*. Their diffractive and wicked attacks mainly target plays awarded Stalin Prizes.⁴”

The goal of the newspaper was clear and unequivocal: “ideological exposure” and moral destruction of the critics. The party would not forgive the discreditation of Soviet ideology, denouncing antipatriotic outbursts, slamming aesthetic-formalistic criticism, decrying of critics trying “to separate dramaturgy and theater from the themes inspired by Soviet patriotism.” The importance of this latter was very extensive and had a dual purpose. Firstly, that that party presented theater criticism as a tool of Soviet ideology. Secondly, the letter represented a sample of the Soviet criticism illustrating the requirements of the time, the strictness of the party, and relationship between the artist and the state.

3 Chair of the Bureau of the Union was Boiajev, Chair of the Dramaturgy Commission at the Writers’ Union – A. Cron 4 გაბ. „ლიტერატურა და ხელოვნება“, N8, 1949.

Although the document was designed specifically for Russian theater criticism, but it was meant to be taken into account by every theater critic in the Soviet Union.

An editorial published in Pravda newspaper enjoyed feedback in Tbilisi. Artistic unions considered themselves obligated to respond to those “miserable critics” hindering the development of Bolshevik theater criticism.

The feedback was so great that it went beyond the scope of theater criticism and everyone was speaking about the commitment and role of Soviet playwrights and writers in general. Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia Kandid Charkviani spoke about the importance of Georgian criticism at the 15th Party Congress. Overall, he commended Georgian literary criticism, but also pointed out that newspapers published articles only about books deserving negative assessment, while positive assessments were neglected. Charkviani urged critics and art propagandists to write more about positive events, to show people the caring role of the government in the development of arts.

The presidium board meeting at the Writers’ Union discussed the editorial letter of Pravda⁵. The transcript minutes⁶ from February 7 are preserved in the National Archive of Georgia, consisting of 60 pages, showing the existing atmosphere and the requirements of those times. According to the rule, meeting outlined the caring role of Stalin and the party in deciding cultural issues, the advantage of Soviet culture over bourgeoisie culture. The chair of the meeting Simon Chikovani noted that it was necessary to “find out all mistakes and failures of Georgian theater and literary criticism, create conditions for productive work in the area of criticism”. Although Georgian criticism did not have “miserable critics” like Yuzovsky and Gurevich, still, in discussing Georgian criticism, the meeting pointed out numerous drawbacks in literary criticism.

Criticism didn’t have scientific and theoretical depth. Critics, as well as writers, had to visit to industrial hubs and agricultural districts to write about local cultural life. With the Soviet people building a socialistic society as the cornerstone, both writers and critics were obligated to underscore their character.

After discussing literature criticism, special attention was paid to theater criticism, with assessments outlining the following problems in theater criticism:

1. Critics did not write about district theaters and actors
2. Only successful actors were reviewed
3. No proper assessment of plays as independent works in place
4. No artistic press in place.

As we can see, despite considering the cause of the meeting, the speeches by theater workers raised purely professional issues. Their inflictions and views were outside any “Soviet ideological” subtexts, and although the echo of the time was observed in their expressions, the key opinions did not go beyond the issues of modern theater criticism.... The issue was not exhausted, though as it seems that there was much to discuss, so the dispute carried on in the theater circles.

On February 14, a meeting of Tbilisi theater workers was held at the office of the Theatric Society of Georgia. The minutes are also preserved in the National Archive of Georgia⁷.

The chair of the session, Head of the Scientific Creative Unit at the Theatric Society of Georgia Shalva Aphkhaidze condemned “cosmopolites without kin who despise Soviet theater and dramaturgy,” followed by discussions on the problems of Georgian theater criticism and a plan outlined to improve them:

1. A strategy should be created to attend theater critics to costume rehearsals
2. The Theatric Society of Georgia, via its dramaturgical section, should do everything not to allow a difference of opinion regarding the same play, thus the play must have a unified assessment, which was required by the public opinion, party, and government
3. The finale should be commended by critics
4. Further work must be based on the resolutions “on bettering theater and dramaturgy” and said letter about “antipatriots”
5. A professional magazine must be established
6. A separate book must be written about each Georgian play, discussing the performances by individual

5 გაზ. „ლიტერატურა და ხელოვნება“, 1949,18/II, N7, p.1

6 National Archive, Foundation of the Writers’ Union 8, Record 1,N125

7 National State Archive, Foundation-21, Record-1, Archive N51

actors, directors, and the artists.

Cinema workers also joined literary and theater gatherings, and Literature and Art newspaper published a letter titled For Bolshevik Cinema criticism.⁸ Neither the music community lagged behind cinema, and meetings of musicians were also held.⁹

Discussions about this topic persisted in periodic press articles with various titles, such as Cosmopolitanism as an Enemy of Soviet Culture, Advancing Musical Criticism, Strengthening Soviet Criticism, and others. Each letter echoed the article published in Pravda. The function of Bolshevik criticism was reiterated by Literature and Art newspaper. In particular,

“Our criticism must support advanced, patriotic trends in literature and art, tirelessly propagate all the best created by them, boldly and principally expose possible disadvantages, and raise writers and artists in the Soviet spirit of patriotism.”¹⁰

The letter titled “Another antipatriotic group of the theatric critics” is one of the most important documents for theater criticism research in that it reflects the trends and the spirit of the Soviet theater life in the 1940s. It determined the role and importance of theater criticism in the formation and reinforcement of the communist society.

REFERENCES:

- გაზ. „ლიტერატურა და ხელოვნება“, 1946, 6/II
- გაზ. „ლიტერატურა და ხელოვნება“, 1948, 6/III, 13/III, 27/II
- გაზ. „ლიტერატურა და ხელოვნება“, 1949, 6/II
- National Archive, Fund of the Writers’ Society – 8
- National Archive, Fund of the Theatric Society – 21
- Bolshevik [Большевик] 1946, N16
- Pravda [Правда] 1949, 28/I

8 Literature and Art. 1949 6/III, N10, p.1

9 Literature and Art, 1949 13/III, N11, p. 3–4

10 Literature and Art, N8, 1949