FROM FACT TO FARCE

THE REALITY BEHIND BULGAKOV’S BLACK SNOW

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Thesis

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To Kate, who knew who Bulgakov was before I got the chance to hurl my knowledge at her.
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CHAPTER I
PURPOSE AND METHODS OF RESEARCH

The achievements of the Moscow Art Theatre, and, more specifically, Konstantin Stanislavski, are known throughout the theatrical world. The path to these achievements was a long and hard one. What started as a near perfect collaboration between two visionaries quickly became a battle of wills and intentions. Twenty-five years after its inception, the Art Theatre was desperate for a new voice, and it found one in a struggling writer.

Mikhail Bulgakov’s experience with the Art Theatre followed almost the exact same path as the theatre itself. However, the partnership soon became an exercise in mutual frustration. Artistic divisions and governmental censorship proved to be a larger challenge than the author could handle. Seemingly bereft of a future in the theatre, Bulgakov began to translate his real life experiences into a novel.

In *Black Snow*, Bulgakov created a satirical version of Stanislavski and the Art Theatre where both are the subject of barbs, inside jokes, and, ultimately, high admiration. *Black Snow* also offers a unique description of the life of a Russian playwright during the early 20th century. Although the novel, as a whole, is comical, a careful study of the anecdotes and situations it contains, when compared to the actual
historical events from which they were drawn, can provide keys to understanding Bulgakov’s true opinion of his struggle as a playwright, the Art Theatre, and Stanislavski.

The histories contained in this thesis should not be taken as exhaustive, but rather a highlight of events as they directly apply to the creation and content of *Black Snow*. For instance, no mention is made of the fact that Bulgakov was married multiple times, as neither his wives’ contribution to his work, nor what remains of their memoirs, contain real relevance to the focus of this thesis. Also, while the possibility exists that Bulgakov’s experience in the theatrical world of Moscow outside those at the Art Theatre could have contributed to the final product of *Black Snow*, only the experiences at the Moscow Art Theatre will be covered. The reason for this choice lies in the fact that the main character in *Black Snow* deals only with the fictional counterpart of the Art Theatre and the fact that most, if not all, scholars agree that *Black Snow* is a direct reaction to, and drawn primarily from, Bulgakov’s experiences at the Art Theatre.

There is no recognized standard history of the Art Theatre. While autobiographies exist for the two founders of the Art Theatre—Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko’s *My Life in the Russian Theatre* and Stanislavski’s *My Life in Art*—most of the information contained in this thesis regarding the Art Theatre is taken from Jean Benedetti’s *Stanislavski: A Biography* (1990), which not only cites the two autobiographies but also all available historical documents. Though Stanislavski is the focus of the book, Sharon Marie Carnicke notes there is no bias:

Benedetti’s style is sober and factual. He never fictionalizes Stanislavski’s inner life, as so many popularized biographies do. He sticks to the facts. Benedetti takes Stanislavski’s statements about himself with a grain of salt, even looking skeptically at the myths created in *My Life In Art*. (Carnicke 134)
All spelling of surnames and uniquely Russian words in this thesis follow those found in Benedetti’s work.

Finally, it should be known that the author of this thesis neither speaks nor reads the Russian language. Therefore, all references cited are either translations or works available in English.
CHAPTER II
THE HISTORY OF THE MOSCOW ART THEATRE

It started with an eighteen-hour lunch. Konstantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko both were planning to create a professional theatre that would lead the way to radical changes in the creation and presentation of plays. Stanislavski had proven himself as a talented director and actor, but was hindered by corporate obligations and familial pressure. Nemirovich-Danchenko had worked hard as a playwright and critic, resulting in his appointment to the head of the Moscow Conservatory’s drama department, where he held “rigorous and intelligent” (Stanislavski 59) courses in actor training, but grew frustrated by the stagnant nature of modern theatre. He tried multiple times to instigate change from within existing organizations, but each effort was hindered by bureaucracy. Stanislavski’s desire to create a new type of theatre seemed to be common knowledge, as was the fact that he had yet to make any decisions regarding funding. Nemirovich-Danchenko saw this as an opportunity to merge visions; and in June of 1897, he wrote an impassioned letter to Stanislavski asking to meet for lunch.

The meeting went far better than either man expected. By the time their conversation ended, 8 a.m. at a completely different restaurant, the two men had drafted a model for a new theatre that included ticket prices, potential ensemble members, artistic
goals, and most importantly, an exact division of authority. Nemirovich-Danchenko would handle the repertoire and Stanislavski would oversee the actual staging, with each having veto power over the other. The euphoria of the meeting left important issues such as a financial strategy unresolved. Nemirovich-Danchenko argued for a privately-held theatre, believing that the unpredictable power of investors could endanger the founders’ artistic vision. Stanislavski, relying on his greater experience in and connection to the bourgeoisie, pushed for investors. Nemirovich-Danchenko relented. With each investment, however, Nemirovich-Danchenko’s fears of outside control grew and he adopted a strategy to obtain as much management control as possible to protect his ideas.

One year after the initial meeting, Stanislavski had secured enough investment for the theatre’s inaugural season and the two began to operate under the name the Open Theatre. The name signified the hope that their theatre would be an artistically free entity that welcomed all classes to their productions. Stanislavski suggested an all-classical season, but the two went with Nemirovich-Danchenko’s preference of modern plays mixed with classical works that had relevance to contemporary problems. Nemirovich-Danchenko also held a hard line in terms of directorial license, claiming that their theatre’s potential significance hinged on their strict adherence to the playwright’s intent. The company’s first two productions, Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and Hauptmann’s *The Sunken Bell*, received mixed reviews. Some critics praised the works as perfect in pace and tone and others lambasted the overuse of realism. A truer mark of the success of the productions’ lay in the repeated attendance of Princess Elizaveta Fedorovna. Her support
was important because the government had yet to decide whether to close the theatre or allow it to continue.

With the end of the season approaching, the remaining five plays had to be fully produced in only five months. Nemirovich-Danchenko was away from Moscow attempting to finish a novel, so most of the preproduction work fell to Stanislavski. No appropriate rehearsal space was available in Moscow, so cast and crew relocated to a small country estate fifty miles from Moscow in Pushkino. Here the company lived as a community, with each assisting in the professional and domestic responsibilities. Since the workload was substantial, Stanislavski kept a book in which work, attendance, and reasons for tardiness were recorded.

Though time was crucial, Stanislavski led the actors in extensive research and seated rehearsals before he allowed them to take the stage. The actors, inexperienced and veterans alike, found Stanislavski’s approach to directing both challenging and refreshing. One veteran, who was selected to alternate the role of Shylock with Stanislavski, praised the director for freeing the role from clichés and reintroducing him to a character he’d already played for over eight years. Stanislavski’s push for realism was manifested both in the sets for the productions as well as in the direction for nonspeaking parts. Each actor in a crowd scene was given an individual character with explicit directions regarding their action on stage.

Eventually, Nemirovich-Danchenko joined the company and provided Stanislavski some relief from the taxing responsibilities for both the theatre’s business and artistic needs. Additional money was needed, but instead of seeking another investor, Nemirovich-Danchenko took out a personal loan. In addition to taking on the
responsibility for the business side of the theatre, Nemirovich-Danchenko also assisted in coaching actors with whom he had worked previously. At the same time, he began the difficult process of convincing playwright Anton Chekhov to allow the theatre to add *The Seagull* to its season.

During its first performance, Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, now hailed as a masterpiece, had been met with jeers and insults. The audience, expecting to see a comedy, had been unprepared for subtlety and tragedy. Chekhov did not take the reaction well and vowed that the play would not be seen in Moscow and that his time as a playwright was finished. Nemirovich-Danchenko, a friend of Chekhov, was determined to persuade the playwright to change his mind. It took four letters and a guarantee that Nemirovich-Danchenko understood the play more than any other director for Chekhov to consent. Of course, under the theatre’s current arrangement, Stanislavski, not Nemirovich-Danchenko, would direct *The Seagull*. Stanislavski’s name, however, was mentioned only once during the correspondence between Chekhov and Nemirovich-Danchenko.

At first, Stanislavski found the script difficult to grasp, but the more he worked on it, the more he became captivated. The final draft of Stanislavski’s directorial plan was extensive. “The production copy sets down every move, every gesture, exact facial expressions in almost cinematic detail” (*Stanislavski* 74). After repeated invitations, Chekhov attended a rehearsal. During conversations with the actors, Chekhov became concerned, questioning the overuse of realism. But after seeing the detailed action on stage, he was won over. He even went so far as to write to a close friend asking him to attend a performance.
Stanislavski’s attention soon turned to another play, *Tsar Fiodor*. Before any play could be produced, however, the script had to be approved by the Russian Government. *Tsar Fiodor*’s approval took nearly four months and required what Benedetti describes as petty but inevitable cuts and revisions. (*Stanislavski 78*). The first performance of *Tsar Fiodor* was highly stressful for Stanislavski. Although most of Moscow knew and liked him, they were prepared to see him fail. His failure would prove that a man of stature should not denigrate his class by abandoning one’s proper work for the theatre.

Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko knew that if there was any hope for the future of their theatre, *Tsar Fiodor* had to be a success. At the time, the company would take a curtain call after each act, a tradition designed to gauge the audience’s reaction as the play progressed. Response to the play was cold at first, but by the end of the play, the innovative staging and high attention to historical accuracy won over the audience. The press agreed and cited the company’s audacity in selecting a difficult play as a factor in the success.

