ABSTRACT

“JESTER TO HIS MAJESTY THE PEOPLE” OR JESTER TO HIS MAJESTY THE SOVIETS: POLITICS OF CLOWNING DURING THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR

By Lydia Abel

This thesis explores the role of the Soviet clown during the Russian civil war, noting in specific how the clown’s role shifted from a political dissident to a mouthpiece for the Soviet government. This shift comes to fruition in 1920 with the premier of a circus collaboration between playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky and prominent Bolshevik clown, Vitaly Lazarenko. The piece, The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle, explores the new role of the clown not only as a political ally to the newly formed government, but as a tool to actively recruit the masses to support the Red army in its fight to maintain control of a politically contentious people.
“JESTER TO HIS MAJESTY THE PEOPLE” OR JESTER TO HIS MAJESTY THE SOVIETS:
POLITICS OF CLOWNING DURING THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR

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“Jester to His Majesty the People” or Jester to His Majesty the Soviets: 
The Politics of Clowning During the Russian Civil War

An Introduction

Jokes
  
  befit the circus.

But in between
  
  the merry jokes,

recall
  
  how our fathers were dying,

flogged to death,
  
  in towns and villages.

– Vladimir Mayakovsky, Moscow Is Burning

Vladimir Mayakovsky’s words succinctly illustrate the role of the circus arts during the Russian revolution and subsequent Soviet regimes. The circus arts of the Soviets were more than simply clowns and trained animals parading within an arena. In a politically charged climate, the clowns and animals themselves became agents of social change. The clown, in early twentieth—century Russian culture, is specifically seen as a political figure: a character who explores the constructs of power through wit and satire.¹ In many respects, the clown serves to criticize the government; or perhaps more realistically during the Soviet era, to condemn political enemies and cultural oppressors.² The role of the political clown created a social and political discourse through which to address and reassess current political events, such as the inversion of the Russian culture’s existing hierarchy. In the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, “pig becomes

¹ Though the satirical clown is perhaps not unique to the Soviets, the number of political clowns is certainly greater in Russia than in many other cultures. For here on, I will refer to the ‘political clown’ as a performer who actively utilizes his/her role to create social change.
² Schechter, Durov’s Pig, 6.
king while the king is reduced to the level of a swine."\(^3\) However, and perhaps most importantly, the audience members are encouraged to become agents of change. By placing the audience in the roles of legislator, the audience is able to judge the performative arena inside and out.\(^4\)

Yet the Soviet clown occupies a more tenuous place in the history of the Russian clown. Not only is this figure capable of capturing the hearts and allegiances of the people through subversive commentary regarding the fallen king, but there also exists a possibility for another form of subversion: when the people occupy that place of power, the subversive comments can be positioned against the people themselves.\(^5\) In doing so, the Soviet clown becomes an enforcer of hegemony and no longer a resistor. By utilizing the popular culture forms of entertainment and education against the people, the clown becomes an enforcer of a new order. While the Soviet circus clown has been discussed at some length as an agitator for the people, little has been stated about the possibility of the clown existing as an agitator against the people. I believe this discussion is an important and neglected avenue worthy of exploration.

Within this thesis, I examine this shift in the role of the Russian clown from political dissenter to enforcer of Soviet ideology. I will be utilizing Mayakovsky’s circus piece, *The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle*, as text in which the clown is acting in favor of hegemony, rather than as a resistor. *Championship*,\(^6\) is a political circus piece written by revolutionary poet and playwright, Vladimir Mayakovsky, in collaboration with the Bolshevik circus clown, Vitally Lazarenko. The piece, comprised and performed entirely by clowns, premiered in November 1920 at the Second State Circus in Moscow. In the performance piece, the clowns function as platforms for propagandistic speech that condemns Soviet enemies. In addition, the role of the clown solicits the loyalties of its audience; begging them for their allegiances in the war.

\(^3\) Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 197.
\(^4\) Schechter, 4.
\(^5\) While it is certainly arguable that the powers in force during the Soviet regime belonged to the people in name alone, the propaganda of the state that attempted in some respects to promote this guise of agency allows for such a Bakhtinian analysis.
\(^6\) From this point forward, I will be referring to the title of this piece by its full name at the top of every chapter it is mentioned in and then by an abbreviated title, *Championship*, from that point on.
Thereby encouraging the spectator to become more than a mere observer but rather a politically engaged citizen with a responsibility to the Soviet people, *Championship* provides a playing field where the clown becomes the enforcer of a new regime against the people it seeks to represent. In this moment the clown maintains hegemony by taking the art form of the people and using the politics of the Bolsheviks against them, the very people they purport to support. The performance piece asks its audience to not only think about their political choices at large, but to make them in the moment.

*Championship* has been discussed by theatre historians who have dissected the politically charged Russian theatre and circus of the 1910’s and 20’s. However, mention of the text primarily remains relegated to footnotes. Indeed, the possibilities of representation and dissent behind the text have been neglected. I intend to make an examination of not only of the political moments this performance piece represents, but also the sociopolitical implications it presents as a performed piece for a very specific Soviet audience. In essence, I strive to look beyond the piece’s propagandistic presentation and focus on the role of the clown as an agitator and enforcer of the new regime, an approach that is yet to be applied in scholarly conversation.

While the relationship between Mayakovsky and Lazarenko has received some scholarly attention, it has yet to be given the focus it merits. As one of the most prominent playwrights and poets of the revolution, Mayakovsky’s circus work deserves to be regarded with serious scholarly intent, not as a footnote to his theatrical career. Likewise, Lazarenko, as the predominant Soviet clown of his generation whose work influenced well known Russian directors such as Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Vaktangov among others, deserves to have his accomplishments acknowledged as the person who altered what it meant to be a political clown in Soviet Russia. His collaborations with Mayakovsky warrant analysis as works that helped to mark the shift of entertainment and art in Revolutionary Russia. This shift is what marked the separation of revolutionary art, one that resisted authority, to one that began to embrace the
Bolshevik party and its message. This new art was one that strove to engage and align the masses to one “correct” ideology, rather than an individual one.⁷

*Championship* was a piece that was written and performed at a contentious turning point in the Soviet regime.⁸ Frantisek Deak, a Mayakovsky scholar, dates the time period in which it was written as between October and November of 1920, post revolution, but still before the end of the long Russian civil war.⁹ This piece situates itself within that moment, placing the citizens figuratively within that battle and allowing the opportunity to make a choice regarding their political and ideological destiny.

The premise behind the piece is quite simple, as is the case with most short circus acts. *Championship* portrays a wrestling match that pits several clowns against one another, all in the costumes of world “Champions.” In other words, the wrestling exists as a means for the clowns to take on the guise of world powers and engage in physical battle against the Soviet champion, the Revolution, to determine not only the class winner and World Champion title, but also the ideological destiny of the new Soviet people. These champions were distinguished by wearing sashes that singled out their country of representation, and consisted of leaders from nations and armies that, in 1920, were in opposition to the Bolshevik regime. There are eight champions total, three of whom represent the Soviet people; the Revolution (the World Champion), the Menshevik (the Almost Champion), and Sidorov (Our Champion Profiteer). The remaining champions represent government or military officials from America, Great Britain, Poland, Crimea, and France. These eight figures are kept in order by the Referee, who acts not only as an arbiter between the champions, but also as a guide for the audience. The Referee lets the audience know who is battling for profit, who for a righteous cause, and who they ultimately should choose as the victor. He does this not only by stating it to the audience, but by embodying the character of the Revolution.

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⁷ Gorky’s *Mother*, largely believed to be the first work of Socialist Realism, was realized in 1921, one year after *Championship* was performed. Therefore this period also marks the first steps towards Socialist Realism, one that the political streamlining of the arts, including the circus, certainly shifted towards.


⁹ Deak, 53.
This choice alerts the audience not only to the outcome of the match, but also presents them with the ideological outcome they too should desire, creating a politically charged piece of popular art propaganda.

More specifically than simply recalling the piece and its intersection with the historical advent of the Soviet clown and political junction with the Russian civil war, I will be examining the performative aspects of *Championship* utilizing a performance studies methodology. This is a route that has yet to be discussed or explored in the examination of this piece. The fact that both the referee and the revolutionary champion are performed by the same individual suggests more than a piece of propaganda to me, one that can be layered against the backdrop of the historical and artistic zeitgeist, but can be dissected to reveal the manner in which it reflects and affects the sociopolitical moment in Russia. By examining how the text itself performs in this historical moment, I will be able to better decipher the depth of its potential influence upon the Soviet people and history as well as provide a more involved interpretation of the role of the clown in this moment. This is a piece that not only utilizes clowns, but that also places them in positions of authority over the audience, a definite shift from the circus pieces that instead allow the audience to maintain that agency and control.

**Timeline of Period/Events Covered**

The historical period that surrounds Russia in *Championship* is rich, involving more than just the revolution and its aftermath. Though the revolution is certainly the impetus for much of the sociopolitical upheaval in Russia, the history leading up to the revolution as well as the events of World War I also played a huge role in the alteration of this country and its people.

The Russian revolution occurred in 1917 during which time Russia, and the rest of East and West Europe, as well as the Americas, were involved in World War I. Russia’s involvement and allegiances varied throughout, according to which regime or
political power was currently in control. During the year in which the circus piece was performed, 1920, the revolution and Great War had both ended, but the country was embroiled in a civil war to determine the course and leadership of the new state. This was not solely a Russian cause, but many of the allied countries found themselves involved in the attempt to determine the course of this new regime as well.

The Russian revolution had its beginnings much earlier than the successful 1917 coup d’état that removed the Tsar from power. The first attempt began as early as 1825 with the Decembrists (an unsuccessful coup d’état carried out in December of 1825). Troops resisted the sudden and publically unexpected succession of the throne from Tsar Alexander I to Nicholas I, not Constantine, who was the next in line though apparently disqualified for marrying a Polish woman not of noble birth. Five of the most prominent figures were hanged, while many others were exiled to Siberia. While this attempt at revolution is separate from later attempts (it was a disagreement over the changing nature of the aristocratic ascension and not the abolishment of the aristocracy altogether as later ones aim towards) this is still considered to be the first Russian revolution.

February of 1905 saw the next attempt at revolution. This in fact can be considered a more reasonable precursor to the 1917 revolution than the failed 1825 effort. It was not characterized necessarily as a desire to seize power from the Tsar, but rather as a complete failure by the Tsar to maintain power and control over a disparate group of workers as well as professionals. The year of 1905 was characterized by frequent strikes and violent outbreaks by the citizens. Though this revolution was ultimately forcibly ended by the military, the people did not lose altogether. 1905 also marked the year in which the Tsar conceded to create a parliamentary body, the Duma. Although the Tsar chose the members of the Duma, he nonetheless had to

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10 Hingley, Russia, 112.
11 Hingley, 114-115.
12 Raeff, The Decembrist Movement, 1-5.
13 Hingley, 144.
14 Hingley, 145.
forfeit a modicum of control as no legislation could be enacted without their consent.\textsuperscript{15} While the Emperor was still in power, that power had begun to diminish.

The successful Russian revolution occurred in 1917, yet during that year, more than one attempt at revolution was made. While the February revolution occurred during the same year as the October 1917 revolution, it was considered in some respects to be a precursor. It in fact lasted through February into March of the same year. The February revolution was not a planned attack, but occurred out of peaceful marches that took place on the 23\textsuperscript{rd} of February, International Women’s Day.\textsuperscript{16} These marches were begun peaceably, yet erupted into bread riots and strikes.\textsuperscript{17} After a few days the military was ordered to use force and shoot civilians. The killing of these individuals was the final straw for the soldiers, who mutinied.\textsuperscript{18} In the face of an increasing lack of faith in their leader, military officials requested the abdication of Nicholas in order to achieve victory and restore stability to Russia.\textsuperscript{19} On March 15\textsuperscript{th}, Nicholas abdicated the Russian crown, which was passed to his brother Mikhail.\textsuperscript{20} Mikhail refused to accept the title, making way for the Provisional Government to restore peace to Russia.

The October revolution of 1917 was a coup d’état of that Provisional Government. This temporary council would rule over Russia for roughly eight months, proving ineffectual at garnering support or taking decisive action to move the country forward. The problem essentially laid in the fact that this government had no real legal basis to create or enforce legislation; they existed ultimately as “a caretaking body” over Russia.\textsuperscript{21} The popular support of the people was not behind this government body, but instead behind the Bolsheviks who, on October 25\textsuperscript{th}, took power in the capital.\textsuperscript{22} Armed soldiers marched to the Winter Palace, head of the Provisional Government, and simply

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Hingley, 145.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Figes, \textit{A People’s Tragedy}, 308.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Stone, \textit{A Military History of Russia}, 171.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Stone, 171.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Stone, 172.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Stone, 173.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Hingley, 151.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Hingley, 155.
\end{itemize}
seized control from them. This proved to be a comparatively less violent and bloody incident than the February revolution.

