

Russian Theater in Picture Postcards – Part Two

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March 29, 2010

The  **Moscow Times**

About six months ago I posted a [column](#) featuring some old theater postcards that I hold in my collection. It seemed to strike a chord with many readers and this weekend, as the remains of Moscow's long winter continued to drip and flow off of roofs, I decided it was time to share another selection of cards.

Once again, most of the images included in the gallery above are either from the Moscow Art Theater in the first decade of the 20th century or from the Maly Theater, probably from the 1940s.

But there are also some strays that intrigue and defy definite description.

A pre-Revolutionary photo of a certain Mr. Rybakov most likely depicts the actor Konstantin Rybakov in the role of Peter the Great in Pyotr Gnedich's play "The Assembly," although I have not been able to verify that.

Similarly, I can only make an educated guess about a portrait of an actor described merely as "Lenin" on another card printed before the Revolution. (The time frame is clear because printing on the back sides of both cards include letters dropped from the Russian alphabet shortly after 1917.) In the five-volume Soviet Theater Encyclopedia I find a Mikhail Lenin who debuted in 1902. One thing of which there can be no doubt is who the actor is impersonating. If there were awards that year for makeup artists, the prize surely went to the person who made the actor Lenin up as the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol.

I never cease to be amazed by the extraordinary realistic detail that went into set designs in Russian theater 70 to 100 years ago. Numerous shots from productions of Maxim Gorky's "The Barbarians" and Alexander Ostrovsky's "Wolves and Sheep," both at the Maly Theater, reflect such intricacies so accurately that you can almost smell the dust, leather and lace.

And look at the mantle Yevdokia Turchaninova is wearing in a scene from "The Barbarians." The intricacy of the doily-like material is breathtaking. One has to assume it would hardly have been visible to anyone beyond the fourth or fifth row at the Maly Theater. But authenticity, as much as effect, is what designers were really after in those years.

No less impressive is the royal manteau worn by Nikolai Yakovlev in the production of Ostrovsky's "Dmitry the Imposter and Vasily Shuisky" at the Maly Theater. The tassels, the fur, the buttons and the stitching between segments of what appear to be squares of velvet all create the effect of a genuine article that might have been borrowed from a museum in the Kremlin.

By contrast, note the simplicity of the costume that Alexander Vishnevsky wore for his role as Marcus Antonius in Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" at the Moscow Art Theater. This toga might be a simple piece of cloth spiffed up with a few stripes of color.

This kind of simplicity, incidentally, is what set the Moscow Art Theater apart from other playhouses in the early years after it was founded in 1898. Konstantin Rybakov, for instance, was one of many vocal detractors of the Art Theater style, considering its work simplistic and uninteresting.

But where would we be without the Art Theater and the most famous of its founders, Konstantin Stanislavsky? A simple sketch of this icon of Russian and world theater is one of the pre-revolutionary cards among my collection. The artist's name scribbled in the bottom left corner may be S. Komenko, but it may be something else, too. Whatever his name was, he drew a fine likeness of the great director and theorist.

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