The Art Theatre’s triumph was short-lived. Remounts of *Venice* and *Bell* were met with apathy. The church protested another play, which was subsequently banned, even though the script the company planned to use was a different translation and had been preapproved by the censors. Ticket sales for the next two productions were paltry, which caused hardship in the financial state of the company. The impact of the success of *Tsar Fiodor* was fleeting, and the theatre where the company performed was demanding rent payments and threatening legal action. If the Art Company were to survive, *The Seagull* had to be a resounding success.
Twenty-four rehearsals remained before the opening. Stanislavski requested that the opening be delayed by a week, but Nemirovich-Danchenko refused, feeling strongly that the move would be a mistake. Stanislavski countered by demanding his name be removed from the production, but Nemirovich-Danchenko talked him out of it. On opening night, the house was less than full. Stressed from the excessive pressure, the actors took Valerian drops, the late 19th century equivalent of tranquilizers. After the Act One curtain, the audience sat in silence. The company believed their work to be a failure. Then the applause started. Nemirovich-Danchenko asked for the curtain calls to be taken slowly, so as to precisely gauge the reaction. “Three or four curtain calls taken slowly meant success. Act One got six” (Stanislavski 83). The remaining three acts were met with equal enthusiasm. The press stated that the directors, actors, and playwright were unified in purpose, each deserving equal praise.

Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavski were unable to follow this triumph with another success. The next play, *Hedda Gabler*, fell far short of the bar The Seagull had set. Two major setbacks then occurred in quick succession. The theatre arranged a special performance for factory workers, which caused problems with the government. Nemirovich-Danchenko was summoned by General Dmitri Fedorovich Trepov, the Chief of the Moscow police, who was known to organize anti-revolutionary pogroms. Trepov informed Nemirovich-Danchenko that performances for working class audiences required special permission, and since the theatre had neglected this formality, they could be in serious trouble. Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavski understood that their choices were either conformity or prison, but either way the dream of an open theatre would not
survive. Soon after the summons, they dropped the word open from their name and elected, at Checkov’s suggestion, the title of Moscow Art Theatre.

The second setback came from an unlikely source. Finally established as a successful playwright, Chekhov was offered redemption for the initial performance of *The Seagull* when the Mali, an older and more established theatre, asked to produce his next play, *Uncle Vania*. To the dismay of Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavski, Chekhov agreed. However, the Mali-Chekhov partnership was short-lived. When the Mali Theatre demanded that Act Three be rewritten, Chekhov withdrew his script. Nemirovich-Danchenko seized the opportunity and appealed to Chekhov. Chekhov eventually handed over his script to the Moscow Art Theatre.

Although the first season was neither financially nor critically successful as a whole, Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko decided to build upon the individual successes and maintain the high artistic standards they set. Many of the same choices and issues from the first season were repeated in the second. Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavski decided once again upon a mix of classical and modern plays. Nemirovich-Danchenko traveled while the majority of the preproduction work fell to Stanislavski and Stanislavski pushed for a high amount of realism. Worried about his workload, Stanislavski appointed assistant directors to supervise early rehearsals. Nemirovich-Danchenko, seemingly concerned with Stanislavski’s health, wrote Stanislavski asking him to take it easy. A month later, however, Nemirovich-Danchenko asked Stanislavski for assistance in a play Nemirovich-Danchenko was supposed to be directing.

A production of *The Death of Ivan the Terrible* was troubled by Stanislavski’s continuing desire for realism and the public’s aversion to it. Stanislavski’s portrayal of
the lead character was critically praised for its combination of myth and humanity, but condemned by the public. The Russian audience, it seems, was not ready to abandon the grandiose image of historical figures.

Though an artistic divide began to grow between Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavski, their opposing strengths seemed to complement each other perfectly in the production of Chekhov’s *Uncle Vania*. Stanislavski initially chose the lead role for himself, but Nemirovich-Danchenko asked that he switch to the character of Dr. Astrov. Stanislavski struggled with a lack of sympathy for this character, and his acting choices caused Nemirovich-Danchenko concern. After being informed of Stanislavski’s approach to the character, Chekhov wrote to him: “Uncle Vanya moans and groans, but he [Astrov] whistles” (*Stanislavski* 95). When Stanislavski incorporated this note into his performance, his portrayal of Astrov changed. By the time of the opening, all remaining issues seemed to be resolved. In a letter to Chekhov, Vsevolod Meierhold, an actor in the company, praised the production, crediting the director-actor and director-playwright relationships in creating an artistically restrained performance.

The second season ended far better than the first. *Lonely People* by Hauptmann was very successful. Maxim Gorki, Lev Tolstoy, and Vladimir Lenin attended performances. Lenin’s eventual endorsement, both in policy and artistic practice, would ensure the theatre’s survival. Although debts were mounting and Stanislavski was extremely overworked, the future of the theatre seemed promising.

The third season began with the first major argument between Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavski. Morozov, a major investor whose contributions totaled nearly 150,000 roubles, had begun to take an interest in the day-to-day operations of the
theatre. Nemirovich-Danchenko’s constant fear of corporate takeover led him to believe the investor had sinister intentions and he wrote an angry letter to Stanislavski. Stanislavski did not take the letter well. His response to Nemirovich-Danchenko was equally emotional. He vouched for Morozov’s honest intentions and reminded Nemirovich-Danchenko that without the money they had collected from him and others, there would be no Moscow Art Theatre. Stanislavski also stated that he himself had made financial sacrifices as well as sacrifices in his public and private life to make the theatre work. He ended the letter by asking Nemirovich-Danchenko not to draw out conflict, but rather put his fears in check or end the theatre. Though Stanislavski’s strict reply put the argument to rest temporarily, the split between the two founders festered and increased.

The third season was much like the previous two in terms of hits, misses, and workload. Stanislavski, on Nemirovich-Danchenko’s insistence, spent a month away from Moscow in the hopes that the overworked director would rest. While away, Stanislavski was able to convince Chekhov to write a play for the third season and tailor it specifically for the company. The new play, *Three Sisters*, was the first of Chekhov’s works that Stanislavski undertook without any initial help from Nemirovich-Danchenko, who was invested in his solo directorial debut with the company. Though both cast and director approached the play with enthusiasm, rehearsals proved difficult. Stanislavski worked earnestly, but he knew the play was in trouble. Two weeks before the opening, Nemirovich-Danchenko, who had been away tending to his ailing sister, returned and gave the play a new perspective. After viewing each scene twice, he made adjustments to the pacing, stating that there could be no abrupt rhythmic changes between the scenes. Stanislavski welcomed the change, and the two proceeded to polish the rest of the play.
The production, like the two previous plays by Chekhov, was a success in Moscow. However, another more difficult audience awaited the company in St. Petersburg.

At the conclusion of the third season, the company took their productions to the seat of the Russian Government. The company expected poor reviews from the severe St. Petersburg critics. The actors were recognized as good, but deficient in individual talent. Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavski fared far better. “By the end of the tour, Stanislavski was hailed as Russia’s greatest actor” (Stanislavski 110). As in Moscow, the public’s reaction was far more positive. At the end of one performance, the audience rushed the stage, thanked Stanislavski by name, and attempted to pull the curtains open so they could see the actors.

The lease on the company’s theatre in Moscow ran out at the beginning of 1902. Though they were heavily in debt, the board signed a twelve-year lease on a new theatre and planned to completely renovate the space at a cost of 300,000 roubles. Existing shareholders refused to invest any additional money, so Morozov paid for the costs himself. Also, following Nemirovich-Danchenko’s plan to allow the actors to share in the profits, Morozov bought out all remaining investors and then loaned money to the actors so they might purchase stock in the theatre. This maneuver essentially made Morozov the sole owner of the company. However, one prominent actor, Meierhold, was not offered stock. Believing a forced departure was imminent, Meierhold resigned, took several members of the company with him, and formed a new theatre in the provinces. Morozov continued to extend his influence. “New articles of association were drawn up, giving Morozov almost absolute power over the members of the Board and the administration” (Stanislavski 116). A policy regarding repertoire was also adopted, which caused
immediate conflict with Nemirovich-Danchenko. Morozov pushed for the theatre to welcome a group of new playwrights, including Maxim Gorki, but Nemirovich-Danchenko claimed they were inferior writers. Nemirovich-Danchenko and Morozov shouted at each other until Nemirovich-Danchenko stormed out and slammed the door. Stanislavski remained silent, following a vow not to involve himself in the financial matters of the theatre.

Even through their growing conflict, Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavski continued to prove that their separate skills were highly complementary. Again Stanislavski struggled with the overall direction of a production of *The Lower Depths* by Gorki, as well as his individual role in it, and again Nemirovich-Danchenko offered the exact critique needed to solve the issues. The play was a success. Stanislavski praised Nemirovich-Danchenko’s assistance, but remained dissatisfied with his own performance. An overall feeling of artistic insignificance was beginning to haunt the acclaimed director. Though he received constant praise from critics and the public alike, Stanislavski found his own work lacking. Nemirovich-Danchenko warned Stanislavski that his perfectionism was taking a large toll on the company.

Nemirovich-Danchenko fought and won to have *Julius Caesar* added to the 1903-04 season. The addition was an attempt to shake the theatre out of an artistic rut as well as to establish Nemirovich-Danchenko’s “reputation as a director equal in stature to his partner” (*Stanislavski* 121). The two directors had differing ideas for the production, but Nemirovich-Danchenko held his own and chose to focus on the overarching political themes. Stanislavski regretted the difficulties he had imposed recently on the company and did his best to follow Nemirovich-Danchenko’s vision. This proved most difficult in
Stanislavski’s approach to the character he was playing, Brutus. By following
Nemirovich-Danchenko’s direction, Stanislavski was unable to explore the psychological
side of his character.