What followed thereafter was a period of civil war, in which the separate political parties, both revolutionary and bourgeoisie (what would become the Red and White armies), made bids to seize control. The Russian civil war followed the revolution in 1917 and lasted until roughly November/December 1920. The two groups that primarily were in contention for power were grouped as the White and Red Russians. The White Russians were comprised of former aristocrats, bourgeoisie, and anyone who generally either wanted a return to an aristocratic rule, or simply did not believe in a Socialist government. The Red Russians were made up of the workers, Socialists, proletariats, essentially, anyone opposed to a return to a bourgeoisie controlled government.

Within the Red Russian category, two groups essentially made up, and sometimes divided, the group; the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks. The Bolsheviks mean the great majority, while Menshevik means minority, though the two would often volley popular support numbers as the civil war went on. The Bolsheviks were characterized by a more militant faction, while the Mensheviks could be seen as the more conservative of the two revolutionary parties. Ultimately, the party of Lenin, the Bolsheviks, won out over the Mensheviks, who were at first relegated to the background, then silenced.

The Red Terror was an extremely violent and bloody period in the history of the Soviet Union, characterized by a climate of fear and repression. Those who spoke out against the Red Army and the Bolsheviks were severely punished through torture and execution; most were not even imprisoned but killed immediately.23 The Cheka, Lenin’s police, were responsible for the execution of an estimated 5000 people in Petrograd during the fall months of 1920 alone.24 A large number of political prisoners were executed for no reason other than a perceived political affiliation. The climate was just

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23 Melgunov, The Red Terror In Russia, 65.
24 Melgunov p. 63.
as hazardous for the popular artists as it was for the common citizen. A popular clown duo of the era, Bim-Bom, were threatened at gunpoint during one of their shows because the laughter in their piece was perceived to be subversive by the Bolsheviks.\textsuperscript{25} This is also the political climate under which many other performers and artist that I will be discussing were forced to work.

Limitations of Research

Language Limitations

It is my intention within this thesis to focus solely on clowning, circus, and theatrical works produced in Russia during the years prior to the Russian revolution to just before the end of the Russian civil war. This timeline is specific to the shift in clowning style I am focusing on, and the cultural and political significance of Russian clown is one that I am looking at exclusive of international influence. Although the work of international clowning and directors may be relevant to this historical period and theoretical agenda, at this moment I would relegate those discussions to future research. To indulge those movements would be to risk neglecting aspects of the Russian clown, upon which I am primarily focused.

One of the most challenging aspects of researching this subject has been attempting to attain a sufficient amount of English language research. While I believe that I have exhausted the available research in English, there undoubtedly remains quite a bit more within Russia and other Russian speaking countries. Case in point, there are several works that address the Soviet clown Vitaly Lazarenko, yet there are very few that address his life and works in great detail. In accessing the impact of his artist work and political affiliations, one aspect of his life is essential in informing the other, making the investigation of his life difficult when few details are available. Yet I have attempted to compile details of his biography and gauge his artistic impact, using all the resources

\textsuperscript{25} Schechter, The Congress of Clowns, 36. Though Schechter states that the description of the attack occurred within a novel of fiction, enough scholars, such as Orlando Figes and Sergei Melgunov, contest the fictitious nature of the attack that I feel comfortable referencing it within this work.
available. A Russian language biography might contain information regarding his collaborations with Mayakovsky, which would be of enormous value to me as a scholar attempting to define that relationship and its effects on the circus.

In addition, were I able to have access to works that depicted the nature of Mayakovsky’s other circus pieces, I would be better able to fill in the historical blanks that exist in ascertaining the historical and artistic significance that the work had in the moment, both on the audience and the artistic community. Were I also able to have access to any programs of the period that listed the piece, which I believe to exist at the Circus Museum in St. Petersburg, then I would be able to determine when the piece was performed in the course of the show. Whether the piece was performed in the beginning, before intermission, or as the finale of the show would make a great difference in my analytical research of the text and its meaning.

The Audience: Difficulties of Determining the Historical Impact

*Championship* was a clowning performance piece that combined political propaganda and artistic influence in a unique manner. Although there were circus pieces that focused on attaining donations for men at war, this is one that instead insists upon the seemingly unambiguous, yet ever shifting, demands of political allegiance and accountability. This piece written by Mayakovsky and performed by Lazarenko was one that did not merely address the notion of political and national responsibility, but demanded it in an almost literal sense by soliciting the audience to stand, either metaphorically or physically, and choose their allegiance to the Red army and Bolshevik party.

I believe that this piece not only represents a shift in the art of the Soviet circus, but also a turning point in Soviet political and artistic freedom. By appropriating and subverting the audience’s collective identity and thus denying their political agency, Lazarenko and Mayakovsky become enforcers of a politics of fear, not revolution. Though the piece is believed by some scholars to mark a shifting point in the connection
between the political and the popular culture entertainments, little attention has been paid to what efficacy it actually had on the men and women who witnessed the performance.

The challenge of interpreting this piece as an act of popular culture that affected its audience in a dynamic manner is that I have a limited audience response to contend with. In fact, the only accounts of the act are scholarly reports, not ones written by the ordinary men and women who took the stands to watch and be entertained, creating difficulty when attempting to ascertain the effect of this particular performance on its target audience. The question for me as a scholar then becomes: how do I construct a methodology with which to examine the affects of this piece in a historical and sociopolitical context? Audience response theory serves as a historical indicator of the efficacy of a particular performance or performer in a specific moment of time. Yet most theories that address the historical interpretation of audience response center on tangible first hand responses regarding the particular production. Not to mention that the pieces are theatrical, which usually entails a performance review or notice printed in a newspaper. Popular culture pieces, such as circus acts, are not necessarily privileged with the same historical footprint.

While this is certainly an avenue for further research, unfortunately I do not have the archival means to support such audience response hypothesis. My work must instead look to the material that I have incontestably at hand, the text. Instead of determining the effectiveness of the piece in the moment, I will step back and contextualize how the text itself performed in the great historical moment and theorize about audience response based on my analysis of the text in context.

**Literature Review**

The material I will be utilizing for my research on the Russian clown and *Championship* is ultimately a collection of historical and political data. While many scholars provide an excellent synopsis of the piece, there is a decided lack of analysis on
the political and artistic nature of the work. The clown has yet to be addressed as anything other than a performer: the fact that the clown may exist in any function other than as a mere performer has not been addressed in any of the works I have read and employed in my work. This is the gap I intend to fill as a scholar in the work to come.

To begin with, I will not only be utilizing Frantisek Deak’s translation of *Championship* (the only English translation in publication), but also the essential historical information he includes in the preface to this work. The brief historical contextualization he presents is essential, as he is the only scholar to provide a time line of authorship and performance as well as the few performance details I have been able to reference. Deak is the only author to provide a modicum of firsthand reference of the piece (he provides a translation from Yury Dmitriev) that describes the dual nature of the Revolution and the Referee characters, an essential point to my research. While the data provided allows me to better contextualize my work, it also provides me the space to present my own analysis of the material. The information he details restricts itself to the documentary, and refrains from engaging in any discussion of the clown’s role in the piece, or the historical moment, leaving a scholarly window that needs to be addressed.

*Durov’s Pig*, written by Joel Schechter, who has remained the greatest contemporary source for works about the Soviet clown, is important to my work as it offers an analysis of several preeminent Russian clowns while also providing a political and theatrical context for other artists who make use of the clown. I will be utilizing this book as a starting point for my own research. As to *Championship*, Schechter provides one of the more complete descriptions of the piece, yet denies much of its artistic and performative potential by citing its primary significance as “historical and documentary.”26 Schechter does discuss Lazarenko and many of the clowns of this period at length, such as the Durovs and Bim-Bom; however he does not undertake an analysis specifically of Lazarenko and his impact on clowning. While Mayakovsky and Lazarenko’s collaborative relationship is also discussed, I believe Schechter leaves room

26 Schechter, 86.
for further analysis of Lazarenko’s role in the collaboration as well as an in-depth examination of how the pieces they presented marked the shift to Soviet clowning.

Schechter provides another book on clowning, The Congress of Clowns and other Russian Circus Acts, that also provides crucial research on the Russian clown. This book is particularly useful in that it discusses Lazarenko’s career both in terms of his work with Mayakovsky as well as other Soviet directors. However, the majority of the material centering on Lazarenko focuses on his role in Makhno’s Men, a pantomime celebrating the Soviet victory over the Ukrainains. This work does not engage in in-depth discussion and dissection of Championship, the piece that I am primarily focusing on in relation to Lazarenko’s career.

Laurence Senelick’s article on the Durov brothers, “King of the Jesters, but not the King’s Jester: The Pre-Revolutionary Durovs,” has also provided useful information on the political satire present before the revolution. Though Senelick limits his topic to the Durovs alone, his insights into the political resistance both Anatoly and Vladimir Durov made prominent in their work, is directly relevant to the analysis of the political trajectory of the Soviet clown that I am focusing on. By comprehending where the political clown began, I am better equipped to map out where it altered from that point forward.

Hubertus F. Jahn’s Patriotic Culture in Russia during World War I, has also provided useful historical accounts of the circus during the period I am investigating. Jahn discusses the major intersections between the political and the popular culture during the years of the first World War, focusing on the larger circus institutions such as the Ciniselli Circus and Circus “Modern.” While the historical facts Jahn lays out are useful in connecting the circus to the Russian culture, he does not attempt any analysis of this relationship, which is separate from the work that I am attempting. I am not only interested in understanding what those relationships consisted of, but also why they were present and what they stated about the greater cultural and artistic implications.

Paul Towsen’s Clowns and James Von Geldern’s Bolshevik Festivals 1917-1920 have proven to be essential texts in my research on Russian clowns. Both books provide
ample research in the type of clowning and performing styles of the Russian circus circa the Russian revolution. Towsen’s research primarily focuses on the genealogy of the Russian clown through the Soviet years. He also provides much of the essential information on Vitaly Lazarenko, who is a challenge for English language researchers. Though he was an important figure in Soviet theatre and circus, little has been written regarding his work and dynamic career.

Von Geldern’s work separates itself from Townsen’s by specifically discussing the popular culture festivals that were utilized by the Bolsheviks during the revolution and subsequent civil war. It is not solely the circus performances listed that make this work important, but Von Geldern also provides illumination as to how the circus space itself was transformed from an arena of entertainment to propaganda. Von Geldern is also one of the few scholars to attach meaning to the format of Championship as a circus piece. His work centers on the meaning making potential of the wrestling format itself, positing it as a means of creating a new physical language, yet his analysis also sidesteps the role of the clown specifically in that process, an avenue which is again left to explore.

Methodology

As to the question of methodology, I will be approaching this study from the perspective of the cultural historian. I will examine the intersections of the anthropology and history of the Soviet clown to determine the larger realities about the Soviet society. I will be enacting a thick description of Championship as a small moment within the cultural sphere that becomes crucial to understanding how the Soviet culture functioned in 1920.

I will also be incorporating the theory of cultural hegemony into my analysis of the clown and its subsequent impact on Soviet society. The political power of the Soviets worked to abolish the notions of a bourgeoisie and a working class, yet the concept of a controlling political party remained. While one would largely assume that
members of the Soviet society would work against the ruling of one group, I am arguing that the Bolshevik clowns worked to impose that very concept. By appropriating the folk art of the masses to transform it into political propaganda to contain that same group, the clown reinforces cultural hegemony on the Soviet people.27

I will be also utilizing Mikhail Bakhtin’s Rabelais and His World as a theoretical guide towards analyzing the role of the clown within the realm of the carnivalesque. The work of Bakhtin is especially appropriate to my research because it places emphasis on the nature of carnival to work at a specific moment in time with a specific body of people, i.e. modes of carnival are culturally specific, which is exactly what I believe this piece does, inhabits a space that is crafted by not only the artists who wrote and performed it, but by the moment in history and the citizens who watched and responded to the performance. Bakhtin defines this extra world, where all citizens meet temporarily as equals and the serious traditions and rituals of a society are mimicked and subverted.28 Carnival destabilizes the official world, bringing a utopian interruption of the everyday power structures and hierarchies. Carnival permits a moment wherein people, both audience and performers alike, inhabit a place that allows subversion of the norm, king becomes clown and clown becomes king. In Championship this subversion of the hierarchy is applied not only to those in power represented by clowns, but the hierarchy between performer and audience also shifts, altering the realm of the performer and audience. In using Bakhtin’s work, I will challenge the notions of what the clown traditionally accomplishes, mocking the established power, and instead demonstrate the ways in which the clown alters that perception by subverting not only power, but the form of the clown itself.

I will be examining both the performance text and the role of the clown through the lens of Bakhtin, exploring the clown within the revolutionary time and body, as a character who perhaps not only to “build its own world in opposition to the official

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27 While there certainly exceptions to this concept, I am focusing on the clowning tradition that actively enforced this notion of hegemony.
28 Bakhtin, The Bakhtin Reader, 197.
world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state”, but also creates its own state and enforces its own rules.29

Chapter Outline

Chapter One

In chapter one I will discuss the trajectory of the Soviet clown, beginning with the pre-revolutionary Durov Brothers, Anatoly and Vladimir, and concluding with Vitaly Lazarenko, the predominant soviet political clown of the 1920’s. This chapter will discuss the Soviet clown as a new evolution in the line of Russian clowns. Not only was the Soviet clown a political agitator, but also the style of performance itself changed. No longer was the clown merely a figure who solely performed acrobatics or physical jokes, but one that became a political commentator to the people in a manner that had not been present previously. The political resistance that the clown was allowed during the years of the revolution curtailed itself into a new form of resistance during the civil war, focusing its satire not against the state, but upon those who would resist it.

