

The Theater Season In Moscow--1925-1926

By Ruth Epperson Kennell.



The State Ballet, Costume Design

BEING chiefly interested in finding something new in Moscow theaters, we shall not here consider the "Bolshoi," for in this great opera house of red and gold the ballet and opera continue much as in pre-revolutionary days. Kings and queens, fairies and mermaids appear in magnificent costumes in settings of the grandeur of which leaves one breathless; huge choruses of townfolk fill the stage with colors, swans sail in a blue background, ballet dancers float like clouds in their filmy skirts. The main difference now is that there are no kings and queens, lords and ladies in the audience.

And to those who thought that the old Moscow Art Theater was actually presenting a "revolutionary" play at the opening of the season, "Pugachev-schina," the historic tragedy of the bandit leader, was disappointing. It has no revolutionary appeal and at the same time falls short of the classic standard of Stanislavsky's theater. The play depicts a rising in Siberia 150 years ago, when Pugachev played the role of the legendary "Czar Peter" and was accepted by the oppressed people as their deliverer. Moskvina as Pugachev does not create a sympathetic character, and the play itself makes of him a weak adventurer. The fourth scene alone lives in the memory: the inhabitants of a village welcome the approach of Pugachev as their last hope, but in place of a deliverer, a detachment of czarist troops appears and in punishment for their rebellion one out of every three hundred inhabitants is executed. The setting—which follows the almost crude simplicity of the other scenes—the desolate village on the steppes, the poor huts, the crushed people, leaves an impression of the hopeless life of the Russian peasants before the revolution.

But in a little theater in the Arbat, the third studio of the Art Theater, we find the classic art of the past linking itself with the present. The splendor of what was formerly a palatial residence creates an appropriate environment for the versatile art of these gifted players. On one night they give you a fantastic fairy tale like "Princess Turadet," which holds all the childhood thrills in lovely princesses and charming princes, taking the audience into their confidence by changing their costumes and sets before your eyes; or perhaps they give you an old French melodrama like "Marion de Lorm," in which they play with such emotional intensity that you weep luxuriously—and then on the very next night you see them in a play of today whose realism hurts, "Verenea," which, from the point of view of conventional drama, is the best play of the season.

"Verenea" has been dramatized from the novel by Lydia Sifulina. The scene of the story is a village in the period previous to and just after the

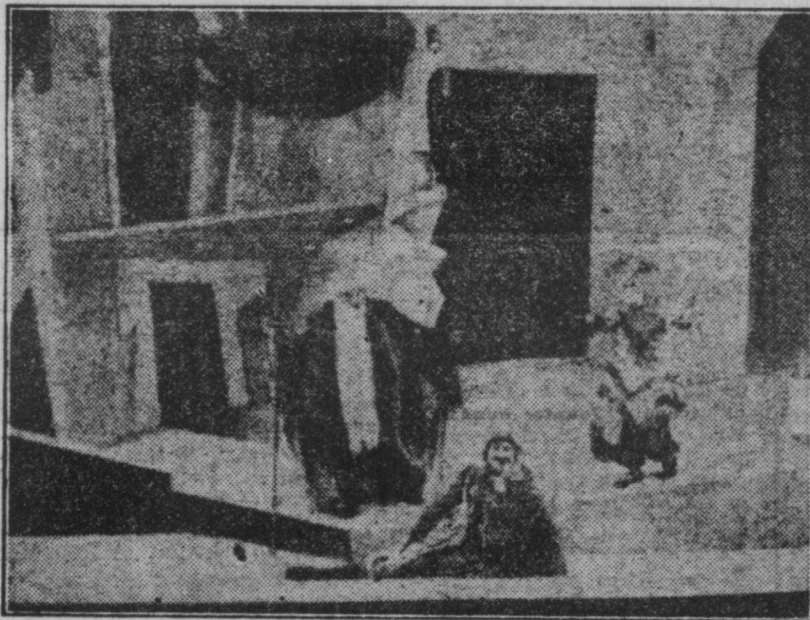


Facade of Moscow Art Theater

October revolution. The characters are everyday types of villagers, so real that they seem, all unawares, to have been transported from their village to the stage. Verenea is the type of village girl often found in Russia, strong, gracefully poised and independent, in her full, winsome face both fire and tenderness. And this splendid young creature is married to a weakling and is a domestic drudge for him and his harsh mother.

The first act ends with her rebellion and final departure from the squalid one-room home, from the whining husband and the nagging mother-in-law scolding her from her bed on top of the brick stove—out into the darkness of the village, where, afar off, can be heard a chorus of young voices singing.