Stanislavski was again alone in his distaste for his acting. Praise came from
theatre critics and the public, yet each performance was torturous for Stanislavski. Three
weeks into the run, he confessed his struggle with Nemirovich-Danchenko while
Morozov was within earshot. Nemirovich-Danchenko saw the confession as an attack on
his own artistic integrity, and wrote a letter questioning why Stanislavski would lambast a
production considered an achievement by everyone else. He also attacked Stanislavski’s
mood and took potshots at his shortcomings as a director. Stanislavski was shocked to
receive the letter, and responded by saying his confession was only criticizing himself.
The conflict between the two directors became public and further revealed that
Stanislavski was gradually being perceived as an outsider in his own theatre. Several
members of the company made it known that if the conflict escalated and Nemirovich-
Danchenko left, they would leave as well. As with the previous conflicts, Stanislavski
penned a letter to Nemirovich-Danchenko. While it contained a good amount of
exaggeration, the sentiment was clear: if he were more of burden than a contributor, he
would resign. The letter worked. Nemirovich-Danchenko apologized for his overreaction
and the two put the event behind them.

After three dissatisfying performances, Stanislavski was thrilled at the prospect of
directing a new Chekhov play. *The Cherry Orchard* was intrinsically tied to the Moscow
Art Theatre. Chekhov wrote the characters specifically for company actors; some were
based on mutual friends of Stanislavski and Chekhov, and the setting was taken directly
from Stanislavski’s summer home. The collaboration between Chekhov and Stanislavski was smooth at first, but eventually the two divided on the very nature of the play with Chekhov believing it was a light comedy and Stanislavski arguing it was a tragic drama. Chekhov died six months after the play opened. Though their final venture was contentious, the playwright’s passing weighed heavily on Stanislavski.

Chekhov’s death was not the only misfortune of 1904. Nemirovich-Danchenko’s conflict with Morozov finally reached an impasse. Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote a contemptuous letter regarding Gorki’s new play, Summerfolk, saying it was “shapeless, formless, having no centre or plot” (Stanislavski 139). Gorki replied by stating that no play of his would ever be performed at a theatre where Nemirovich-Danchenko was in charge. Morozov resigned from the board, greatly reduced his investment, and promised no more of his money would be used at the theatre.

Meierhold returned to Moscow in 1905, bringing with him a report of his work. His theatrical experiments excited Stanislavski and the two talked extensively. After his departure, Meierhold sent Stanislavski an outline for a Theatre-Studio, a term he had invented, which combined the two men’s visions for the future of theatre. Stanislavski gathered actors from the Moscow Art Theatre and Meierhold’s company, and established the Studio outside of Pushkino with Meierhold in charge. Though the Studio was associated with the Art Theatre, Stanislavski paid for everything out of pocket, including a 20,000-rouble renovation of a local theater. Nemirovich-Danchenko did not voice complaint or concern.

Stanislavski attempted to bring innovations from the Studio into the Art Theatre. Instead of preliminary analysis, he planned to initiate rehearsals with improvisation.
Nemirovich-Danchenko, believing that a playwright’s intent was law, was outraged. Moreover, he believed the Studio was a grand scheme by Meierhold to steal Stanislavski from the Art Theatre. Again, Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote an angry letter, this time totaling twenty-eight pages with an equally long postscript. Again, Stanislavski responded. This time, however, Stanislavski did not express contrition. He severely rebuked his partner and carefully outlined the facts of the situation. Nemirovich-Danchenko’s response was far calmer than his initial letter. He recognized that the two would no longer see eye to eye, but affirmed that they had to compromise for the sake of the company. The Studio produced no real artistic breakthrough. While the productions seemed inspiring in a smaller space, they did not translate well to the larger theatre in Moscow. Stanislavski was disappointed with the artistic result and worried about the financial loss. Meierhold saw the experiment as proof that a whole new approach to theatre was needed, and he set off to discover it.

In 1906, revolution was a constant threat in Russia. Strikes were frequent, and often ended in bloodshed. In October, one strike instigated a large-scale street fight. Stanislavski was convinced that the theatre should have an integral part in the revolution and refused to cancel rehearsals. Eventually, the rest of the company convinced him that working during the violence was too dangerous. A week later, the revolt was brutally suppressed. Stanislavski was despondent, questioning whether or not his art had any place in the current Russia. He and Nemirovich-Danchenko decided to close the theatre and take the company on an international tour.

The tour, which included Austria and Germany, was a resounding success. Europe and beyond recognized the Art Theatre as being at the forefront of theatrical innovation.
The increase in recognition, however, slowed artistic development. The plays selected for the tour were old, proven works. Subsequent tours, which gave the public what it expected to see, also contributed to artistic stagnation.

The separation between Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavski sharpened over the next five years. Stanislavski spent most of his time and energy discovering his system for acting; Nemirovich-Danchenko focused on making the Art Theatre financially stable and consolidating power over the company. Stanislavski, aware that the board might eventually remove him from the Art Theatre, submitted a document explaining his intentions and setting conditions for the next three years. His primary focus would be teaching, and he would refuse any and all managerial responsibilities. Nemirovich-Danchenko agreed with Stanislavski’s demands, and then passed new statutes through the board, essentially giving himself full administrative control of the theatre. Nemirovich-Danchenko did not abuse the new power, but rather craftily used it to show that he and Stanislavski were still collaborators while simultaneously making sure that Stanislavski remained under his control. Within the year, Nemirovich-Danchenko announced that the Art Theatre would adopt Stanislavski’s system as the official teaching method and informed the board that Stanislavski should be given all necessary support for his efforts.

Stanislavski’s next goal was to form another studio in which to apply properly his method. Unlike the first studio effort, the second proved to be an artistic success. Stanislavski gathered a group of experienced young actors, including Yevgeny Vakhtangov and Michael Chekhov. The new company rehearsed in a modest space and with limited time, as the actors maintained their obligations to the larger company. By the end of the 1914-15 season, the First Studio “had established itself as the centre for
original work and sensitive expressive acting” (Stanislavski 199). With each new group of students, Stanislavski had to start anew, thus new studios were created. The Second Studio started in 1916, the Third Studio in 1920, the Fourth Studio in 1921, and an Opera Studio in 1918.

While artistic innovation was apparent in the First Studio, the Art Theatre’s output was extremely predictable. Neither new writers nor experimentation appeared in the productions. Nemirovich-Danchenko attempted to get Stanislavski out of the Studio and back into management in the Art Theatre, but the shareholders voted to extend Stanislavski’s previous agreement. Stanislavski offered a solution to the board, asking them to allow all future Art Theatre productions to begin in the Studios. Nemirovich-Danchenko refused.

Between 1917 and 1922 the Art Theatre staged only one new production, Byron’s Cain. Cain was Stanislavski’s attempt to make theatre relevant to his country, which had just come out of a deadly revolution. The production was an immediate failure and only played for eight performances. At the same time, the First Studio was beginning to disappoint Stanislavski. “He saw that in their ideological zeal these talented people were mindlessly rejecting the past and trying to artistically run before they could walk” (Stanislavski 251). Stanislavski yearned for the relevance the Art Theatre had enjoyed during its early years, but recognized that those achievements were due in large part to the company’s collaboration with Chekhov. A rejuvenation of the Art Theatre would not happen without a new playwright.
CHAPTER III
THE LIFE OF BULGAKOV

Grandson of a priest, son of a theologian, Mikhail Bulgakov was born in 1891 in Kiev to a wealthy family. Signs pointing to his eventual career as a writer were evident in his youth. As a child, Bulgakov created elaborate schemes to make his family believe in ghosts; he told fantastical tales with a strictly straight face and, more often than not, he was the life of the party. His parents made sure to supplement his upper class education with as many forays into various disciplines in the arts as possible. These educational adventures presented opportunities that brought him into contact with his future employers. The Art Theatre’s traveling company made its way to Kiev in 1912, bringing with them their new approach to the stage. There is no evidence that the Bulgakov family attended these performances; however, scholars agree on the likelihood of their presence.

Bulgakov discovered his penchant for writing during his primary education, but was not be able to pursue a literary career until later in life. After the death of his father in 1907, Bulgakov’s mother turned her son’s focus to medicine. This phase of his life involved prominent hospitals, private practice, and, ultimately, military service during the Russian Civil War. While in the Caucasus, during what was to be his final military tour in 1919, Bulgakov nearly died from typhus. This experience prompted him to abandon
medicine for a career in writing. During the next year, he published his first book, as well as writing two plays that were performed in a local city theater.

In 1921, Bulgakov moved to Moscow. Traveling with no possessions and little money, he embarked on a grueling journey, part of which involved a one-hundred mile trek beside railroad tracks. At the time, Moscow was overflowing with country immigrants, so housing and work were scarce. Bulgakov found a place with his sister and her husband, and with the recommendations he had accumulated from his service in the war, he was able to secure a low-level job with a publisher. Books were considered a luxury and were as likely to be burned for heat as read. There was virtually no money to be made in publishing at this time. Eventually, Bulgakov’s publisher tried to pay him in matches, an episode he would later use in his work *Diaboiad*.

Bulgakov moved to a trade chronicle and served as editor. Most of his workday involved walking around the city, gathering information, editing it, and then presenting it for publication. These activities left him little time to focus on his own work. Since he had no typewriter, nor money to purchase one, he found a typist who agreed to wait for payment until the works were published. “He would come into her room with notebooks and loose pages which he would consult before dictating, but often there was no manuscript as such to work from, and he seemed to be working from memory” (Proffer 57). Payment for his work at the trade chronicle and several similar jobs to follow dwindled from enough to cover his bills to barely enough to buy food. He attempted to balance this discrepancy by seeking publication of his own work wherever it was possible. While Bulgakov was successful in publishing *feuilletons*, small works of fiction
included in newspapers or magazines, the lack of interest in his larger works was the cause of great frustration for the author.