While a significant portion of the chapter will center around Vitaly Lazarenko, whose collaboration with Vladimir Mayakovsky made not only Championship possible but several other circus pieces as well as theatrical influence, the clown troupe Bim-Bom will also play a significant part in this chapter. This troop was responsible for some of the most public anti-Bolshevik circus pieces of the pre- and early post-revolutionary years. As part of the opposing political party, their pieces represent an important antithesis to the pro-Red circus canon.

The chapter will begin focus on the Durov brothers, who were prerevolutionary examples that truly set the stage for both the Russian and Soviet political clown. Their political circus acts would get them into dangerous predicaments long before the revolution began. Both astonishing entertainers in their own right, Anatoly and Vladimir would work together and separately to produce works that would challenge as much as

29 Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, 88.
they would entertain. Vladimir Durov, upon entering the circus arena, would boldly declare, “King of Jesters, but never Jester’s King. The Jester to His Majesty the People.” An act that challenged the current power structure, breaking allegiance from the Czar and placing it within the hands of the people. Both his and Anatoly’s work against the political powers in command would set the stage for generations of clowns to come.

I will next turn my attention to a clown act that was present both before the revolution took place, as well as after. Yet this troop sets itself apart from the former by performing routines questioning the Soviet government. Bim-Bom was a clown troop composed of Ivan Radunsky as Bim and a series of performers who utilized the title Bom. M. Stanevsky was the latter part of the duo when the infamous act The Laugh was performed. The text utilized is seemingly harmless in fact only comprising about half a written page of dialog, yet the real crux of the performance is the infectious laughter that pervaded and overwhelmed the dialog and the audience itself, yet somehow this act was considered dangerous to the Bolsheviks. I will attempt to analyze The Laugh as a counter-revolutionary text, questioning how it was effective and perhaps more strangely, why the sound of laughter itself could elicit such fear within the Bolshevik ranks. Perhaps more conspicuously, whether the laughter elicited by the performance was carnival in its “indissoluble and essential relation to freedom.” This lack of dialogue, coupled with the seemingly dangerous laughter, presents a stark contrast to the sanctioned laughter and dialogue in Championship. The counterrevolutionary clown seems to code the message of the satire, while Lazarenko and other revolutionaries present not only the dialogue, but also the message alongside it. The work of Bim-Bom will present not only an illuminating contrast to the work of Lazarenko and Mayakovsky, but provide valuable clues as to the shift from revolutionary era to Soviet era clown.

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30 Schechter, 4.
31 Schechter, 36.
32 Schechter, 33.
33 Bakhtin, 90.
Lastly I will focus on Vitaly Lazarenko, potentially one of the most significant and prolific of the soviet political clowns. His work marked a new transition in the Russian clown, from a political radical who worked to undermine the authority of the state, to one who chose to uphold and enforce the politics of the new regime, utilizing the circus as a mouthpiece to speak directly to the people. He worked not only within the circus, but also in the theatre and film to create political art and propaganda. Lazarenko collaborated with the most innovative and influential theatre artists of the early nineteen hundreds, including Vlesvelod Meyerhold, Vladimir Mayakovky, Yevgeny Vahktangov, Nikolai Erdman, among a few; they all utilized the talent of Lazarenko within their projects. His is perhaps the most in-depth resume of all the circus performers of that era, working with the leading artistic and political figures of the Moscow theatre.

Vitaly Lazarenko’s most prolific collaborations involved the poet and playwright, Vladimir Mayakovsky. Together the two would produce two short circus acts and a full-length circus production, *Moscow Is Burning*. However, for the purposes of this research, I will focus my efforts on the second of the circus short pieces, *Championship*. Performed as a wrestling match in 1920, the act pitted The World Champion wrestler, Revolution, against a series of challengers, the American Champion Woodrow Wilson, the French Champion Millerand, the Menshevik Almost Champion as well as several others. Lazarenko played both the referee and Revolution.

Chapter Two

Chapter two will focus on the revolutionary poet and playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky. Mayakovsky is significant to this project primarily as the author of the circus piece, *Championship*. Although he had collaborated on several other pieces with Lazarenko, as well as utilized his talents in his theatrical endeavors, this piece remains

34 Deak, 53.
35 Deak, 54.
under examined. While many of Mayakovsky’s works from this period have been sufficiently scrutinized, a gap remains where his circus collaborations are concerned. It is my intention to contextualize this piece within Mayakovsky’s work of this period as well as within the greater body of theatrical texts.

The early nineteen hundreds were a period of circusization of the theatre in Russia. Many playwrights and directors were not only incorporating circus moves and training into their productions and aesthetics, but also circus performers as well. The combination of performers and an increasingly physical staging created a whole new movement in theatre, one which Mayakovsky was a part of, both with his collaborations with Lazarenko as well as Vlesevold Meyerhold. In addition to examining the works of Mayakovsky, I will also be focusing on the theatrical pieces of Meyerhold and Vahktangov, among many, who also represent the shift in theatrical training and aesthetics. It will be important to gauge where their works lie within the canon to better place Mayakovsky and his achievements.

I will begin this chapter by examining a timeline of Mayakovsky’s life and career, focusing on his political and artistic achievements. This section will serve as a chart to begin setting the course to map Mayakovsky’s eventual success in the theatre and the circus, where this piece lies. It is also significant to note that his last piece to be produced was also a circus piece with Lazarenko. Whereas *Championship* is formed at the beginning of his success, the end of his career was marked by another circus piece, *Moscow Is Burning*. Although the details of this performance may not be relevant to the project at hand, the piece itself is worth noting in Mayakovsky’s canon.

**Chapter Three**

This chapter will consist of a close reading of the text of *Championship*, both as an artistic and historical document, and to give an example of the solidification of the new characteristics of the Soviet clown. In this piece Lazarenko and Mayakovsky extend the boundaries of the Soviet clown, making the clown the mouthpiece of the Soviet
regime and inciting citizens to join the Red army in the ongoing civil war. This piece takes the clowns from the physical buffoonery of the arena to a choreographed wrestling match. The clowns in this piece literally enact the play for power in the war.

Attention will also be given to contextualizing the roles of all the “Champions” listed in the piece, noting their relationship with pre and post-revolutionary Russia. The Champions are representative of the separate political factions that position themselves alongside the White Russian army and against the Red army. It is also my goal to, where pertinent, identify the terms and battles noted within the text to elucidate the historical implications behind their status.

To further the understanding behind this work, I will also be attempting a reading of the text as a performative document, working within the realm of performance studies. I will be identifying the ways in which the clown performs, as well as looking at the ways that clowns layer identity: they exist as both clowns and historical figures simultaneously.

In Conclusion

I intend to demonstrate that there was a shift that occurred in Russian clowning after the Russian revolution, during the years of the Russian civil war. This shift saw the clown altered from a politically subversive figure, who worked to undermine levels of authority, to one who became the spokesperson for the new government. The Soviet clown uplifted the ideology of the new Soviet regime, invoking the message of the government within the arena and inciting the audience to political action. Chapter one brings an in-depth analysis of how the clown evolved into a political figure, setting the stage for the introduction of the Soviet clown. Chapter two brings the playwright Mayakovsky into perspective, examining how the introduction of theatrical aesthetics altered the clowning craft. While chapter three brings provides an example of a clowning piece that works to exhibit the role of the new clown, combining the political and theatrical to bring the Soviet clown into his own.
Chapter One

Outlaw to Icon: The Trajectory of the Russian Clown from Political Subversive to Enforcer of Soviet Law

“Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people...It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part.”

– Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World

What allows the Russian circus to hold its reputation as an ensemble capable of not only reflecting its world, but perhaps also able to renew it, are the clowns who provide entertainment and critique on their society. These performers create a space where they are capable bringing the public together in a manner that theatre and other performing arts are perhaps not capable of doing. During the years of revolution and civil war, these performers navigated through an ever shifting sociopolitical state, creating satire that would not only challenge regimes, but also provide relief for a public in need of laughter.

The path to this Soviet clown was laid out long before the revolution. Russian clowns had long been political and social commentators, but with the fall of the aristocracy and introduction of the Soviet regime, the clown became more than a mouthpiece for dissension: the new Soviet clown became a spokesperson for the state itself, condemning political enemies both large and small. The clown shifted from one capable of using humor subversive to the authority of those in power, to actively working to uphold the new regime. I will begin by examining the pre-revolutionary
clowning tradition and inspecting the trajectory of the Russian to Soviet clown; what were the stepping stones to arrive at this new clown type, and what were the ramifications of doing so.

According to Bakhtin, the clown uses laughter to invert the official reality to an unofficial reality, an acceptance of a new world. The prerevolutionary clowns worked within that spectrum, inverting the existing authority using laughter and jest. This laughter is produced within the circus as a safe space; the folk culture of the circus was an accepted realm within which one could generally laugh at the official law and authority, within the walls of the circus such behavior is permitted and expected. It is a space where the society and its individuals allow that to occur, much like Rabelais and his carnival rituals. It is because of this accepted tradition that the clown was able to transcend many political boundaries within their routines of political satire. This is also what complicates the arrival of the Soviet clown, who usurps authority not from the political leader, but from the people who help create the carnival moment within the circus, the space where jest is allowed without the same repercussions of the outside world. Lazarenko and his peers do not invert the traditional hierarchy, but rather the new Soviet hierarchy, taking power from the people and replacing their satire with sanctioned and appropriate humor. I will be analyzing Lazarenko within this role as the enforcer of Soviet rule and his clowning as the next wave in Russian clowning. His work not only influenced the world of circus, but also altered what the clown’s role was in conjunction with the new government.

I will be utilizing the theories of Bahktin to address why the clown, above other artistic and popular culture figures, is able to use humor to deflect much of the negative connotations embedded in the text and performance of these satirical pieces. Additionally, I will address not only how the clowns function, but also through examining specific pieces, how they are able to exist as subversive pieces in a society that was increasingly restricted.
The Beginnings of Russian Circus Tradition

The Russian/Soviet Circus has its roots both in the traditions of the Russian folk performances of the medieval period and the Western European circus that arrived in Russia in 1793 with the introduction of Charles Hughes of the Royal Circus. Yet it was J. Bates and Jaques Tourniaire, both equestrian performers, who with their separate acts, helped truly bring the popular European traditions to Russia, in the form of the Equestrian show.

While the types of physical performing spaces utilized are not readily mentioned in any documentation on this period, I am able to infer that they were either open-air venues or portable tents, both with the audience surrounding the playing space, sitting on wooden benches. Exact written descriptions of such spaces are again challenging to attain and according to the resources that do attempt to describe the conditions of these early arenas, the traveling circus seemed to be more a grouping of amateur acts and freak shows under make-shift tents rather than a group of traveling professionals. It was not until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the circus became stationary.

The true beginnings of the circus in Russia also took root in traditional folk forms. The skomorokhi were early mimics, minstrels and comedians that performed acrobatics and exhibited trained bears. The skomorokhi traveled the country, performing for the common people instead of the titled class. Their title later became vatagami, which means “for the masses.” Their work was also political in nature, critiquing the landowners and local officials, often in the form of satirical poems. Czar Alexis I issued an edict in 1648 banning the performances of the skomorokhi after a Moscow revolt. While many of the practices of these performers were lost, their influence remained.

36 Hammarstrom, Circus Rings in and Around Russia, 34.
37 Leach, Revolutionary Theatre, 4.
38 Hammarstrom, 35.
39 Towsen, 309-310.
40 Towsen, 309.
41 Towsen, 309.
42 It is fitting that Mayakovsky and other revolutionary artists would turn to this folk form when looking for a venue to once again speak “for the masses.”
43 Towsen, 309.
The traditions of the *skomorokhi* are an obviously precursor to the work of many later political clowns, whose satirical poems must in some way acknowledge the artistic heritage of their predecessors. According to John H. Towsen, “only in Russia did the talking clown take the step from Shakespearean jester to political commentator. This transition begin in the 1880s, the heyday of the European talking clown, and a period of political gloom in Russia. Under Czar Alexander III, progressive social forces had seen their hopes crushed, political repression, tight censorship, and the state’s denial of civil liberties.”44 This is the period during which the Durov brothers make their debut in the circus. Their unique style of clowning meets a unique historical period, which makes for a powerful impact on the circus, creating a true evolution in the Russian clown.