A member of a fanatical religious sect has announced that God will summon him to die on a certain day. In the next scene we have a winding road with a fence, a piece of the thatched roof, steps and a section of the room of his log cottage. The other members are preparing his bed; against the wall stands his wooden coffin. Outside are gathered the villagers. The deacon standing before the roster announces importantly: "The death will now take place" and



"Turandot" as produced by Moscow Art Theater, First Studio

the prophet, his huge figure clothed in white linen, takes a lighted taper and lies down. The others take lighted tapers and begin chanting. The villagers draw nearer to watch thru window and door.

At this point there comes a long intermission, during which the audience, as is the European custom, gravely promenades thru the rooms of the mansion. The audience is "NEP" in character, for in spite of fifty per cent reductions to trade unions, a great many workers cannot afford to come.

While we have been promenading, drinking tea in the tapestried dining hall and eating apples, the people in our drama have been waiting for the prophet to die. The curtain parts on the weary watchers. Candles are beginning to splutter, and tired heads droop. The skeptical young people, among them Verenea, begin shouting ribald remarks. Suddenly, raising himself, the prophet attacks the two kulaks nearby, drives the frightened watchers out, throws after them the stand, the ikon, and lastly the coffin, and then curses the God who betrayed him. The boys and girls, lifting the coffin on their shoulders, form a rakish procession, and the accordion breaks into a merry tune as they pass out of sight.

The fourth scene is a country cross-road. By the fence sits a crowd of young men and women singing. They have been drinking and are very hilarious. A slender youth in a red rubashka plays on his accordion the most sentimental of Russian village songs and, leaning amorously on one another, the boys and girls sing. Pavel, the Communist, comes down the steps at the cross-road and turns to look at Verenea, who is sitting against the shoulder of a strapping youth. At his stern words of dis-

approval she springs up indignantly. Left alone by her companions, defiant, a little drunk, she is just in the mood for the chief engineer of the village factory, who has more than once made unsuccessful advances to her, and abandons herself to his kisses. In this compromising situation the deserted husband finds her, and, mad with grief and jealousy, he appeals to the half-insane old prophet to do that which he is too weak to do himself. The scene ends with the murder of the engineer in the gathering darkness of the lonely road.

Verenea has undertaken to look after the house of a neighbor who has been called to the bedside of her wounded husband. Pavel drops in to talk with Verenea about taking care of his motherless children. Pavel is a heavy, dependable type, so natural that he seems quite accidentally to have dropped into the play. Verenea, having learned something of men, tells him that she does not want to be his servant and mistress. He answers that he quite agrees with her—a woman is a free human being who has a right to earn her living and love whom she chooses. They are both young, and if they should want one another, well and good, but that has nothing to do with her work.



The Big (Bolshoi) Theater, Moscow

placing her kerchief, looks pleased with herself.

Verenea is sitting in Pavel's home. She is wearing a new holiday dress of white cotton with a pattern of small flowers. The widow, entering, starts to cross herself and, seeing no altar, spits instead. Her open hatred of the Bolsheviks exasperates Verenea to the point where she throws her neighbor out. Pavel, observing only this part of the controversy, comes in and scolds her for her violence. Verenea laughs and, sitting down beside him, tells him that she is expecting a baby. They begin laughing happily like two children. Then he seizes her and kisses her, swears and throws his hat on the floor with great fervor. A brief moment of happiness—and then to the serious business of life. He must go away at once; the whites are coming. With a stricken face she prepares his knapsack and then stands waiting for the simple farewell. At the door, turning once more to look at her, he lifts his hand and brings it down at his side in a gesture of suppressed grief.

The last scene takes place some months later in the house of Pavel. Verenea enters carrying a bundle. She has been in prison and gave birth to her baby in the hospital. One of the Bolshevik girls comes in with three comrades. Verenea begs the men to undertake a dangerous mission to Pavel in the woods. They turn away in fear, but her scorn overwhelms them and at last they agree. When they have gone, she lifts the baby, her face radiant with tenderness. But outside we see her friend creeping to the window. In a hoarse voice she warns Verenea to leave at once. Verenea hands the bundle to the old nurse and runs out. On her bed on top of the stove the old woman, her head lifted in an attitude of tense waiting, begins crooning a lullaby. Almost at once two rough soldiers led by the Menshevik and the kulak enter the yard and bang at the door. The crooning stops sharply. Finding no trace of Verenea in the room, they hold a conference.

"Wait," says the sleek kulak, stroking his beard, "she will come back. The baby must have its milk."

When they have gone, the old woman blows out the lamp and the place is in utter darkness. The crooning begins again. Gradually the light of morning comes. The two soldiers can be distinguished sitting against a tree. At last, in the growing light, the figure of Verenea approaches, moving stealthily toward the door, toward the baby waiting for its food. She is seized, she frees herself, turns and runs—into the arms of the other soldier. A brief struggle and she falls. The two soldiers creep away, clinging in terror to one another. A far-off chorus of boys and girls returning from some festival dies away.



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