Both the Russian government and, in turn, the publishing industry had strict rules about what could and could not be published. If any work was deemed anticommunist or contained material unsuitable for the average Russian, it would not be printed. Bulgakov’s first experience with this problematic system came with his work, Notes on the Cuff. A heavily autobiographical yet still fictional work, Notes on the Cuff dealt with the author’s experiences in the Caucasus. When the first part was published, it was heavily censored because the editors found “the references to famine, typhus and political clashes a little too sensitive for their readership” (Proffer 77). For two years, Bulgakov fought to have additional parts published, but eventually Notes on the Cuff was banned completely. Another work, Notes of a Young Doctor, existed in draft form as early as 1919, but was not fully published until 1927. The conflict between what was considered appropriate at the time and what Bulgakov wanted to write would become a defining theme of the author’s career.

During this period, Bulgakov began to work on his first novel, The White Guard. Inspired by his experience in the war, the novel follows the fate of the Turbin family as The Red Army (communists and eventual victors) and The White Army (anticommunists) battle over the city of Kiev. The first thirteen chapters of the novel were published in a literary journal; but before Bulgakov could complete the final chapters, the journal faltered, its editor was exiled, and the journal shut down. The novel was ultimately published in its entirety in Paris four years later.
Print publication, however, was not Bulgakov’s only option to get his work out to the masses. He built some buzz for *The White Guard* by holding public readings at every opportunity. This buzz, combined with the partial publication, caught the attention of the leadership at the Art Theatre and, in 1925, they approached Bulgakov with a proposal to bring *The White Guard* to the stage.

The association of Bulgakov with the Art Theatre was equally important to both theatre and playwright. Although Bulgakov was known for his prose, his reputation was limited to small literary circles. To have his name attached to the Moscow Art Theatre was a major step forward in his career. For the Art Theatre, it was a step toward revitalization. The theatre’s reputation had begun to decline, partly because their play selection was completely devoid of any modern material. Moreover, Stanislavski believed that “a transfusion of young blood into the theatre’s main company was urgently needed” (*Mikhail Bulgakov: A Critical Biography* 107). *The White Guard*, or *The Days of the Turbins*, as the theatrical version would come to be known, served both concerns.

With the events of the play occurring just eight years earlier, *Turbins* was by far the most modern play the Art Theatre had ever selected. This fact provided the opportunity for theatergoers to experience a story drawn from their own lifetimes. Moreover, many recent immigrants to Moscow had lived through the revolution. Though there were other theatrical offerings that dealt with the war, *Turbins* was unique in that the Red Army was portrayed in a decidedly unflattering light. In fact, the original version of the play left The Red Army out entirely.

Leslie Milne explains that *Turbins* offered a second and equally important benefit to the Art Theatre. Many of the theatre’s modern acting legends were at or closely
approaching the age of fifty. *Turbins* “was the play that established, overnight, the reputation of the ‘youngsters’, the Moscow Art Theatre’s ‘second generation’ (*Mikhail Bulgakov: A Critical Biography* 107). The advantages that Turbins offered, the modern subject and young cast, were most likely a factor in the Art Theatre’s resolve to fight for the production.

The Art Theatre directors expected *Turbins* to run afoul of the censors, just as the novel had. To their surprise, the first report back mentioned no concerns regarding the plot. The censors even went so far as to say the play was wonderful. However, the sense of relief upon receiving this unexpected good news was short-lived. Not two weeks later, the censors informed the theatre that, though the play might be politically acceptable, it was an artistic disaster. Regardless of the language of the complaint, all involved now feared the play would suffer the same fate as the novel.

Bulgakov tried his best to resist any and all changes to the play, whether the suggestions came from the censors or from Stanislavski himself. He even went so far as to write a letter to the theatre’s leadership asking to have his play removed from the season if certain changes were imposed on him. Since the play was of great importance to the theatre, every possible effort was made to satisfy Bulgakov’s concerns.

Despite the author’s diligence, *Turbins* sustained major changes. Among the multitude of rewrites, which included deletion of characters, a major reduction in length, removal or merging of scenes, and elimination of entire plotlines, the most telling change was the title of the work itself. The title of the novel, *The White Guard*, indicated the story would tell the tale of the war’s losing side. However, the play’s title, *The Days of the Turbins*, points toward a more specific focus on the family experience. What
remained of the White Army in the original play was either diluted or completely negated. Eventually, the censors demanded that no evidence of the White Army’s heroism should remain in the production. By the time the play was finally approved, the theme was advertised as showing “how revolution changes people… and the fate of those who accepted the Revolution and those who didn’t” (Proffer 189).

Although it is safe to assume that the final version of *Turbins* was far removed from Bulgakov’s original intent, the playwright had a greater than normal involvement in the production. He was present at most of the rehearsals, frequently stepping in to assist the actors in their characterization. Some rehearsals, according to Stanislavski, were held entirely by the playwright.

The critical reaction to the play was mostly negative, mainly due to the official opinion that the content of *Turbins* was too sensitive and too recent for the average Russian. However, if the critics viewed the production as a whole in a negative light, all agreed that the actors were brilliant. In spite of critical opinion, public reaction was the most telling factor in regard to the impact of the play. Their reaction made it clear that the censors’ attempts to paint the White Army as evil villains had failed. Instead, the White Army was humanized:

> Here, after ten years of propaganda portrayals as “monsters of Depravity,” were live White Guardsmen, walking around a stage in those uniforms so weighted with emotional significance. Here was a vanished way of life, the passing of which was certainly regretted by part of the audience. (Proffer 198)

The impact was powerful enough for the Moscow Art Theatre that *Turbins* came to be known as the new *Seagull*. Word of mouth spread quickly and performances consistently sold out. Eventually, *Turbins*, which was performed nearly 1000 times, became one of
the theatre’s most lucrative productions. *Turbins* reestablished the Art Theatre’s reputation as the focal point for innovative Russian theatre. The impact of the play for the author, however, was a mixed blessing.

Bulgakov attended many performances of the play, apparently relishing the opportunities to experience the magic of seeing characters and events that originated in his imagination come to life on the stage. The play was successful enough that Bulgakov became a household name. Ultimately, he went on to write other plays for the Moscow Art Theatre, making it possible for him to focus entirely on his writing.

Unfortunately, his fame and the subject matter of *Turbins* resulted in him becoming a symbol for anticommunism. Critics of the play increased their efforts to stop public performances of *Turbins*, attacking both author and play with great fervor. Bulgakov took these attacks to heart, cutting out each bad review and collecting them in an album. Out of 301 reviews, only three were favorable. The political tide against the play was strong enough that one reviewer, who, even as he condemned the play as an obvious attempt to “rehabilitate the White Guard morally” (Proffer 200), was denounced by his employers for giving *Turbins* too favorable a review. Ultimately, the critics won and, in 1929, the play was banned.

The dichotomy of fame and notoriety followed Bulgakov throughout his career. Only two more of his plays were produced during his lifetime. The rest were banned before rehearsals could begin. Bulgakov did not fare well in the face of such rancorous political pressure. He wrote two letters to Joseph Stalin (who enjoyed *Turbins* and was rumored to have attended the play at least seven times), asking for permission to emigrate from Russia. But Stalin, perhaps acting on the (slightly altered) adage that one should
keep one’s friends close and one’s popular political enemies closer, refused the visa request. Instead, he appointed Bulgakov to a position at the Art Theatre.

Bulgakov and Stanislavski had disagreed on certain elements during rehearsals for *Turbins*, but the two were able to establish a middle ground and mount a successful production that was acceptable to both of them. Ten years later, during rehearsals for *The Cabal of Hypocrites*, Bulgakov’s adaptation of the life of French playwright Molière, the two argued over the physicality of the main character and the need for editorial changes—in some cases new text and in other cases fundamentally reconceiving the play itself. Neither Bulgakov nor Stanislavski was willing to cede control. The proceedings of one rehearsal, which involved a deliberate rejection of the written text and the creation of new scenes and situations, were sent to Bulgakov under Stanislavski’s orders. Bulgakov responded by demanding the altered script be restored or that the play be removed from the upcoming season. Clearly, artistic differences were frustrating to both artists, but Bulgakov’s greatest frustration was the extremely slow pace of the production process.

Though Stanislavski was not the director of *Cabal*, most, if not all, of the rehearsals were held under his direct supervision. Instead of the normal process of scoring action or guiding characterization, he would consume entire rehearsals with seemingly minor details such as how one actor should properly bow. “A suspicious number of the main actors” (Proffer 428) were out with colds during one early rehearsal, signifying their unwillingness to be subjected to apparently pointless exercises. Bulgakov himself was absent from many rehearsals claiming to be ill, which, due to the amount of stress he seemed to be under, may very well have been true. After 290 rehearsals, Stanislavski eventually stepped down from the production and, despite his objections,
allowed the play to be performed. The run was extremely short—only seven performances. The play’s lack of success and early closing had less to do with internal conflict than it did with a devastating review. The play was attacked for abandoning realism and choosing to portray glamour and luxury at a time when the Communist Revolution had led the country into great poverty. Compared to the success of Turbins, Cabal was a complete failure.

By the time of his death in 1940, Bulgakov’s reputation was based almost entirely on the success of his first play. However, since his death, his works have received what has been called a “literary resurrection” (Mikhail Bulgakov: A Critical Biography 2) with many works receiving productions as well as critical acclaim. His most famous work, The Master and Margarita, was “at once perceived as being unlike anything that had preceded it in Soviet literature of the previous four decades” (Mikhail Bulgakov: A Critical Biography 228). Although embattled in life, Bulgakov has become a legend of Russian literature, so much so that when astrophysicist L. Karachkina needed three names for asteroids, he chose Dostoevsky, Pasternak, and Bulgakov.
CHAPTER IV
HISTORY AND MAIN CHARACTERS OF BLACK SNOW

After his experience with *The Cabal of Hypocrites*, Bulgakov believed that his career in the theatre was over. It seemed he had two choices: to retain his artistic vision and have his plays continually banned; or to compromise and create something against his principles. Though this was a dark realization, it provided him with a sense of freedom. Bulgakov was known to recount his experiences at the Art Theatre to friends and at parties to great acclaim. Eventually, he collected these “party” anecdotes and created a draft of a novel. Not much is known about this draft because soon after it was finished, Bulgakov burned it in his stove. The inspiration for the novel was the individuals with whom he still worked at the Art Theatre. If they disliked the novel, they could further damage Bulgakov’s reputation or get him banned from the theatre entirely.