It was the Russian born Nikitin Brothers who were among the first to usher the Russian circus into the traditions it carries today. These three brothers opened the first stationary circus in Russia in 1873.45 The Nikitin brothers were in many respects the forerunners of the infamous Durov Brothers, but without the political bent.46 Two of the brothers were strictly equestrians, while the third, Akim, both rode and played the part of the “*r‘izhii,*” or the simpleton.47 The *r‘izhii* was the native Russian folk clown, characterized by his bright red brushed-up wig and bright make-up and nose.48 This character was a popular figure in the Russian circus whose evolution paralleled the European auguste character.49 The auguste clown is characterized by overly exaggerated and grotesque makeup and serves as a comedic foil to the more sophisticated white clown.50 According to Towsen, the *r‘izhii* character was originally known as Ivanbrick, then later dumb Ivan.51 The *r‘izhii* became the butt of jokes for the white clown character, a combination that would potentially serve as a basis for later

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44 Towsen, 308.
45 Towsen, 310. Their arena was located in Moscow, but it was later taken over by the Soviets. I am unsure whether the factors which lead to this action were economic or political. It could also possibly have been a byproduct of the Soviet’s desire for a unified State Circus.
46 Leach, 5.
47 Towsen, 310.
48 Towsen, 310.
49 Towsen, 308.
50 Towsen, 214.
51 Towsen, 310-311.
clown duos, such as the second formation of Bim-Bom.\textsuperscript{52} This is a combination not only reflected in the Russian circus, but also in comedy parings worldwide.

**The Russian Clown: History, Popular Forms and Variations**

In order to better contextualize the clowns that will be discussed in the chapter, it is essential to discuss the many clown types that were popular in Western Europe and in Russia around the turn of the century. Three main categories existed in the realm of Western European clowning during that time period as well as in Russian clowning. They consist of the Whiteface, the Auguste, and the Character clown.\textsuperscript{53} What is especially intriguing to note about these categories of clowning is what each indicates about the clowns who embodied them are the class connotations that are represented by each type. One may then in part assume that the clown selects a specific type according to the class he/she desires to either portray or satirize, a concept that especially lends itself to the clowns of the revolutionary period.

The Whiteface clown is a figure that personifies elegant and refined humor.\textsuperscript{54} This type of clown is characterized by a stern, take-charge behavior.\textsuperscript{55} The clown’s makeup appears as the name describes, the face and neck are covered in white makeup, though facial features may be painted or outlined elegantly. The costume of the Whiteface is not defined as one type particularly. The Whiteface is a clown that implies an aristocratic or high class, one that particular clowns of the revolution would select to satirize in an untraditional manner, choosing to make them the butt of jokes rather the joker.

The Auguste clown was apparently born out of the need for the Whiteface clown to have a comedic counterpart. As the foil to his humor, the Auguste is the butt of the

\textsuperscript{52} Towsen, 308. While Towsen does not suggest that Bim-Bom took their format from the Russian model over the European, I am making the suggestion that the two models might be interchangeable in the Russian tradition, as the r’izhii predates the auguste clown form.
\textsuperscript{53} Pipkin, *Be A Clown*, 10.
\textsuperscript{54} Lee, *The History of Clowns for Beginners*, 158.
\textsuperscript{55} Pipkin, 10.
joke, literally the “stupid” clown, the term itself apparently derived from German Berliner slang.\textsuperscript{56} The Auguste is also characterized by “grotesque makeup and ill fitting clothes.”\textsuperscript{57} Though the r’izhii serves a similar function in the circus and Russian folk culture, according to Towsen, this type actually predates the Auguste form. Though the Auguste was popular in Western Europe, the r’izhii would be a classic in Russia up until the 1950’s. A typical performance by a r’izhii is described in The Book of Clowns as such:

The clown tumbled down from the banks of benches into the ring, accompanied by the crashing and banging of a huge watering-can. He collapsed, sprawled across the ring fence; then, seating himself on it, he brought out a handkerchief and blew his nose. The sound was atrociously magnified by the drums and trumpets of the band. When he removed his handkerchief, his false nose was seen to be lit up by an electric lamp inside it. It went out, but suddenly his red hair stood straight up on his head... He got out of the way of the ring boys as they rolled up the carpet, until they put him with it in a wheelbarrow and wheeled him off, crying like a baby.\textsuperscript{58}

The r’izhii was a physical clown, prone more to pratfalls than prose. The r’izhii and the Auguste were often portrayed as descending from a lower class than the Auguste, though once again that would change with the advent of the revolution. Foreign sounding names and characters of circus performers were strongly discouraged under the new regime, making way not only for a resurgence in a traditional clown, but a shift in class representation for these buffoon characters.\textsuperscript{59} If the aristocrat was now the buffoon, the former buffoon was now on top.

\textsuperscript{56} Lee, 159.
\textsuperscript{57} Lee, 160.
\textsuperscript{58} Speaight, The Book of Clowns, 92.
\textsuperscript{59} Von Geldern, Bolshevik Festivals, 112.
The final clown type is the Character clown, who is defined as just that, a clown with a distinct character.  

The Tramp/Hobo is a form of the character clown that was created in the United States in the early 19th century to mirror the new itinerant class of men that traveled the rails. The tramp/hobo had “parched white lips, an ashy growth of beard and tatters arrayed in some strange semblance of clothing.” Known as the existentialist clowns “His is the world of day to day misfortune with all its accompanying slings and arrows. Of making do with whatever the world presents and the discovery of small miracles that open the world significantly.” Beckett’s clowns in Waiting for Godot are among the most iconic representations of this type within the theatre. Aside from the Tramp or Hobo, the Eccentric form as well as most Female clowns are also lumped under this category, of Character clown. In Soviet Russia this would become one of the most popular new clown types to emerge, a form that remains the most popular even in contemporary Russian clowning.

The Ciniselli Circus: The Politicized Circus of the Revolution

The Ciniselli Circus of St. Petersburg was not only one of the most successful of the Russian circuses, but also one of the most artistically and politically innovative. Ciniselli was the first to produce works of Shakespeare in the circus arena, and it was also involved in many political mass spectacles as well, with pieces dating from 1911 to 1914, the beginning of the Great War (with financial and political support from the Romanov’s) to the entrance of the revolution. The theatrical pieces that the company would stage in the arena would in many ways set the stage for the work of Mayakovsky and others as they attempted to connect these two disciplines. The mass spectacle

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60 Lee, 160.
61 Lee, 162.
62 Lee, 162.
63 Lee, 163.
64 Pipkin, 10.
65 Mass spectacles were large scale political pageants or productions which involved hundreds of citizens gathered together. During the Soviet regime, these spectacles usually occurred at celebrations for state holidays.
66 Von Geldern, 15-16, 25.
would become an integral part of the Soviet propaganda machine, integrating the masses in artistic and politically driven performances glorifying the plight of the Bolsheviks. Mass spectacles ("monumental open air spectacles involving thousands of performers and tens of thousands of spectators") are described in detail by Deak:

These mass spectacles were characterized by collective authorship (script and mise en scene), military-like organization, and the participation of different segments of society: workers; soldiers of the Red Army; drama students and artists of different orientations, including those of the avant-garde. Thematically, mass spectacles were connected with the events of the Revolution and the civil war. They were not isolated performances but were a part of a more complex event, such as the celebration of the anniversary of the Revolution, May First, the Third International, or any other holiday of the Red calendar. The mass spectacles were not only conscious attempts to create a new distinctly proletarian theatre but also an attempt to establish a new social ritual by collectively reenacting and celebrating the events of the revolution.

Indeed, the mass spectacle itself had a rich history even outside of the revolutionary context, the revolution simply strove to make it its own. The Tsar and the state had previously controlled the right to put up festivals and carnivals, as well as held control of the finances to do such. With the onset of the revolution, the people, or at least the new Bolshevik government, now had the right to declare what spectacles and marches were to take place.

One of the first marches in St. Petersburg (at the time Petrograd) after the war in 1917, involved the Social Mystery-Play, which involved the workers as well as the churches (that had yet to be outlawed at that point) in a show of unity and solidarity to

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67 Deak, 7.
68 Deak, 7.
69 Von Geldern, 18.
the new Bolshevik government.\(^\text{70}\) Mass spectacles were truly “noticed” by the officials in 1920 and taken over at that point to be useful to the Soviets.\(^\text{71}\) Instead of spectacles promoting religious holidays, these would now be engaged to support the Soviet holidays and propaganda. The quantity and scale took on new greater size than what was common during the Tsarist years.

Another of the Ciniselli’s influential innovations was the introduction of the “French style” wrestling matches to the Russian circus arena.\(^\text{72}\) The “French style” of wrestling separated itself from other styles by specific rules regarding physical appearance and the necessity of socks or bare feet, but also by demanding that wrestlers grasp each other by the head or not below the waist and a ban on tripping, holding of the legs, striking, scratching, or clasping of hands.\(^\text{73}\) While not only separate in rules and form from other European wrestling, it also seems to be a first form of European circus wrestling.\(^\text{74}\) As wrestling was a commoner’s sport, it became a regular feature of the Russian circus, becoming a staple among the popular troupes.

The Ciniselli Circus also played a large role in St. Petersburg culture, both “higher culture” and “lower” culture, including political involvement. In both the summer and the fall of 1917 rallies were held on the premises of the Ciniselli Circus and the Modern Circus by Bolshevik women.\(^\text{75}\)

In the summer and fall of 1917 the journal *Rabotnitsa* (which had resumed publishing in May and now emerged as the main organizing center for work among women) organized special women’s demonstrations at the Ciniselli Circus and the Modern Circus on the Petrograd side, an important working class neighborhood, to address topics as “The Woman Worker and Inflation,” “Who Needs the War?” “Female Labor,” “The Protection of Maternity.” The Bolshevik woman

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\(^{70}\) Von Geldern, 18.  
\(^{71}\) Von Geldern, 133.  
\(^{72}\) Hammarstrom, 32.  
\(^{74}\) Von Geldern, 112. It was incidentally also the first form of female mud wrestling.  
\(^{75}\) Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 37.
organizers tried not to allow Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries, and Anarchists even to attend.  

Apparently, over 10,000 women attended the demonstration, forcing the organizers to convene a second meeting out in the street. In addition to the meeting at Ciniselli circus, “This meeting was followed by another one on the same theme held at the Patronnyi factory on June 25, which was attended by 5,000 workers, and a further one four days later on the organization of working women which was held in the Cirque Moderne.”

Although written verification that the Ciniselli Circus rented its space to groups solely on the basis of their political beliefs cannot strictly be verified, it also cannot be a far stretch to assume that those political leanings played a large role in the decision. The shift in emphasis from renting out the space as a location in which to perform Shakespeare to a space where the working population convenes to discuss political and economic policy is consistent with the greater Bolshevik ideology. Though Shakespeare could not be considered entirely a bourgeoisie theatre, as it was still commonly performed in the Soviet Union, the fact that the needs of the worker were now placed at the forefront demonstrates a shift in the culture of the circus itself. Coupled with the fact that the Cirque Modern was also competing for the same public, one can assume that the Ciniselli Circus officially shifted from a space for all Russians to a place for all Soviets during the early years of the revolution. The circus recognized the willingness to shift its focus from entertainment alone to a political engaged center, ensuring not only its place, but its importance to the people in the new society.

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76 Wood, 37.
77 Wade, The Russian Revolution, 122.
78 Jahn, 147.
Durov Brothers: the Beginning of the Pre-Revolutionary Political Clown

When looking at the trajectory of the Soviet clown, it is imperative to begin by discussing the Durov Brothers, Anatoly(1864-1916)\textsuperscript{79} and Vladimir(1863-1934)\textsuperscript{80}, early examples that truly set the stage for both the Russian and Soviet political clown. Their political circus acts would get them into dangerous predicaments long before the revolution began. Both astonishing entertainers in their own right, Anatoly and Vladimir, the brothers would forge their own unique paths onto the world of Russian clowning. The two brothers would work together and separately to produce works that would challenge as much as they would entertain.

What truly set these gentlemen apart from other Russian clowns of the period was the education and titled class that they were born into.\textsuperscript{81} Before the Durov’s, the most notable clowns to perform in Russia had been foreign-born.\textsuperscript{82} Those that were Russian usually ascended from the lower classes and hadn’t the same level of cleverness and wit that the Durov’s embodied. What was most important to Anatoly and Vladimir as performers, was not only that they were born of a class that afforded them privilege and education, but also the social tools that they were afforded because of that class. They were articulate performers, and encompassed a sophistication equal or above that of their audience.\textsuperscript{83} This distinction alone was a first for the prerevolutionary circus audiences. Both the brothers appropriately took the form of Whiteface clowns (although photographs of the period show them wearing little to no makeup), their class status and sophistication creating a natural fit with the clown style characterized by the same attributes. In this instance the class distinctions suggested by the character type paralleled the actual performers.

The material the Durov brothers chose to perform also lent them distinction among the circus clowns performing. Most foreign clowns performed acrobatics and physical humor as opposed to the spoken word. While native Russian speakers certainly

\textsuperscript{80} Banham, 316.
\textsuperscript{81} Senelick, “King of Jesters,” 97.
\textsuperscript{82} Senelick, 97.
\textsuperscript{83} Senelick, 97.
told jokes, they were of a less sophisticated class; their humor not always able to translate to the more refined audiences. The Durovs, on the other hand, were able to supersede both of those limitations. With their topical wit they were able to translate to all classes of men and women. Laurence Senelick states in his article on the Durovs, “Just as in the Soviet Union today, audiences were alert to the ‘Aesopic’ language and veiled allegory. The slightest hint was caught and savored. The Durovs could become topical clowns because, better educated and more sensitive to the political climate than their precursors, they could hold the public interest with well-honed barbs.”

The two brothers had a contentious relationship, stealing one another’s work, each crediting themselves for the same acts, the same bouts with political enemies. This battle over authorship of work makes it especially challenging for the scholar attempting to examine and dissect their pieces; one artistic legacy cannot be looked at without including the other. For this section, both of the infamous Durov brothers will be included, crediting the actual pieces to the brother that seems to have the more extensive historical credulity.

It was Anatoly Durov, the more satirical and anti-authoritarian of the two who upon entering the circus arena would boldly declare, “King of Jesters, but never King’s Jester. The Jester to His Majesty the People.” It was an act that challenged the Tsarist power structure, breaking allegiance from the Tsar and placing it within the hands of the people. Indeed, most of his routines openly challenged the pre-revolutionary powers, from Czar Nicolas to Kaiser Wilhelm II, acts that would result in his being removed from St. Petersburg and Germany respectively.

A particularly amusing example of Anatoly Durov’s willingness to challenge authority resulted in his arrest in Germany. He was performing at the Wintergarten in Berlin and was apparently insulted by a German officer. As was his custom when insulted by anyone, Anatoly then worked a joke at the man’s expense into his act.

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84 Senelick, 97.
85 Senelick, 98.
86 Senelick, 98.
87 Senelick, 97.
During the show he brought out two of his trained pigs. He held out a piece of bread to one pig and a helmet to the other. He asked each pig, “Was willst du?” One pig went to the bread, wherein Durov said “Will Brot,” while the other went to the helmet, that had a piece of sausage concealed within it. To that pig he said “Will Helm.” At the time of the performance, Wilbrod was the Minister of Foreign Affairs, while Wilhelm was, of course, the Kaiser. The theatre was apparently frozen in shock, and the clown was arrested as soon as he exited the building.88

Anatoly’s tendency to contest the reach of authority was not limited to foreign officials. After a particularly biting political sketch Durov was asked by the Tsarist censor for an approved copy of his script. Anatoly responded, “We clowns are barred from that pleasure. They don’t censor our routines.”89 As Senelick explains, “Apparently, the censorship considered it beneath its dignity to bother with such vulgar carryings-on. Thus, quite fortuitously the circus enjoyed a modicum of license unavailable to the theatre or the cabaret. But, lacking the censor’s seal of approval, Durov was even more open to suppression by bureaucratic whim.”90 This is a prime example of the clown’s ability to subvert the authority of the government directly in the open. The humor of the fool, or the circus clown, is often relegated to the realm of the inconsequential because it exists in a space that allows for this momentary subversion, it is a place that exists for entertainment. Yet when these moments are compiled into a greater historical period of resistance, such as the Russian revolution, these inconsequential moments taken on greater meaning both inside the arena and out. The carnival space

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88 Senelick, 100. This story is an example of one claimed by both brothers. Senelick, however, provides intriguing reasons for why the tale belongs to Anatoly. It was Anatoly who first reported the story, and it was he who provided the most information pertaining to the tale. Senelick also suggests that it would be possible to ascertain through prison records that it was Anatoly who was imprisoned; though he does appear to do so within this article. Joel Schechter also discusses this problem, noting that the Circus Museum in Lenigrad does hold Berlin court documents describing the release of Anatoly Durov from prison, though the crime is not specified (213). In addition, Richard Stites also credits the arrest to Anatoly over Vladimir (19). However, multiple biographies of Vladimir Durov continue to credit him with the arrest, which continues to leave the matter quite contested (213).
89 Senelick, 99.
90 Senelick, 99.
no longer exists solely inside the circus arena, but takes on a life that expands beyond, assisting in a greater sociopolitical upheaval.

While Vladimir Durov’s work was certainly political, his main interest was in the training of circus animals and the message of goodwill that could be produced through those pieces. He developed a non-coercive system of training circus animals that is still widely in use today. Unlike Anatoly, who also used animals in his acts, Vladimir was more interested in creating political allegory with his animal “performers” than in using them as props for his own satire. He believed that the circus could educate as much as it could entertain.

While most of Vladimir’s acts worked to demonstrate the incorporation of animals for political allegory, there are several specifically that prove especially efficacious. One particular act entitled There Are No More Enemies exhibited the ability of two warring parties, in the form of a tomcat “supervisor” and rat “workers,” to make peace and works cooperatively together.91

The piece began with Durov bringing the rats into the ring, placing them on a cable stretched across the circus arena where they began “to work.”92 After the rats had begun to “work” on the cable, Durov brought the tomcat into the ring and set him next to the cable. At this point the “supervisor” began to scratch the cable, looking as though he would soon pounce on his small workers. Durov explained the action which occurred to the audience as such;

I said: ‘These rats represent the white workmen, while the tomcat is playing the part of the furious supervisor. Well, my workmen, go and interview the supervisor!’

The rats which were nearest to the cat boldly ran to him and thrust forward their muzzles.

‘See,’ said I, ‘how the tomcat and the rats kiss!’

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91 Durov, My Circus Animals, 41.
92 Durov, 41.
The delighted public applauded. Cries were heard. ‘How is it possible to make rats kiss this spiteful cat who is sharpening his claws?’

This was by no means the case. The tomcat was not spiteful, but merely sleepy, for I always brought him into the arena after a nap. He straightened out his body, stretched himself and scratched the cable, and seemed to be getting ready to jump on the rats, while the rats, hearing my squeak and smelling the familiar odor of the cage (which the cat and rats all shared) which had just been brought in, ran toward it over the cat who stood in their way.

‘See,’ I said, ‘how the tomcat and the rats are exchanging kisses! I have reconciled such bitter foes.’

Yet, Vladimir’s politics and wit were not confined to the animal kingdom alone. According to Vladimir, in 1906 he was sentenced to death by the Black Hundreds, a secret government-subsidized group of criminals, for his role assisting the wounded in the 1905 uprisings and his increasingly subversive remarks made against the government thereafter. The Black Hundreds were a counter-revolutionary and reactionary group characterized by violent action and anti-Semitism. The group was responsible for strike breaking, acts of political terrorism, and the lynching of students, intellectuals, and Jews. Apparently Durov’s run-in with the group led to a controversial new monologue that he performed upon entering the circus ring;

For many long years I’ve been under a ban
If truth in a jest I retail,
They’ll expel me from the provinces
Whene’er they can,
Or else make me languish in jail.
They’d throw me inside, and then let me out,
My soul they’d belittle as funny;
With scads of the tsar’s royal money.
But a clown for the people I staunchly remain,
From democracy I shall not swerve;
And I wait until finally Russia attains
The blessing our nation deserves.⁹⁶

While Vladimir would perhaps not always describe himself as a proletariat, he would certainly proclaim himself a revolutionary. Indeed, while only Vladimir would live long enough to see the Soviet revolution take hold, both Anatoly and Vladimir were adamant fighters against Tsarist rule and authority. Whether their protests were verbalized within the ring to visiting soldiers and officials, or whether in the guise of a Aesopian allegory, the brothers would fight for the people, becoming the first “King of Jesters, but never King’s Jester. The Jester to His Majesty the People.”⁹⁷

**Bim-Bom: The Non-Conformist Political Duo**

The clown troop Bim-Bom represents an entirely divergent type of clown humor from the style of the Durovs. They too were a clown act that was present both before the revolution took place, as well as after. Yet this troop sets itself apart from the former artists by performing routines that openly questioned, not the Tsarist regime, but the Soviet government.

Bim-Bom was composed of Ivan Radunsky (1872-1955)⁹⁸ as Bim and many incarnations of Bom via a series of performers who utilized the title. The first Bom was a “Russanized Italian musician” F. Kortezzi, until his death by drowning in 1897.⁹⁹

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⁹⁶ Senelick, 102-103. Text and translation both taken from Senelick’s article.
⁹⁷ Senelick, 97.
⁹⁹ Towsen, 316-318.
Together the troop wore identical silk costumes, yet the only face paint came in the form of Bom’s red nose, as well as his red wig.\footnote{Towsen, 316.} The second Bom, Stanevsky, moved to Poland in 1920, but Radunsky chose to stay and find a new partner in the USSR.\footnote{Towsen, 321.} Radunsky regrouped and began performing with N. Vilstak in 1925. The group remained popular and had many imitators throughout the twenties, including Din-Don, Bib-Bob, Fis-Dis, and Vis-Vais.\footnote{Towsen, 321.} After Kortezzi’s death, M. Stanevsky arrived to renew the act with Radunsky. However, Stanevsky’s arrival proved not merely to be a replacement, but in the moment truly became a true reinvention of the troop. Stanevsky’s Bom became an auguste character, a caricature of an aristocrat, wearing a dinner jacket and top hat.\footnote{Towsen, 318.} Before the revolution their audiences were comprised mostly of middle class Russians, as such the troop was not entirely in favor of the revolution.\footnote{Schecter, “Bim, Bom and the Laugh”, 35.} After the revolution, the troop found more popularity with the middle class than the proletariat, due to their anti-Bolshevik humor and would perform topical songs and skits, updated as the political and social situation changed in Russia.\footnote{Leach, 5.}

In the second incarnation of Bim-Bom, the troop situates a type of \textit{r’izhii} character against a plain clothed clown, dressed in a tail coat. This change in costume represents more than a change in the line-up; it also points to a shifting dynamic within the act which signifies a transformation in the audience itself. In the first version of the duo, Bim portrays a white clown, a straightman, to Bom’s traditional \textit{r’izhii}. In this version, Bim remains the straight character, while Bom becomes a caricature of an aristocrat, perhaps a new form of the “stupid” character. In the aftermath of the revolution, the traditional folk clown is perhaps not one to be laughed at, rather the tables are turned and the aristocrat is shown to be the fool.

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{Towsen, 316.}
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  \item \footnote{Towsen, 321.}
  \item \footnote{Towsen, 318.}
  \item \footnote{Schecter, “Bim, Bom and the Laugh”, 35.}
  \item \footnote{Leach, 5.}
\end{itemize}
Bim-Bom’s dangerous propensity for mocking the bureaucracy of the new regime was capable of striking in no more than a few lines. Take for example a piece performed regarding the Soviet love of permits: “The popular clown Bom entered the ring carrying a great sack. To Bom’s question, ‘Have you been getting wood?’ Bom replied, ‘No, here is the wood,’ and held up a match. ‘Then what is in the sack?’ inquired Bim. ‘The necessary permits,’ replied Bom.” 106 While this piece could not be considered the most insidious dismissal of Soviet rule, yet coupled with their history of anti-soviet jest, it nevertheless suggests a condemnation beyond the joke it hides behind. 107 The mockery of certain complicated aspects of Soviet bureaucracy was not an altogether forbidden topic. Mayakovsky made light of the Soviet system in his play *The Bedbug*. Lenin himself thought the piece to be quite amusing and truthful in regards to the extremes to which the Soviets could carry the intricacies of their system. 108 It was the fact that Bim-Bom were mocking the system while on the outside of Soviet politics instead of within the party that created the site for political dissension. Perhaps if they, like Mayakovsky, had belonged to the Bolshevik party and touted the political beliefs inherent to them, Bim-Bom’s dissension might be overlooked as a series of harmless jests rather than dangerous political allegory. However, it is interesting to note that a certain degree of dissent must have been allowed within this historical moment. The Reds, like many regimes, seem to have initially allowed moments of opposition within the circus and other art forms. Yet this was by no means an altruistic leaning, but should rather be interpreted as an act within the greater desire to secure and retain power over the people. While there are certainly examples of popular culture resistance to this notion, hegemony primarily works by allowing moments of release to prevent discord and rebellion. By allowing the people to jest at the expense of the Bolsheviks, the party was in fact securing their control over them.

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106 Leach, 50.
107 The duo was well known for the political couplets they delivered as part of their performance, always penned by the longstanding member of the duo, Bim. Though written accounts of those couplets no longer remain, scholars agree on the certainty of their overall anti-Bolshevik nature.
The most infamous piece performed by Bim-Bom was the innocuously titled *The Laugh*. M. Stanevsky was the latter part of the duo when the infamous act *The Laugh* was performed; the piece consisted of very little dialog and was instead made up almost entirely of laughter. The text utilized is seemingly harmless in fact only compromising about half a written page of dialog, the real crux of the performance is the infectious laughter that pervaded and overwhelmed the dialog and the audience itself. The text itself comments solely on the trees and a young lady seen on an afternoon walk, yet somehow this act was considered dangerous to the Bolsheviks. Reportedly during the performance one night a group of soldiers sent shots into the circus tent, threatening to aim them at the clowns if the act persisted. While Bim-Bom did perform routines that outwardly criticized the government, somehow this piece lives as the most pervasive and transgressive. In point, there are several stories that surround the performance of this piece that attest to its transgressive power:

The most popular entertainment of the Civil War in Moscow was the clown duo of Bim-Bom. Their popularity, alas, rested not only on their wit but also on its target, the Bolsheviks. Bim and Bom desisted from mocking the Bolsheviks only when their couplets so offended Latvian Rifleman in the audience that they shot up the circus and threatened to do the same to the clowns.