Before the production of *Cabal*, Bulgakov was not willing to take this risk. After *Cabal*, however, he believed that he had nothing else to lose and he began work on a second draft of the novel, eventually titled *Black Snow*.

Work on the novel was sporadic, occurring between paid projects. During the writing process he often read sections to friends, many of whom still worked at The Moscow Art Theatre. These individuals enjoyed the novel as satire, laughing at the way
Bulgakov described the theatre, knowing that these barbs were thinly-veiled truth. Eventually, nearly everyone at the theatre knew of the novel’s existence.

A final draft of *Black Snow* was never completed. Two years after *Cabal*, it seemed that another of Bulgakov’s plays might pass the censors and reach production. Whether it was this hope that prompted him to cease work on *Black Snow*, or the knowledge that his health was deteriorating, is unknown. From the autumn of 1937 until his death in 1940, his writing was almost exclusively dedicated to his final and most well-known novel, *The Master and Margarita*.

*Black Snow*, Bulgakov’s satire of the workings of the Moscow Art Theatre, was published posthumously. Since Bulgakov’s drafts were not in final form, discrepancies in characters and plot elements remained, forcing editors to guess the author’s intentions. Despite these inconsistencies, the finished product has a “polished quality,” (Proffer 460) due mainly to the fact that Bulgakov had been refining the stories into a finished narrative through party conversations and public readings. Most importantly, “virtually nothing in this unfinished work is without real-life foundation. It was clearly intended to cover Bulgakov’s theatre career from start to finish” (Proffer 460).

In an attempt to clarify the relevant plot points of *Black Snow*, a description of the major characters of the novel, along with the perceived identity of their real world counterparts, will now be provided. Comparisons between the fictional characters and their real world counterparts, however, will be included in a later chapter.

Sergi Maxudov, whose historical counterpart is Bulgakov himself, is the main character and narrator. Maxudov, a struggling writer, is hired by The Independent
Theatre, the counterpart of The Moscow Art Theatre, to turn his novel into a play for the theatre’s upcoming season.

Ivan Vasilievich (Stanislavski) is one of two primary producers at The Independent Theatre. Aristarkh Platonovich (Nemirovich-Danchenko) is the second. The two do not speak and, in effect, they have split the theatre into two factions. Employees at the Independent Theatre are loyal to one or the other, but never both. During the events of the novel, Platonovich is abroad in India.

Pytor Bombardov, an actor at the Independent Theatre, is a guide and confidant for Maxudov. Bombardov does not seem to have a direct historical counterpart, but rather serves as a composite of anyone who assisted Bulgakov during his time at The Moscow Art Theatre.

Thomas Strizh (Ilya Sudakov) is a producer at the Independent Theatre. Sudakov produced Turbins for the Art Theatre. Misha Panin (counterpart unknown) is the literary editor at The Independent Theatre. Both are early fans of Maxudov’s play and are firmly in the Platonovich camp. At the end of the novel, they are credited with assisting Maxudov’s play when all hope seems lost.

Xavier Ilchin is another producer at the Independent Theatre. Ilchin, who wrote Maxudov asking to meet about his novel, serves as Maxudov’s first contact from the Independent Theatre. Although it was Sudakov who wrote to Bulgakov asking to talk about The White Guard, since the character Strizh is the eventual producer for Maxudov’s play, Ilchin’s counterpart is unclear.
CHAPTER V
THE PLOT OF BLACK SNOW

This thesis focuses primarily on the elements of *Black Snow* that relate to the Independent Theatre. These elements will be explored in some depth, while those that do not relate to the Independent Theatre will be treated briefly. Also, any page or chapter references relate to the first English version of *Black Snow*, translated by Michael Glenny and published in 1967 by Simon and Schuster.

Although the first chapter of the novel brings the reader to the door of the Independent Theatre, it serves primarily as an introduction to a flashback, which is covered in chapters two through seven. In Chapter One of the novel, our hero, Sergi Leontievich Maxudov, arrives at the steps of the Independent Theatre carrying a letter of invitation from one of the theatre’s producers, Xavier Borisovich Ilchin. During Maxudov’s meeting with Ilchin, Maxudov is shocked to learn that Ilchin has read his novel.

In Chapter Two, Maxudov is a proof reader at *The Shipping Gazette*, a publication that deals primarily with marine transport. Maxudov hates his job, which prompts him to pen a novel based on dreams he had of his hometown. While writing his novel, he expends as little energy as possible at work and calls in sick as much as is allowed. Upon completion, Maxudov reads his novel to guests over four separate evenings. The first
reading is held at his house for only four guests; the last is held at the house of a short story writer with twenty people in attendance. At the final reading, Likospastov, an elderly writer, dominates the conversation and both berates and praises Maxudov’s novel. He says it is an intriguing work but that it is written terribly. He compares Maxudov to Dostoevski while claiming Bulgakov has no idea what the story actually needs. Likospastov is also adamant that the censors would never publish the novel. Embarrassed and confused by the discrepancy in the comments, Maxudov leaves the party without saying goodbye to his host or friends.

True to Likospastov’s prediction, Maxudov’s novel is rejected as unsuitable. Though he sends it to only one journal, Maxudov does not take the criticism and rejection well and promptly plans to kill himself. His plan involves stealing a gun from a friend, returning to his apartment, and shooting himself. However, before he is able to pull the trigger, he is interrupted by a knock on the door. It is Ilya Ivanovich Rudolfi, editor of The Motherland, who arrives at the behest of Likospastov. Rudolfi demands to read the novel and then offers to publish it.

The reader then follows Maxudov through a complicated series of events: parties with writers, quitting his job, promises of payment, and the mysterious disappearance of two different publishers. Maxudov’s novel is eventually published, but since the publishing house has also disappeared, Maxudov has only a few complimentary copies of the publication as proof of his accomplishment. Eventually, Maxudov returns to his job at the Shipping Gazette. He also begins to write a new work of fiction. Rather than a novel, however, the new work is a stage play. Upon completion of the first scene, the letter from Ilchin, first introduced in Chapter One, arrives.
Chapter Eight returns to the time and place where Chapter One left off: the 
meeting between Maxudov and Ilchin. Ilchin informs Maxudov that he wants Maxudov 
to turn *Black Snow* into a play so the Academy of Drama, which is part of the 
Independent Theatre, can produce it. Ilchin then gives Maxudov a short tour of the 
theatre, during which Maxudov remarks that he believes he has found his home. The tour 
begins and ends in a small theatre that seats approximately 300 people. A golden horse, 
rearing up on its hind legs, stands in the middle of the stage. Maxudov is then given a 
pass for the play, *The Favorites*, being staged in the small theatre.

A month later, Maxudov meets with Ilchin, Eulampia Petrovna, the theatrical 
producer, and Misha Panin, the literary editor, and reads them his novel. The three 
implore him to finish the adaptation so that it can be ready for the upcoming season. Over 
the next four months, Maxudov does just that.

Maxdov begins to meet others at the Independent Theatre, including Anton 
Antonovich Knyazhevich, who is in charge of new play selection, and Pytor Bombardov, 
an actor. Bombardov gives Maxudov a tour of the portrait gallery, which holds paintings 
of well-known actors and writers as well as past and present staff of the theatre. During 
the tour, Bombardov tells the story of Major General Claudius Alexandrovich 
Komarovsky-Echappard de Bioncourt. After attending a play at the Academy of Drama, 
Bioncort wrote a letter to his commander requesting to be relieved of duty so that he can 
become an actor.

After the tour, Maxudov is led to the office of Gavril Stepanovich, the business 
manager, to sign a contract. Agusta Menazhraki joins the meeting. Maxudov finds that 
the contract contains many restrictions, which include:
The Author shall not offer his play to any other theater in Moscow. The author shall not offer his play to any theatre whatsoever in Leningrad. The Author shall not offer his play to any other town whatsoever in the R.S.F.S.R. The Author shall not offer his play to any other town whatsoever in the U.S.S.R. The Author shall not have his play printed. The Author shall not have the right to make such-and-such a demand of the Theater – what it was, I forget (clause twenty-one). The Author shall not have the right to protest about something or other (I forget what). … The Author must … unreservedly and without delay to incorporate into the said Work all such corrections, alterations, emendations or abridgements as the Management or any Commission, Institution, Organization, Body Corporate or Natural Person thereunto empowered shall require, for the execution whereof he may demand no emoluments other than those specified in clause fifteen. (72)

Maxudov is overwhelmed by the experience, and signs the contract without consideration. Stepanovich tries to talk Maxudov into taking less money than was verbally agreed upon, but Maxudov stands firm.