Towser corroborates this tale and goes on to suggest: “It was even reported that during the Russian civil war a group of battle-fatigued soldiers made the near-fatal mistake of

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109 Schechter, 34. Neither Schechter nor any other scholar I come across has been able to give either a date or a year in which this work premiered. What I can tell conclusively is that it would have to be sometime between 1897 and 1920, the approximate dates which M. Stanevsky was part of the duo.

110 Schechter, 36. The text will be included in the appendix.

111 Stites, *Soviet Popular Culture*, 52. According to Orlando Figes, Bim was rumored to have been murdered by the Cheka for this particular anti-Bolshevik satire, but I am currently unable to find any written proof of this claim. Figes suggests this derives from a book called *The Red Terror in Russia*, yet I am unable to find this reference in the book. What I am able to discern is that Radunsky performed until 1946 and lived until approx. 1955.

112 Von Geldern, 114.
listening to a recording of this routine and were sent into a state of utter delirium as a result.”¹¹³

Schechter believes that the laughter induced by the performance of *The Laugh* can be considered counterrevolutionary. He goes so far as to say that it is laughter “destructive of [the] revolution.”¹¹⁴ An analysis of *The Laugh* as a counter-revolutionary text is essential in determining how it was effective and perhaps more strangely, why the sound of laughter itself could elicit such fear within the Bolshevik ranks; perhaps more conspicuously, whether the laughter elicited by the performance was carnival and had an “indissoluble and essential relation to freedom.”¹¹⁵

Bakhtin asserts that a text and the laughter it may provide must go hand in hand with the time period it is derived from. Therefore the laughter elicited in *The Laugh*, must be informed by the period that produces it. Rabelais also notes that folk humor began its existence outside the official sphere, later to be regulated and controlled by the powers that be.¹¹⁶ It would then make sense to view *The Laugh* as a text that existed outside of the official sphere because it did not provide the keys to official understanding; if there is no text, it cannot be censored or regulated, which in itself creates a possibility for danger. The laughter produced from such a text must then be suspect, keeping also in mind Bim-Bom’s political stance against the Bolsheviks, it is no wonder the government was concerned over an act that they were unable to comprehend or control.

**Vitaly Lazarenko: The First Proletariat Clown**

Vitaly Lazarenko (1890-1939) was a soviet political clown who worked not only within the circus, but also in the theatre and in film to create political art and propaganda. The introduction of Lazarenko to the circus was significant not only in that

¹¹³ Towsen, 319.
¹¹⁴ Schechter, 34.
¹¹⁵ Bakhtin, 66.
¹¹⁶ Bakhtin, 71-73.
he was an ardent representative of the Soviets within the circus arena, but also the work he produced altered the circus itself, changing not only what the clown said, but the way the clown worked in conjunction to politics. Lazarenko brought the Soviet clown from revolutionary dissident to mouthpiece of the new regime. He was no longer a resistor of authority, but challenged those who would resist Soviet authority. Lazarenko marks the shift of the Soviet clown from one who opposed hegemony, to one who enforces the ideology of the political power through his circus performances.

What is especially important to note about Lazarenko in the trajectory of the Soviet clown, is that his clown heritage stems directly from Anatoly Durov. Durov was Lazarenko’s teacher and most certainly must have passed along his knowledge of wit and satire. In fact, when Lazarenko took to the ring he utilized his own version of the Durov brother’s slogan, “Jester to His Majesty the People.” In many respects he might be considered the first proletarian clown. Lazarenko was a Bolshevik by politic, a member of the lower class by birth, and a dedicated revolutionary who was arrested in his youth for supporting the revolutionary cause. After his popularity had grown, he continued to support the Bolshevik cause by entertaining troops on the front line of the civil war. While one could say that Vladimir and Anatoly Durov were clowns of the people, Lazarenko was truly a clown of the new Soviet people.

Born in 1890 as the son to a seamstress and coalminer, Lazarenko’s beginnings were decidedly proletarian. The circus became his career at the young age of eight after his father’s death in 1898, where he began performing as a gymnast. It was not until 1906 that Lazarenko choose to become a clown; interestingly his first clown character was a r’izhii. It is revealing that this clown of the people began his clown career with a truly Russian clown type. Yet it wasn’t simply these beginnings that set him apart from the other seemingly bourgeoisie performers, but the coupling of his

117 Schechter, 82. Though Schechter implies that it was Vladimir Durov who trained Lazarenko, both Robert Leach (5) and John H. Towsen (321) suggest that it was Anatoly Durov instead.
118 Towsen, 321.
119 Hammarstrom, 42.
120 Banham, 633.
121 Towsen, 321, Banham, 633.
122 Towsen, 321.
background with his political wit and satire that allowed him to become a revolutionary force within the arena. In 1911 Lazarenko met Anatoly Durov who introduced him not only to satire, but also to verse as a means of delivering his dialogue. Using the acrobatic skills he had attained in his early training, coupled with the new found use of verse and satire, Durov assisted Lazarenko in stepping away from the non-political r'izhii, to the new clown that allowed Lazarenko to become a celebrity and a political force in Moscow by 1914.

Another aspect of Lazarenko’s proletarian stage persona that should not be overlooked is his choice of costume. While many clowns of the period wore the silk frocks that were considered traditional stage attire, Lazarenko chose instead to wear overalls, a utilitarian choice for a clown speaking to the working classes. Though his later persona was a tramp clown, this choice of costume coupled with the political satire of his act transformed his character into something other than merely tramp, but proletarian. It could be argued that the unassuming costume of the tramp character allowed the best means of connecting to his audience, the working men and women. The tramp clown was also known as the existentialist clown, which would also serve Lazarenko’s character. The existentialist clown was one that chose to eschew the politics of the elite in favor of the struggles of everyday men and women, a stance that was certainly in line with the Bolshevik ideology.

Prior to the revolution Lazarenko, like his predecessor Durov, had the propensity of continually getting into trouble with local officials, often prompting them to have him removed from town. When the Tsar introduced a constitution that was largely felt to be ineffectual and an inadequate response to a need for genuine change, Lazarenko apparently did not hesitate to voice his views on the matter. In the city of Orinberg, this notice was posted, informing the citizens of the clowns’ offence:

BANNED!

BY THE CITY OF ORINBERG

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123 Towsen, 321.  
124 Towsen, 321.  
125 Towsen, 321.
Lazarenko’s bold political sketches not only put him at the ire of local officials, but also threatened to put him in danger with the violent political group “Black Hundreds” in a way similar to his predecessor, Anatoly Durov. 127 Like Durov, Lazarenko, a devout revolutionary, refused to be intimidated by the Black Hundreds, performing sketches that directly criticized their politics and violent actions regardless of threats to his safety.128

Lazarenko collaborated with the most innovative and influential theatre artists of the early nineteen hundreds, including Vlesvelod Meyerhold, Vladimir Mayakovky, Yevgeny Vahktangov, Nikolai Erdman, among others; they all utilized the talent of Lazarenko within their projects.129 His work was not limited to theatre and circus alone; Lazarenko set a world record by leaping over three elephants in the Pathe film, “I Want to Be a Futurist.”130 His is perhaps the most in-depth resume of all the circus performers of that era, working with the both the leading artistic and political figures of the Moscow theatre. According to Meyerhold, what truly set Lazarenko apart from the rest was that he was able to turn “the transformation of the abstract show [circus] into an agitational theatrical performance.”131 Lazarenko performed the role of the demon in the second production of Mystery-Bouffe (1921), a play written by Mayakovsky and

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126 Hammarstrom, 42. At the moment I am unable to ascertain what Lazarenko’s specific offense was for soliciting such a response. Obviously he made disparaging remarks against the constitution, but what those words were specifically is unknown.
127 Hammarstrom, 42.
128 Hammarstrom, 42.
129 Deak, 53.
130 Schechter, 82.
131 Leach, 50.
directed by Meyerhold, considered by many to be the first socialist play. Within the circus itself his productions were not limited to Mayakovsky pieces alone. Nicolai Erdman wrote circus sketches for the clown as well including: The Comradely Court Case at Housing Cooperative No. 1519, The Divorce, and The People Vs. Vitally Lazarenko.

By the time Lazarenko met Mayakovsky, he was already a figure in his own right; some of Lazarenko’s most prolific collaborations involved the poet and playwright. Together the two would produce two short circus acts, The Soviet Alphabet (1919) and The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle (1920), and a full-length circus production, Moscow Is Burning (1930).

The Soviet Alphabet was a piece that literally was meant to accomplish what its title suggested, teach the alphabet to citizens. Lazarenko would walk around the arena and perform a satiric verse or song for each letter of the Soviet alphabet; it was entertaining and served an educational function. James von Geldern suggests that the couplets were anti-white Russian, stating that not only would it politically advantageous to do so, but that it would not be outside the methods of the clown tradition to construct these types of couplets. Not only would the political advantages be present, but this type of piece would line up with the Soviet belief in educating all the classes, of all ages.

Moscow Is Burning was a piece that served quite a different function. Moscow Is Burning, was both written and performed in 1930 as a part of the Soviet anniversary of the October Revolution and details the events surrounding the proletarian version of the 1905 Bolshevik attempt at revolution. One of many productions produced in celebration of the revolution, this was particular in that it was not simply a speech or a
play, but a circus production. Mayakovsky’s idea was to “present a general idea of 1905,” or a “review of 1905” in twenty-one episodes all to be performed within the circus arena. Within the play Moscow Is Burning, the clown plays an important role. He is a reappearing character who acts according to the idea of the satirical subversive force, though he does in fact have to toe the party line, he manages to explore boundaries and notions of power nonetheless. It is the clown’s specific role to incite the spectators to take notice as he demands the Czar be held accountable for his actions. He challenges the Czar at first in a figurative sense, and then later quite literally assists in toppling the old regime. At times depicting comic portraits of the aristocracy, liberals, and other Czarist loyalists, at other moments the clowns as characters within the production resist the simply comedic persona for a more important political role. Through sardonic wit and candid speeches, they become a window of truth and point of transition, carrying the audience from the world of Czarist rule to the awakening of Bolshevik ideology and revolution. Though satirical in tone, they nonetheless serve as guides, working alongside the narrative to further the ideological story.

The circus for Lazarenko existed as not solely an artistic venue to explore the clown craft, but a political forum. The arena became a site for political and ideological dialogues with the Soviet people and Lazarenko, their clown. Yet in becoming the circus clown of the Soviets, he altered the way in which the clown communicated with the people. The clown, as Lazarenko demonstrated, could no longer be content with apolitical humor or vague political outpourings, but must shape and direct his/her speech to meet the ideological needs of the Soviets. Lazarenko, especially noticeable in his work with Mayakovsky, was not content to merely discuss the politics of the Bolsheviks, but to firmly lay out the messages and interpretations that they people should receive. In doing so he shifted the clown’s role from political couplets to messages, from a coded implication through laughter to a direct response to the demands of the party. The carnival atmosphere of the circus was no longer present in

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138 Deak, 53.
the same manner, no longer created by both the needs of the performer and audience in a collective moment, but restricted and constructed to meet the party’s needs. While Lazarenko cannot be held responsible for the conclusion of the censor free moments of societal release found within the circus, his work certainly contributed to that shift, changing the clown into a state directed mouthpiece for the new regime, his revolutionary moments directed not at the state, but those who would oppose it.

The Next Chapter in the Soviet Circus: Nationalization and Reform

In 1918 Anatoly Lunacharsky (Playwright and People’s Commissar of Enlightenment, 1875-1933) established the Circus House. This group met weekly to discuss how to bring the circus better in line with the Communist philosophy. These meetings were not restricted to circus and theatrical directors alone; anyone was allowed to attend and present their ideas of reform. In terms of possibilities for propaganda, the form of the theatre was able to offer much to the circus. Theatre exists to communicate specific messages through plays constructed with sequential scenes that work together to create the intended message. If that format was introduced to the circus the possibilities for presenting specific messages in line with Soviet ideals would be dramatically increased. No longer would the circus consist of randomly connected acts, but they would connect together the same way that a play’s scene compilation would, building off of one another to construct a narrative message, making separate interpretations of the performance impossible. This format, utilizing the popular entertainment of the masses, would bring propaganda to the people in a manner unlike it had previously accomplished.

Lunacharsky listed three main elements that were either viable points within the circus or elements which needed to be addressed: first the show of strength, agility, and beauty were assets; secondly, the clown needed to evolve from the naïve jokes and

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140 Hammarstrom, 50.
141 Hammarstrom, 50.
buffoonery. “Their jests are the favorites of the people, and that is esthetically pleasing... but we demand more from a clown. In the ‘renewed circus,’ the clown must have an extensive repertoire. The clown must dare to be a publicist. The [stance] of the clown, of [his] national character, must be totally believable, and deeply democratic.”\textsuperscript{142}

Third, it was suggested that the subject matter for the circus and pantomimes should be relegated to historical matters, such as the history of the revolution. In addition to the Circus House meetings, in 1919 the circus was nationalized by Lenin.\textsuperscript{143} This was followed by a resolution passed in 1920 by the circus performers to “work for the common people, not so much for the exploiters.”\textsuperscript{144}

Though all of these directives have express bearing on pieces discussed in this thesis, it is the second of Lunacharsky’s that bears directly on the clowns in this chapter. One must reconsider the context in which they delivered their sketches. It illuminates the nature of the works which support the party and the real dangers of those who chose to go against the edicts of the party. One could go so far as to speculate that the works of Mayakovsky and Lazarenko exist as a response to such decrees; at the very least they must provide an influence. As ardent Bolsheviks, it seems likely that they would be among the first to take the challenge with enthusiasm, to help usher in a new age for the Soviet circus.

\textsuperscript{142} Hammarstrom, 50.
\textsuperscript{143} Hammarstrom, 54.
\textsuperscript{144} Hammarstrom, 58.
Chapter Two

The Circus of Mayakovsky: Creating a Sociopolitical Spectacle

“The circus today is beginning to drift away from naked tricks in an attempt to present the various acts in some social content.”

— Vladimir Mayakovsky, The Soviet Circus

“We, the workers of all fields of art, the theatre and the circus must join forces in our common task and, with as much unity as possible, bring our art to the people.”

— Vlesvelod Meyerhold, The Soviet Circus

“To the question: who are you?— reply seriously: the geniuses of our time—Mayakovsky, Burliuk, Kamensky.”

— Victor Woroszyski, The Life of Mayakovsky

In this chapter I will provide a synopsis of Vladimir Mayakovsky’s life as well as a contextualization of his work at the time that The Universal Struggle of the Class Championship was produced. I will primarily focus on Mayakovsky’s theatrical and political milestones rather than his personal and literary ones, which I feel have been discussed at great length in most works about the artist. The plays and the politics that feed those works more aptly connect to the piece I am focusing on. It is my hope that in contextualizing where Mayakovsky and his contemporaries were during this period, that I will be able to bring the world and politics of the piece into greater perspective.
It is also this concept of the theatrical zeitgeist that I will be attempting to discern. The theatre of the post revolutionary years utilized the physical aesthetics of the circus in their productions as well as increasingly in their theatrical training. Likewise the circus was influenced by the theatre to take many of its structural and aesthetic choices. The theatre altered the circus by introducing plot, characters and the idea of a constant message or theme that would connect all acts. The separate worlds of the trapeze artist and lion tamer were now forced to unite on a greater level; they would shape their works around the message, the ideological identity of the party. The ideological importance of the circus art applied to the clown as well. The clown’s role was now shaped by a need to construct and put forth the message before the comedy. This work would significantly impact the audience as well, character and plot construct meaning within the circus just as they do within the proscenium stage. It will be my task to not only contextualize how those aesthetics were used, but why the techniques of these two worlds collided at this moment.

Mayakovsky: The Beginnings of a Political Figure

The playwright Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky was born July 19, 1893. His early years were spent in the Georgian village of Bagdadi with his parents and two older sisters. After his father’s unfortunate death in 1906, the family re-located to Moscow. Regrettably his father had died a year before receiving his retirement pension, leaving his family without any means of support. They were forced to sell their home and furniture as well as borrow 200 rubles in order to get to Moscow, once there the family was obliged to take in boarders in order to pay the exorbitant rent.

Among the young students who rented a room from the Mayakovskys were several political dissidents, whose involvement in the Social Democratic party would

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145 Terras, 1.
146 Woroszlski, The Life of Mayakovsky, 1.
147 Woroszski, 5.
148 Woroszlski, 13, 6.
serve to engage Vladimir from an early age. The political influence of these young men would prove so engaging that he was in fact, admitted to the party at the relatively early age of 14 in 1907.

Within this single year he was both expelled from school for involvement with the Social Democrats and then, in late 1907 or early 1908, elected to the Moscow Committee of the Bolshevik wing of the Russian Social Democratic Party.¹⁴⁹ Both Mayakovsky and his family were involved in revolutionary efforts, taking in and assisting in revolutionaries.¹⁵⁰ According to Isidore Marchadeze, a border of the Mayakovsky’s:

The Mayakovsky family, little Volodya included, was a family of true revolutionaries... here is a small example to confirm this. The entire Mayakovsky family knew that I took part in expropriation, knew that large sums of money passed through my hands, but even though they lived in poverty and were often short, neither they nor I would ever think of spending so much as a kopek for our personal needs.¹⁵¹

This quote demonstrates not only Mayakovsky’s early commitment to revolutionary ideals, but gives an indication as to his family’s stance on his involvement. After his father’s death, Mayakovsky was treated more as an adult, as the man of the home, than a child. With his mother and sister’s support, it is no surprise that he surrounded himself with individuals who allowed him to take an active position in pre-revolutionary politics.

The young Mayakovsky was arrested three times for his political activities, yet it was the third arrest that was the most serious and for which he was given jail time.¹⁵² Yet Mayakovsky’s political allegiance was not diminished by this time spent in prison, if anything he became more of a political agitator while incarcerated, inciting the other

¹⁴⁹ Terras, 2.
¹⁵⁰ Woroszlski, 14.
¹⁵¹ Woroszlski, 14.
¹⁵² Terras, 3.
prisoners with his political speeches.\textsuperscript{153} He was transferred to at least three prisons during his six month imprisonment, also falling into solitary confinement at the Butyrki prison.\textsuperscript{154} According to the warden’s report at his first jail, on August 19, 1909, he states Mayakovsky’s misbehavior as such:

Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky, held in the prison under my administration, by his behavior incites other prisoners to disobedience toward prison officers, persistently demands free access to all cells, purporting to be the prisoner’s ‘spokesman’; whenever let out of his cell to go to the toilet or washroom, he stays out of his cell for a half an hour, parading up and down the corridor.\textsuperscript{155}

While in prison Mayakovsky continued to tout his politics, challenging guards and promoting Proletariat ideology to whomever he could manage. He began to hone his political skills, engaging men much older than he with the Bolshevik goals.

After prison Mayakovsky’s involvement with the party came to an end, the time spent in solitary confinement having affected him more than he would let on.\textsuperscript{156} His interest in art, however, became decidedly more passionate. According to Mayakovsky:

I came out of prison in a mood of great excitement. The ones I’d read (the novels) were the so-called greats. But it would not be difficult to write better than they did. I already have a correct attitude toward the world. The only thing I need is experience in art. But where to get it? I’m an ignoramus. I need to get serious training. Kicked out of the gymnasium, even out of the Stroganov School. If I’d stayed in the Party I’d have to work underground. And as I thought, in the underground you

\textsuperscript{153} Terras, 3.
\textsuperscript{154} Terras, 3.
\textsuperscript{155} Terras, 3.
\textsuperscript{156} Brown, \textit{Mayakovsky, A Poet in the Revolution}, 35.
never learn anything... Surely the revolution demanded of me serious schooling... I cut myself of from Party work. I began serious study.\textsuperscript{157}

Mayakovsky had abandoned both poetry and politics for the moment and decided to return to school to become a painter.\textsuperscript{158} He joined the studio of P. Kelin, which would prepare him for the entrance into the Moscow Institute for the Study of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, into which he relieved admission in August 1911.\textsuperscript{159}

The most influential moment of Mayakovsky's time in art school came not in the studio, but from meeting the man he described as his first “real teacher,” though incidentally he was also a student.\textsuperscript{160} David Buryluk (1882-1967) began attending the Institute in the same year, but was already an accomplished painter who had exhibited work abroad.\textsuperscript{161} It was Buryluk who began the Futurist movement in Russia 1910.\textsuperscript{162} The Futurists were a group of artists and writers who yearned to express what was new and modern, searching for examples of man’s ingenuity over nature. It was also his influence that encouraged Mayakovsky to begin writing poetry once more.\textsuperscript{163}

\textbf{The Russian Futurists}

Though the Russian Futurists came about before the revolution in 1917, their ideals were not entirely removed from one another. The Futurists, like the revolutionaries, were looking for new ways to speak and act that went outside the acceptable in Tsarist Russia. Their language and beliefs were infused with the political as well as the artistic. While the Futurists were not collectively involved in revolutionary politics, their penchant for disregarding the classical aesthetics for the new and modern was a definite precursor to the art of the proletariat.

\textsuperscript{157} Brown, 37-38.  
\textsuperscript{158} Brown, 40.  
\textsuperscript{159} Brown, 40-41.  
\textsuperscript{160} Brown, 42.  
\textsuperscript{161} Brown, 41.  
\textsuperscript{162} Brown, 41.  
\textsuperscript{163} Berghaus, \textit{Italian Futurist Theatre}, 3.
The Futurist movement began in Italy in 1909 based on the writings by Franco Marinetti.\textsuperscript{164} The Italian Futurists were characterized by a writing and artistic style that fully rejected the outdated artistic aesthetics and insisted on replacing them with ones focused on all things modern.\textsuperscript{165} While the Russians would not readily admit an association with the Italians, one could not deny that the Russian movement was derived from the ideas of Marinetti. In one of Mayakovsky’s poems he did go so far as to praise Marinetti, stating “in every youth, the gunpowder of Marinetti.”\textsuperscript{166} Like their Italian counterparts, the Russian Futurists were focused on praising the modern, highlighting technological advances in art and life. Yet the Russian movement also had an element of primitivism and surrealism that, though antithetical to the main futurist dogma, ran hand in hand with the Russian school.\textsuperscript{167} Russian Futurism began as a movement in 1911, but wasn’t in full force until 1913 when groups of young artists gathered to promote their manifestos of technology over nature, modernity over the past.\textsuperscript{168}

Mayakovsky began performing his poetry with the Futurists in 1911, joining the Russian movement early on. While all the Futurists performed in bright and garish costume, he began performing his poetry wearing a trademark bright yellow jacket sewn for him by his mother.\textsuperscript{169} Both his and Burlyuk’s involvement with the Futurists caused them to be expelled from art school.\textsuperscript{170} When the Russian Futurists took their show on the road in 1913, Mayakovsky apparently made a name for himself through his ability to argue the merit of Futurist aesthetics, although he had only ever completed an eighth grade education.\textsuperscript{171} Though the Futurists of Mayakovsky’s circle remained together only through 1915, Mayakovsky’s involvement with the Futurists was his first real break-through into an artistic circle, the publications and tours allowed him for the

\textsuperscript{164} Berghaus, 3.
\textsuperscript{165} Berghaus, 3.
\textsuperscript{166} Terras, 45.
\textsuperscript{167} Terras, 50.
\textsuperscript{168} Terras, 46.
\textsuperscript{169} Terras, 6.
\textsuperscript{170} Terras, 7.
\textsuperscript{171} Terras, 6.
first time a platform for his art and political ideas. The influence of the work he read and saw performed would continue to be reflected in the spirit of the work he created after as well.

The Politics of Mayakovksy

When Mayakovksy entered the realm of Bolshevik politics and ideology, he was one of its main supporters, and one of the leading artistic forces. As time went by and ideologies shifted, his beliefs on art and politics became less in line with the new and left him feeling more of an outsider than a driving force. Though his belief in the Revolution did not shift, his belief in his artistic comrades did. He held his own views of what art and poetry should be, changing allegiances and publications when he felt that the guiding powers were no longer in line with what was correct. While Mayakovksy began his political involvement earnestly at the age of 14, by the time he had reached his twenties, his notions of the people’s responsibility to the party had brought him more in line with the party ideology than with the artist’s needs and desires. Anatoly Lunacharsky, playwright and Bolshevik party member, first approached the Artists Union in 1917 about joining the revolution. However, the group feared losing their autonomy in the new political spectrum. It was only Mayakovksy and other avant-garde artists who wished to assist the new regime. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Mayakovksy’s reasoning shifted, and he found he did not find grounds to suspect the new regime. In fact, in the early part of the revolution, 1918, Mayakovksy was able to accept the cultural dictatorship of the new regime as long as he was one of the dictators. He advocated control over the arts, attempting with his futurist colleagues to set up a collective that would control “creative expression in the Soviet Union

172 Terras, 136.
173 Terras, 136.
174 Terras, 140.
through its collective publishing houses and schools.” Lunacharsky, however, denied the proposal.

By 1923 Mayakovsky did not believe in the free-reign of revolutionary art that he had once sought to promote. In an application to start his own journal he listed his goals, the first two were quite telling: “(a) To advance the finding of a communist way for every art form (b) to revise the ideology and practice of so-called left art, freeing it of individualist antics and developing its communist aspects.”

This was largely to be a trend with Mayakovsky in the coming years; he was very willing to engage in party ideology and defend their right to censor political art, as long as those views on censorship matched his own. Though a revolutionary in some respects, he could not escape the accusation of elitism. He was accused of controlling the content of the journals he edited and produced to fit his own propaganda and political positioning by selecting contributors from among his supporters. Unlike such groups as the Proletcult, who believed that only the Soviet people could create art that would truly speak for them, Mayakovsky believed in imposing restrictions and guidelines, believing his version was always the most ideologically correct. He also believed in the power of the government to assist citizens in these tasks believing that the Cheka, the state Secret Police was “the conscience of the Revolution,” repressing all “enemies of the state” who attempted to subvert and weaken the Soviet government.

“And he who doesn’t sing with us today
is against
us!”