Two days later, Maxudov revisits the Independent Theatre to see the posting of the season’s plays. The upcoming season includes Black Snow, as well as Agamemnon by Aeschylus, Philoctetes by Sophocles, Fenisa’s Bait by Lope de Vega, King Lear by Shakespeare, The Maid of Orleans by Schiller, and Not of This World, by Ostrovsky. Maxudov, feeling extremely proud of having his play included in such company, overhears a conversation between Likospastov and a fat, dark-haired man named Volkodov, both of whom question why Maxudov is included in the season. Maxudov confronts them and seizes the opportunity to gloat. Maxudov enters the theatre and meets Thomas Strizh, a producer at the Independent Theatre. Strizh informs Maxudov that he will be producing Black Snow, which is news to Maxudov as he believed that Eulampia Petrovna was enlisted as producer. Strizh does not take this information well and threatens to write to India, which the reader later learns means to contact Aristarkh
Platonovich, who co-directs the Independent Theatre. Strizh asks Maxudov to see Polixena Toropetzkaya, Platonovich’s secretary, and to have Black Snow transcribed.

When Maxudov arrives at the secretary’s office, the secretary is arguing with an employee, who has failed to secure a travel warrant for Platonovich’s cousin. Shortly after the employee leaves, Ludmilla Silvestrovna, a well-known actress in the Independent Theatre, arrives. The actress becomes enraged when she is told she has to fill out a questionnaire and promptly leaves. The secretary and Maxudov continue to transcribe the play amidst an ongoing flurry of activity, including actors and actresses who ask if Platonovich has sent them notes from India. One young actress did receive notes, and the secretary reads them aloud:

The answer is that Veshnyakova should not enter through the big double doors center stage, but from the side, near the piano. She shouldn’t forget that she has recently lost her husband and in her state of mind nothing would induce her to come in by the center doors. She could walk like a nun, looking down at the floor and holding a little bunch of marguerites – so appropriate for a widow… (94-95)

After the first day, the secretary is released from her normal duties and she and Maxudov move to a more secluded location and continue to transcribe. With most of the distractions removed, Maxudov finds the secretary to be extremely efficient. At various times, Maxudov can hear sounds from the rehearsal of Stenka Razin.

During a break, Maxudov begins to explore more of the theatre and eventually stumbles across Phillip Phillippovich Tulumbasov, the house manager. Tulumbasov is a flurry of activity with attention split between three phones and a mass of individuals. Eventually, Maxudov learns that the people want tickets from Tulumbasov. Maxudov tries to guess which patron will be accommodated and which will be refused, but
Tulumbasov seems to work from a scale discernable to no one else. Well-dressed patrons are refused while those who look poor are given free passes. Maxudov becomes infatuated with Tulumbasov, calling him “a psychologist of the highest order” with “A perfect knowledge of human nature.” (103)

Upon completion of the transcription, Maxudov is commanded by Stritzh to travel to the home of, and read the play to Ivan Vasilievich. Before the journey, Bombardov imparts overly-specific advice to Maxudov, which includes exactly what Bombardov will see when he enters the compound, what the staff will say, and what to say in reply. Bombardov also advises Maxudov to lie about his father’s occupation, his lack of use of homeopathic medicine, and his knowledge of Misha Panin. Finally, Bombardov implores Maxudov to omit the section of his play in which a character is shot.

Maxudov finds the journey exactly as Bombardov said it would be. However, he fails to follow the advice regarding his father and the gunshot, both of which cause Vasilievich concern, the latter far more than the former. Vasilievich first demands that Maxudov cut the scene that contains the gun, imploring him to have the character stab himself off stage instead. Maxov argues for the necessity of the gun, but his pleas are ignored. Bombardov’s demand for revisions continue with the addition of characters, removal of others, and the renaming of most of those who remain. Vasilievich ends the visit by instructing Maxudov that he should write about a specific list of characters that seem to be based on older actors at the Independent Theatre.

Maxudov returns home to find an article written by Volkodov, whom Maxudov met in front of the Independent Theatre’s season poster. The article described Shakespeare, Moliere, Lope de Vega, and Chekhov laughing at a character obviously
based on Maxudov. Likospastov enters Maxudov’s apartment and explains that this will not be the last such criticism to come Maxudov’s way, as several playwrights considered it an affront that an amateur was included in the Independent Theatre’s season.

Days later, Bombardov visits Maxudov’s apartment and reports that major damage has been done to the probability of Black Snow appearing on stage. Bombardov explains that no one ever argues with Vasilievich and the proper response is to say yes and thank you, even if his demands will not be carried out. Maxudov inquires how Platonovich handles Vasilievich, and Bombardov explains that the two have not been on speaking terms for years, handling their responsibilities completely without consulting each other.

Eventually Maxudov is summoned back to the theatre. Upon arrival, he notices that everyone seems to be putting on airs and dressing in finer clothes. Maxudov is led into a meeting with Vasilievich, Misha Panin, and several other important figures in The Independent Theater. One such person, presumably an actor, begins the meeting by praising specific elements of the novel form of Black Snow, then claiming that as a play it would be a failure. Maxudov takes no solace in the compliments, as all were fabricated, indicating that the actor had read neither the play nor the novel. Sensing that all in the room find his play unsuitable, he asks that they hand it back to him. Stepanovich responds that the contract would prohibit Maxudov from offering it to any other theatre in Russia. Vasilievich, attempting to console Maxudov, explained his intentions were solely to prevent Maxudov from fearful harm and certain danger, especially if Strizh produced the play. Maxudov awkwardly stands, bows, and runs from the theatre.
Maxudov, desperate to learn the final judgment of his script, invites Bombardov over for a wake. Bombardov reveals that those gathered in the meeting were the founding members of the theatre, the youngest of whom is 55. In order to understand the company better, Maxudov presses Bombardov to give him information about each of its founding members. Reluctantly Bombardov tells him two stories. First he tells of Margarita Petrovna Tavricheskaya who has based her career and her right to have her opinions heard on the fact that in 1885 the great Russian director Alexander Ostrovsky had faintly praised her as being “very good” (141). In Bulgakov’s novel, Bombardov goes on to recount, in much greater detail, the story of actor Gornostayev. Bombardov explains that Gornostayev arrived at the theatre one day and sadly announced that he had been diagnosed with cancer. Immediately he was sent to a hospital outside of Switzerland to receive treatment for which the theatre paid. Time passed, and all at the theatre assumed that Gornostayev had died. At some time later another member of the theatre, sent to Paris on theatre business discovered Gornostayev apparently quite healthy, sitting in a restaurant with two young women. Gornostayev explained that the Swiss hospital had treated him briefly and had then sent him to Paris to recuperate. He also explained that his two companions were doctors charged with taking notes on his recovery. Months later, Gornostayev arrived back at the theatre, fresh from a cruise which was also ordered by the hospital. The next year Gornostayev was again diagnosed with cancer, rushed to the Swiss hospital, and subsequently returned healthy. This routine was repeated every year after the first diagnosis, whether Gornostayev had cancer or not.

Bombardov then gives a final, precise explanation to Maxudov about why his play had been met with such resistance. “It’s simply that you don’t know what the
theater’s like. There are some complicated mechanisms in the world but the theater is the most complicated of them all…” (149). Bombardov goes on to explain that the founding members all like the play, but are furious that there are no characters old enough for them to play. Maxudov asks why the play could not be cast with the younger members of the company, and Bombardov explains that such a move would allow young talent to emerge which might ultimately eclipse the reputations of the founding members. Bombardov guesses that Maxudov’s trouble began when he read the play to Vasilievich. Vasilievich had demanded alterations to the original script in order to create roles and situations that would not upset the older company of actors. Bombardov finishes their meeting by claiming that, short of a miracle, *Black Snow* would not be produced.

Even though Maxudov continues to see Bombardov, the two do not speak of the theater, nor does Maxudov visit it. Maxudov does, however, continue to read theatrical magazines in which he discovers writers, some of which he personally knows, gaining contracts for plays with various theaters. Maxudov is also annoyed to discover that Panin has called a group of playwrights to the Independent Theatre with the intent of discovering how to write a modern play. The article claims that The Independent is best suited to discover the modern playwright, but is now one of the last in the area to put on such a play.

Nonethless, Maxudov shortly receives a letter from Strizh informing him that rehearsals for *Black Snow* would begin the following day. Bombardov soon arrives, but is unable to explain how this unexpected miracle occurred. His best guess is that everything was arranged by Strizh and Panin.
Bulgakov groups all previous action in the novel as Part One. The second and final part, in which the play is actually produced, consists of only 24 pages. The action begins in the middle of a rehearsal with Maxudov alone in the theatre. Technicians enter the theatre and attempt to set props and lights. Romanus, the conductor for the orchestra, enters and attempts to gain Maxudov’s support for moving the orchestra out from the side of the stage. Andrei Andreyevich, the stage manager, enters and Romanus turns his attention to him. The two begin an argument which quickly escalates. Andreyevich attempts to end the argument by leaping to the stage and focusing his attention on the lights, but an actor incites Romanus to further argument. This quarrel ends, but is soon replaced by another between two actors, one afraid that the others’ play for cheap laughs would rob him of his big line. Eventually the rehearsal begins.

Vasilievich continues to insist that the scene with the gun shot be cut. Maxudov resists and although he attempts to gain the favor of Vasilievich, his efforts are not effective, perhaps because of his strong distaste for Vasilievich, but also because he does not have money to dress himself as a man of stature.

Eventually, Vasilievich attends a rehearsal to assist the actors with his method. This news is less than exciting for Maxudov. As he explains to the reader: “I don’t doubt for a moment that the method really is a work of genius, but the practical application of it reduced me to despair” (180). This despair is mainly due to the time Vasilievich takes to reach negligible outcomes.

For example, an entire day was spent on a profession of love from one actor to another. When Vasilievich was unable to elicit a satisfying answer from the actor who was asked what he felt passionate love was like, he demanded that the actor ride a bicycle
around his beloved until his riding became solely for her. The riding continued until the actor became fatigued. At the next rehearsal, no word was spoken about the bicycle, and Vasilievich’s attention turned to the offering of a bouquet of flowers. This lesson concluded with a listing of actors who had mastered the gesture. Such exercises continued, many involving all actors in the play.

This focus on the minutia begins to depress Maxudov. He realizes that there is only a week left in the season, and when the season ends, rehearsals will not resume for four months. Maxudov’s greatest pain, however, is when he discovers a note written in the producer’s notebook which says simply, “Duel with Swords” (187) which indicates that Maxudov’s battle to keep the gunshot in the play is finally lost.

Oddly, not much resolution is given at the end of Bulgakov’s novel. The last eight words of the novel are a confession from Maxudov. Even though the entire process had been beyond painful for him, “Nothing could keep me from seeing every performance…” (188). It should be noted, however, that Bulgakov includes an afterword that adds a narrator. The narrator claims that Maxudov sent him the unfinished novel, then committed suicide later that same day. The narrator also states that Maxudov had no connection whatsoever with the Independent Theatre.
The potential pitfalls preventing Bulgakov from developing a successful relationship with the Art Theatre were many. The political situation in the USSR prohibited many artists from making their work public. Any works expressing opinions that contradicted those of the leaders of the Red Army were summarily banned. The possibility of a play adapted from a partially published novel written by an unknown author who consistently ran afoul of the censors catching the attention of one of the most prominent modern theatres seems unlikely. Yet, it happened. Bulgakov included these elements in his novel, point for point, for a reason. It could have been that this series of unlikely events had an improbable aspect to them, which was well suited for the farcical tone of *Black Snow*. I believe, however, that Bulgakov saw the events, both in his life and in the novel, as steps toward his own destiny.

In the play, when Maxudov first enters a stage at the Independent Theatre, he is overcome by the experience. In awe, he whispers to himself “This is my world” (59). After seeing a production, Maxudov expands on his feelings. “Nothing that I had ever done before or since would have given me such pleasure as to have appeared on that stage” (60). Maxudov was drawn to the theatre, and upon his arrival, found it to be immediately familiar.
Bulgakov’s choice of a starting place for the novel adds to idea of destiny. By informing the reader that Maxudov would eventually be summoned to the Independent Theatre, Bulgakov introduces an element of inevitability. From the first page he wants the reader to know that Maxudov will become a playwright. Even before his work at the Art Theatre, Bulgakov had experienced the joys of being a playwright, but there is little doubt that his experience in the Caucuses paled in comparison to the chance of writing for the Art Theatre. To work with those who worked with Chekhov was an honor, and Bulgakov was worthy of that honor. At least, that’s what he believed for his fictional counterpart.

There is one major theme from Bulgakov’s life that he did not translate into the life of Maxudov. Though both the real and the fictional playwrights experienced difficulty with the publication of their novels, *Black Snow* makes no mention of the politically motivated suppression that Bulgakov experienced. The play does, however, make references to censorship. Likospastov, the elderly writer at the initial readings of Maxudov’s novel, claims “There’s no question of it being passed! Simply no hope of it” (23). His reasons for this opinion, however, relate to the style of the writing rather than the content. Rudolfi, the publisher, states “The censorship will never pass your novel and no one will print it” (Bulgakov 31), but the only changes Rudolfi makes to the manuscript are the deletion of the words apocalypse, archangels, and devil. After Maxudov accepts the invitation to the Independent, no further mention of the censors is made.

Moreover, none of the political content of *The White Guard* is found in Maxudov’s novel. When Maxudov is confronted with the idea that his modern play might be an attack on the government, his response is simple and direct: “Why should
anyone want to?” (119). Bulgakov’s self-censorship is noteworthy considering the political climate when *Black Snow* was written. Censorship was a recurring theme in Bulgakov’s career, and it was his resignation to the inevitability of censorship that prompted him to start putting *Black Snow* in print. Why then, in a novel directly drawn from real events, would such a strong influence be absent?

The easy answer is that Bulgakov hoped *Black Snow* would be printed, and any inclusion of the censors banning a work based on political content, factual or not, would probably doom the novel. It is important to remember, however, that *Black Snow* was published posthumously from notes, and the novel was the result of Bulgakov’s conversations and storytelling at social functions. His frustration and displeasure with the censors was well known. He even wrote a letter to the Russian Government, stating his unwillingness to be deceitful about his displeasure, saying, “I am hardly likely to put myself in a favourable light to the Soviet Government by writing a deceitful letter, which would reveal me as a grubby and what’s more a politically naïve timeserver as well” (*The Moscow Art Theatre Letters* 331). To hide his discontentment with the censors in the creation stages of the novel does not fit with his public persona.

A second, and more likely explanation lies in the fact that Bulgakov was never one for the easy option. Anatoly Smeliansky, author of *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, points out that Bulgakov was not a fan of jokes. “A joke is laughter which has gone cold, second-hand laughter which has been borrowed from someone else” (Smeliansky 332). Bulgakov preferred impromptu spontaneous comments, proving originality and authorship. Simply put, the novel needed a villain, and the censors would not have been
an original choice. Also, their inclusion would not have made for a dynamic plot. The only tension the censors could provide was whether or not the play would be banned.

Stanislavski, with his imposing reputation, not only as an actor and director, but also as a cultural figure in Russia was a far more original choice villain of *Black Snow*. To be sure, Stanislavsky’s reputation was less impressive inside the Art Theatre, especially among those who were aligned with Nemirovich. Company members of the Art Theatre had all benefited from Stanislavski’s strengths, but they also had to endure his weaknesses. Moreover, Stanislavski was a direct and tangible presence and ultimately a great source of frustration immediately prior to the writing of *Black Snow*. These facts and qualities made Stanislavski a perfect villain in the play.

Though Stanislavski was long removed from the Art Theatre’s official leadership, Vasilievich, his fictional counterpart, still had the power to “run the Independent” (59). Oddly, Nemirovich is absent, both literally and physically, from the events of the novel as his fictional counterpart is overseas in India. With the exceptions of the scenes with Philipp Philippovich in Chapter Eleven or the tale of Gornostayev in Chapter Thirteen Stanislavski’s literary double Vasilievich receives Bulgakov’s greatest attention. Vasilievich is humorous. He is so laughably predictable that other characters are able to anticipate his foibles in minute detail. Most notably, Bombardov is able to describe perfectly what will happen during Maxudov’s first trip to Vasilievich’s house. Vasilievich’s obsession and aversion to the use of guns onstage points not to pacifistic leanings, nor to Greek theatrical convention. It seems simply to be an idea that has solidified in his mind. His eventual arrival at the Independent is treated like the visit of a dignitary, indicated by the staff’s nicer than normal attire and the notably odd behavior of
the lower level employees. Bulgakov’s most obvious gibe at Stanislavski’s expense is Vasilievich’s conduct at rehearsal. Vasilievich’s seems to have no redeemable qualities as a director. Having an actor ride a bicycle in a circle to the point of exhaustion in order to better understand what love “feels like” reduces an element of Stanislavski’s technique to absurdity. Bulgakov takes the joke one step further by indicating that ultimately no actor breakthrough was achieved through this bizarre exercise, and that the company and Vasilievich acted the next day as if it had never taken place.

When taken together, these elements show Vasilievich as out of touch, even to the point of self-delusion. The theatre staff are clearly uneasy about this rare appearance, which resembles a state event. Bulgakov seems to be implying that, either because of his genius or his age, Stanislavski’s ideas and approaches were far removed from the rest of the Art Theatre. Nonetheless, his power and influence were not to be questioned. Proffer pushes this idea further. “The trouble with Ivan Vasilievich is that he has too much power” (Proffer 463). Once Vasilievich decided that Maxudov’s play was too complicated to produce, the rest of the theatre fell in line. Even Panin, who is eventually credited with bringing Maxudov’s play back into production, seemed to have started looking for new young playwrights.

Bulgakov does include some positive aspects of Vasilievich, but even these may be veiled criticisms. During rehearsals for the play, Maxudov remarks “I don’t doubt for a moment that his method really is a work of genius, but the practical application of it reduced me to despair” (180). Proffer notes that even though Bulgakov offers praise for Stanislavski’s method, the comment is actually a condemnation. "One could assume that it [the passage] meant Bulgakov was not totally opposed to the method. But since the
method is absolutely useless unless it is put into practice, this is actually a very damning remark" (Proffer 464). In a later rehearsal, when Vasilievich demonstrates how to offer flowers to a lover, Maxudov states “I began to believe that Ivan Vasilievich really was an actor of genius” (184). Bulgakov seems to be saying that Stanislavski’s genius as an actor is exactly what prevents him from being a capable director. Vasilievich knows exactly how a moment should be played, but he is incapable of prompting those exact actions in his actors.

The founding members of the Independent also received a fair amount of attention from Bulgakov. Bulgakov made it absolutely clear that the main reason Vasilievich proposed character and plot changes to Maxudov’s script was to appease the founding members of the Independent Theatre. They would not be pleased if a quality script was given to actors younger than themselves, proving them to be driven by personal interest rather than the interest of the theater as a whole.

This aspect is further emphasized by the tale of Gornostayev. While his first bout with cancer may have been real, the successive bouts are questionable, as are his claims of the hospital’s post treatment directives. Nevertheless, Bombardov relates the story with no hint of disbelief, nor does he indicate that any other member of the Independent Theatre found the story suspicious. Basically, an actor found a way to have the theatre pay for his yearly vacations, and no one questioned him. Finally, Silvestrovna’s reaction to a simple questionnaire cements Bulgakov’s opinion that the older actors are conceited, and are, therefore, nothing but a hindrance to his work.

The discovery that the artists were fallible humans was striking. Smeliansky writes, “By the time he was writing Black Snow, Bulgakov had been through a schooling
in the theatre such as probably no other Russian writer had ever experienced” (Smeliansky 338). He was drawn to the theatre through its magic, he then was deeply disillusioned when he discovered how the magic was made. This is not to say that Bulgakov hated all actors, nor was his reaction as strong or biting as other playwrights. Chekhov, too, voiced a poor opinion of actors, calling them blockheads and idiots. Nothing so harsh can be found in Black Snow, or any other of Bulgakov’s writings.

In contrast to the depiction of the older guard of actors, the younger guard is portrayed far more romantically. Of course, this may be because the reader meets the young actors when Maxudov’s play is finally rehearsed, but Maxudov’s admiration seems to extend beyond the circumstances. In regard to these young actors, Smeliansky notes:

Bulgakov creates a collective portrait of the acting profession on the pages of his theatrical testament, creative and idling, potent and fussy, magnificent and dependent, grand and pretty. He depicts the acting instinct, the talent for transformation, as a great and mysterious gift of nature. (Smeliansky 343)

Again, the actors are not depicted in a wholly positive way. Maxudov notes that one actor intentionally stirs up a fight between the conductor and stage manager. The overall tone of this act, however, is more playful than manipulative, as if the actor is stepping back and laughing at the situation, instead of taking it too seriously, something which unfortunately, the conductor is unable to do.

As there are few academic works directly addressing the inner structure and politics of the Art Theatre, and fewer still addressing Black Snow, exact comparisons between the staff of the Art Theatre and the staff of the Independent Theatre are impossible. Smeliansky notes that Olga Bokshanskaya, whose literary counterpart was
Toropetzkaya, wrote detailed letters regarding the daily life of the Art Theatre to her boss, Nemirovich, but few of these letters are available in English. While this is a hindrance in fully understanding the novel’s comparison to historical elements, conclusions can still be made.

Bombardov notes that the theatre is divided into two factions, those that follow Vasilievich and those that follow Platonovich. As noted previously, Vasilievich had near complete control over the Independent Theatre’s operations, while Vasilievich seemed only to have direct influence over individuals through correspondence. Thus, the staff played a delicate game in regard to their responsibilities.

As with Bulgakov’s choice of villain, the most revealing aspect of the staff seems to be what Bulgakov did not include. First, no mention is given on how Strizh and Panin were able to resurrect Bulgakov’s play. Vasilievich’s arrival at and direction of rehearsals indicate that his approval was obtained, which, considering his previous opinion of the work, could not have been an easy task. One can assume that Strizh and Panin either slowly worked on Vasilievich to turn his opinion, or the two waited for the right moment to readdress the possibility of production. Regardless of their plan, it must have been a long process with no guarantee of success.

Also absent was the unbridled ambition that drove most of the Art Theatre artists at the time of *Cabal*. Those who served under Stanislavski and Nemirovich knew that the two would soon either step down or pass away, thus there was constant jockeying to ensure a place in the line for leadership. None of this infighting for position is present in *Black Snow*. Bulgakov must not have seen this as relevant to his portrayal of the Art Theatre, a fact which may indicate that he did not see the battle between the would-be
leaders as a hindrance to his plays. Or he might simply have found it uninteresting. Either way, his choice indicates his primary focus was on the actual leadership, not any lower levels at the theatre.

Few exact conclusions can be drawn in the comparisons between history and *Black Snow* because Bulgakov never finished the novel. One can assume that the relationship between Maxudov and Vasilievich would continue to mirror that of Bulgakov and Stanislavski, but it could as well have taken a more conciliatory tone, as indicated by Maxudov’s attempts to get Vasilievich’s approval in the last chapter of the book. Lost, also, is the ultimate fate of Maxudov’s play. Perhaps *Black Snow* achieved the public and financial success of *Turbins*; perhaps it was never produced. This lack of resolution makes it impossible to fully gauge Bulgakov’s opinion on the Art Theatre or Stanislavski. In regard to the Art Theatre, any change in Maxudov’s religious-like devotion to the building and the creations held within would be wholly unexpected. As to Stanislavski, the novel ends just as Maxudov and Vasilievich begin to interact one on one, when most of the real life conflict occurred between Bulgakov and Stanislavski. While Maxudov says the rehearsals were a “time of considerable strain” (176), the reader will never discover if Maxudov believed the strain was worth it.

Above all, *Black Snow* is a commentary on Bulgakov’s view of himself. It’s certain that Maxudov is a more timid version of his author. While Maxudov responds to pressure by running away and sulking, Bulgakov met it head on, as indicated by his letters to Art Theatre leadership and the Russian government. It is possible then, that Maxudov represents the timid and innocent version of Bulgakov. Although Bulgakov portrays Maxudov’s faults in a harshly honest and humorous manor, he also praises
Maxudov’s ability to be drawn into wonder. “Bulgakov makes fun of that young man who came to the Art Theatre full of reverence and egotism in 1925, but he never makes fun of his dream: no matter how disillusioning the real literary and theatrical worlds prove to be” (Proffer 472).

Maxudov is also a symbol for Bulgakov’s dichotomous relationship with the theatre. “Bulgakov has a love-hate relationship with theatre people, a tragic love. There is absolutely nothing platonic about the way he was attracted to the stage. This is a procreative, virile love intent on conception.” (Smeliansky 346) At the time Bulgakov began to write Black Snow, he had seen more of his literary children aborted than birthed. His desperation was great enough that he asked his government to allow him to leave the country. “I … ask that I, a writer, who can be of no use to himself or to his country, be generously allowed to leave it for freedom” (The Moscow Art Theatre Letters 340).

The inability to use his talent as a writer was maddening for Bulgakov. Although suicide was not a choice Bulgakov would make, he could allow his timid fictional counterpart the gift of a final end to his artistic frustrations. Maxudov’s first attempt at suicide was prevented only by lingering hope for his works. Total despair leads to his eventual successful suicide. Neither he nor his works survive.

On the final page of Black Snow, Bulgakov includes a most curious addition. The afterword, voiced by an unidentified narrator, claims that Maxudov “had no connection whatsoever with playwriting or with the theatre in his life” (190). How should the reader take this claim, considering the factual origins of the novel? It is certain that Bulgakov did not add it as a safety clause, asserting that his portrayal of his friends and coworkers was a total fabrication. As previously stated, many of the individuals portrayed in the
novel were aware of its existence and source material. The only plausible option is that
Bulgakov seems to be saying that it would have been better if the elements in the novel
were fiction. Bulgakov would rather have continued to write novels than be lured with
the life of playwright only to have that life taken from him. He would have rather his
dream stayed a dream, and saved himself from a pain he had no way to manage. This was
a destiny he could not bear. So, bereft of any other options, Bulgakov poured himself and
his experiences into a fiction, allowed his fictional self to die, then gave his fictional self
the satisfaction of knowing that it never really happened.
CHAPTER VII
BULGAKOV’S INTENT WITH BLACK SNOW

A few months before his death, Bulgakov used the back of a page of notes for a presentation on Shakespeare to pen what is assumed to be his last writing for *Black Snow*. The addition consisted of an expanded list of individuals trying to get tickets to *The National Theatre*. Smeliansky writes:

Bulgakov tries once more to capture the image of those who are trying to storm the gates of Paradise: ‘shorthand-typists, clerks of works, students, electricians, wireless operators, filing clerks, blood donors, plumbers, statistical planners, pederasts, heating engineers, telephone line repairmen, railway engineers, bridge maintenance engineers, deputy accountants, time and motion study technicians, transport controllers, quality control inspectors, and Morse code operatives’. (Smeliansky 347-348)

This last addition points exactly to what the world of the theatre offered Bulgakov. Even though Maxudov would never be able to see his work come to life on stage, Bulgakov did, and triumphantly so. The greatest evidence of success Bulgakov could receive from his novels or *feuilletons* was a paycheck, a glowing review, and individual or small group praise from readers. The theatre, however, offered mass praise from all levels of Russian society. It is easy to imagine Bulgakov standing near the ticket office, watching people clamoring for tickets to *Turbins*, or attending performances just to hear firsthand the audience’s reaction. It is also easy to imagine the pain he felt when he realized he might never have this experience again.
Bulgakov did not see his novel either as the venting of his anger, or as an attack against the Art Theatre. *Black Snow* was a suicide note. The original title for *Black Snow* was *A Dead Man’s Notes*, and that is exactly how Bulgakov approached this work. Through the character of Maxudov, Bulgakov was able to convey his awe-filled love for the theatre and the suffering that love brought him. The novel was also an indictment of a former idol who caused him great pain.

It is unknown how Stanislavski reacted to the *Black Snow*, but it is clear that he could sympathize with it. Although Stanislavski received far more success in the theatre during his lifetime than did Bulgakov, Stanislavski was constantly dissatisfied with his work. Stanislavski’s love was also returned with pain. Try as he might, his vision for acting perfection was never fully realized nor was it properly communicated. Both Bulgakov and Stanislavski fell short of what each thought his work should be.

Of course, it must be said that *Black Snow* is largely viewed as a comedy, but much like the conflict between Stanislavski and Chekhov over *The Cherry Orchard*, the tone of a work depends on one’s perspective. Yes, there is humor in *Black Snow*, but the overall tale is tragic. A writer created a work of recognized brilliance, was welcomed into a world he immediately recognized as his true home, and then was met with only obstacles and hardship. The veil is lifted and he sees his home, the theatre, as a maddening place, filled both with the brilliance and miracle of creation as well as petty and selfish people. Ultimately, the writer dies unfulfilled.

*Black Snow* holds no suggestions or clues to how the imperfections of Stanislavski, or the Art Theatre as a whole, could have been improved. Perhaps, as indicated in Bulgakov’s letter to the Russian Government, he knew a change in the
system was impossible. Thus, all he could do was shine light on what caused him pain, and hope the work was taken as intended: A note of joy and sorrow, explaining both to the best of his ability.
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