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175 Terras, 140.
176 Terras, 18.
177 Terras, 140.
178 Terras, 140.
179 Terras, 140.
180 Terras, 295.
This was an idea that was not only felt by Mayakovsky, but repeatedly advocated in his poetry as well as theatre. It is also made apparent in *Championship*. Mayakovsky’s views on the Cheka are touted there as well, as a force that has the people’s interests in mind. It is interesting to note that several of Mayakovsky’s colleagues and contemporaries became victims of the Cheka’s oppression, yet his view on them did not seem to, publically at least, shift.

**The Theatre of Mayakovsky**

Mayakovsky’s first theatrical production was a Futurist play he both wrote and starred in entitled, *Vladimir Mayakovsky, A Tragedy*. Originally titled *The Revolt of Things*, the play was performed in 1913 at Luna Park in St. Petersburg.¹⁸¹ This first piece was a both critical and popular disaster, yet continued to sell out the house every night. The action of the piece pitted Mayakovsky against the social evils of the world, try as he might to assist his fellow countrymen, he found himself unable, as the closing lines of the piece state a similar point, “I’m only sorry that I have no breast; otherwise I’d feed you all like a kind nanny.”¹⁸² Stylistically it was typical of his other Futurist work, yet the scope and length marked a change in Mayakovsky’s approach to his work. Though perhaps not the great success he had wished for, it none the less marked his introduction to the theatre.

In 1918, five years after this debut, Mayakovsky’s next foray into the theatre came with the premier production of *Mystery-Bouffe*. The production was produced in celebration of the first anniversary of the October Revolution.¹⁸³ The text of the script was written by Mayakovsky, yet for this production he collaborated with director Vsevolod Meyerhold. The play is in its essence a re-write of the medieval mystery play, yet is largely considered to be the first Socialist play. The plot centers around a group of individuals who, after the destruction of the world through a flood, are attempting to

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¹⁸¹ Terras, 7.
¹⁸³ Brown, 198.
reach a place of safety. There are two separate groups that attempt this journey together, the “clean” and the “unclean,” the clean obviously the bourgeoisie and the unclean the workers. After traveling through various locations including heaven and hell, the unclean triumph and arrive back on land to create a new world, a Communist paradise. The concept for this piece is not altogether removed from Vladimir Mayakovsky, A Tragedy, but the real difference lies in the fact that the second piece focuses not on the individuals who face hardship, but the masses of people. It marks a shift from the Futurist poet dealing with the individual to the politically conscious playwright addressing the masses.

A second production occurred in 1920, though there were some alterations in both the script and production. Not only were acrobatics and circus tricks used, but Lazarenko also appeared in this version as a leaping devil. It is undoubtedly not a coincidence that this second production incorporated these techniques as Mayakovsky had already begun his collaboration with Lazarenko in 1919 with The Soviet Alphabet and continued it in 1920 with Championship.

Mayakovsky’s next production opened in 1929, titled The Bedbug. The Bedbug was a propagandistic piece of theatre based in the 1920’s present as well as the future. The main character, Prisypkin, as he appears in the 1920’s is in danger of renouncing his Party ways for the comforts of the middleclass. He abandons his working class girlfriend for a middleclass business owner, in doing so seals his fate. On the night of their wedding a drunken guest burns down the apartment, apparently killing Prisypkin. It is not until fifty years later that his body is dug out of the ground and revived as a specimen of the early proletariat. This future society is unknown to Prisypkin, who is subsequently sent to live in a zoo for his and society’s safety, as his irrational tendencies to drink vodka and speak of love are outmoded in the future.

The play itself is propagandistic is some respects but also contradictory in others. The solution for his lost proletariat is imprisonment in a zoo, whereas one might

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184 Terras, 13. Victor Terras claims that the 1921 production of Mystery-Bouffe was performed in a circus arena, though I cannot find another source to verify.
think in the Soviet future that the advances in reasoning and the way of life might bring him more comfort than not. It would seem that the solution would be to allow Prisypkin to recognize and repent abandoning the Party ways, not be traumatized by the new Party. However, despite such discrepancies the play marks a shift in Mayakovsky’s plays, from simple structure to a more complex, if not overly so, one.

On January 30, 1930, *The Bathhouse: A Drama in 6 Acts, with Circus and Fireworks* opened to less than enthusiastic reviews. Mayakovsky was expecting the same reception that had met *The Bedbug* only a year prior. He was however greatly disappointed in the play’s performance run, there were apparently no laughs or applause.\(^{185}\) Mayakovsky’s final piece, *Moscow Is Burning, or Moscow on Fire: A Mass Spectacle with Songs and Words*, was performed posthumously a week after Mayakovsky’s suicide on April 21, 1930.\(^{186}\) Mayakovsky died from a self inflicted gun-shot wound to the head, he was apparently playing a game of Russian roulette after an argument with his current lover. This was not the first time Mayakovsky had played this game, nor was it the first time he had written a suicide note. At the time of his suicide, Mayakovsky’s professional relations were strained, but he remained as devoted as ever to the party itself. In his suicide note he even left money to pay his taxes.\(^{187}\)

Due to the nature of the game he was playing, and also owing to the fact that he had left suicide notes previously, scholars remain unclear whether Mayakovsky intended to commit suicide, or whether he was acting out in the moment. If he did not intend to kill himself, it must be questioned why he felt so comfortable confronting death time and time again; whether it was the thrill of act, or whether he felt his life was ultimately worth risk losing.

\(^{185}\) Terras, 34.
\(^{186}\) Terras, 36.
\(^{187}\) Brown., 364.
Circusization of the Theatre: Examining an Aesthetic

Vsevolod Meyerhold can certainly be considered one of the largest contributors to the inclusion of the circus into the theatre. Yet neither Meyerhold nor Mayakovsky can claim sole credit for this movement. The Ciniselli Circus was arguably the first contributor to the connection between these aesthetics when it opened its arena to Shakespeare in the late eighteen hundreds. Meyerhold, however, was certainly the latter day contributor to this intersection. Not only did he envision a new Soviet theatre influenced by the physical athleticism of the circus, but he believed strongly that all Soviet citizens could benefit from such a relationship as well. He felt that the visual and physical aesthetics of the circus arts promised much to the Soviet citizens, that “the circus is a house in which the art of physical education, of physical beauty, will rise ever higher. The new circus studios will train instructors who will then travel to various parts of the country to create sports clubs and a new physical culture, for a healthy body means a healthy spirit.”188

Yet when discussions began in 1919 to amalgamate the worlds of the theatre and circus, he was not in favor of a blind acceptance and integration of these techniques. He felt that while the two could certainly intersect, they should inherently remain true to the principles and elements of their separate crafts. During the Circus House meetings held by Lunacharsky, Meyerhold spoke against a forced restructuring of the circus into a more theatrical format stating, “There cannot and must not be a theatre circus: each is and must be a thing in itself, [although] the work of the masters of the circus and theatre can draw close to one another.”189

Interestingly enough, one could perhaps attribute the introduction of the circus into the theatre houses to Meyerhold. It was his 1920 production of Mystery-Bouffe with Mayakovsky that heralded the circus’s introduction to the stage. During this production, as stated previously, the physical movement of the actors became more acrobatic, including a role for Lazarenko, who being also famous for his ability to leap

188 Fevralsky, 235.
189 Von Geldern, 116-117.
over elephants, as a leaping devil in the scenes depicting hell. Victor Terras also asserts that a later production actually took place inside the circus itself, utilizing over 350 performers.\footnote{Terras, 13.}

While I can find no conclusive evidence of a continued collaboration with Lazarenko, Meyerhold’s foray into the circus certainly did not end with that production. Not only did Meyerhold bridge the circus and theatre together in *Mystery-Bouffe*, but his productions of *The First Distiller*\footnote{Leach, 53.} and *The Death of Tarelkin* also utilized circus aesthetics and performers. The production of *Mystery-Bouffe* seemed to be just an introduction to the circus rather than just an experiment.\footnote{Mayakovsky as well would go on to incorporate the circus into his theatrical works, his play *The Bath-House* is subtitled as “A Drama in Six Acts With Circus and Fireworks.”} His school of physical movement for actors called Biomechanics utilized many forms of physical training including acrobatics and circus techniques. Furthermore, Meyerhold required of his students to learn, among subjects such as theatre history and contemporary directors, the circus.\footnote{Hoover, *Meyerhold*, 89.}

Among Meyerhold’s students was Sergei Eisenstein, who went on to not only great success as a film director, but also paraded the circus techniques in the theatre. His 1922 production of Ostrovsky’s *Every Wise Man* had an array of circus techniques and performers, including tight-rope walking and acrobatics. Interestingly enough, Meyerhold directed a production that same year, yet the results of his teaching left the two with very different productions:

Both Eisenstein and Meyerhold put on two independent and very different productions of Ostrovsky’s *There’s Enough Simplicity to Every Wise Man*, making use of various circus tricks in both productions. Unlike *The Death of Tarelkin*, staged by Meyerhold in strict accordance with the author’s text, the play staged by Eisenstein was first completely rewritten by him and Sergei Tretyakov, the result being a topical political review.
presented as a circus spectacle. The printed programme carried out the same theme with the words "Working in the ring are..." instead of the usual "List of Characters."\(^{194}\)

The foray into circus by Mayakovsky and Meyerhold proved fruitful in this respect: what they had begun, the next generation of directors were already set on continuing. Though Meyerhold had expressed reservations about the theatre and circus intersecting too extremes, it was certain that Russian theatre would never to the physically disengaged theatre of the previous century.

\(^{194}\) Fevralsky, 228.
Chapter Three

The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle: Performing a Civil War

“The Russian circus existed as world in microcosm thus presented a patriotism in various ways during World War I. ... It could react to changes in the popular mood and try to exert influence by direct interaction with the audience. Thus it helped to reconfirm a variety of patriotic values. In the circus ring it became clear that patriotism was not a monolithic idea, that it had breaks and different meanings, which often remained vague and ambiguous, just as in real life.”

—Hubertus F. Jahn, Patriotic Culture in Russia During World War I

“Now there'll be a championship match: not an ordinary fight-but a class struggle. Now before your very eyes-the noblest nobles-athletes will strut by in well-matched pairs: they're here to eliminate each other.”

—Vladimir Mayakovsky, The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle

As Hubertus F. Jahn rather succinctly states, the circus not only existed as a popular culture art form during the Russian revolution and subsequent civil war, but also as a gauge by which to ascertain the citizen’s shifting allegiances. During the turbulent years after the revolution, both theatre and circus artists alike endeavored to find new ways of approaching their art forms, ways that would engage and challenge an ever changing population. The Soviet clown worked in a unique manner, however. While the revolutionary clown worked to present various forms of patriotism and resistance, the Soviet clown worked to solidify the politics and ideology of the Red
Russians, to concretize the notions of what it was to be a Soviet. The clown demonstrated this not only through a foregrounded political stance, but by altering the format of clowning itself. With the introduction of the theatre into the format of the circus, the clown brought monologue, developed characters, and a message rounded out by theme to the art of clowning. *The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle* is a prime example of a circus piece that demonstrated that shift in clowning, one that extended the boundaries of its craft to reach citizens in a politically contentious society. *Championship* was not the first collaborative effort between Mayakovsky and Lazarenko, but it was the first to adopt a longer, more theatrical format. This shift sets it aside not only from their earlier effort, but from much of the circus pieces of the moment. This important work is duly noted by historians, though rarely concentrated on as a major work in the circus, which it certainly deserves to be acknowledged as.

This chapter will focus on the analysis of the shifting nature of the Soviet clown as demonstrated within *Championship*. I will also be interpreting *Championship*, not solely as a textual body, but as a historical piece shaped by the men who presented it and the audience who witnessed and responded to those performances. Not only will a contextualization of the historical content of the script be included, but I will also provide a performance studies analysis of the text, identifying and examining the performativity textual present. I will be locating the moments in the text that perform a physical action or point to historically loaded phrase and breakdown the possibilities by which those moments may have engaged or altered the audience, may have in other words, performed on them.

*The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle: A Synopsis*

*Championship* was performed in November of 1920 at Moscow’s Second State Circus. The title of the piece is taken from a poem of Mayakovsky’s, *150,000,000*,

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which was written during 1919-1920. The script, discovered posthumously among Lazarenko’s effects, consists of approximately 8 pages of dialogue and stage directions. Though the stage directions were limited, the descriptions of the costumes worn by the champions were seemingly uniform, jerseys with a sash and replicated medals over their chests. The champions themselves were all played by circus clowns, though Lazarenko is the only performer identified by name.

The play itself begins with the Referee introducing the world champions, all of whom represent a political group who pose a real threat to the new soviet regime. The Entente champion is the first to be announced, Lloyd George, Prime Minister of England is the representative of the Triple Entente. He is to battle the French Champion,

196 Deak, 53.
197 Deak, 53. While Deak believes the work to be a collaboration between Mayakovskv and Lazarenko, there is no proof either way. It would seem to make sense for Mayakovskv to consider Lazarenko’s knowledge of circus work when constructing the piece, though there is an obvious lack of written wrestling direction in the script, which would assumedly be where Lazarenko would step into the process.
198 Deak, 53.
199 According to Frantisek Deak, the name is a reference to Referee Uncle Vanya, Ivan Lebedev, a well known referee of French wrestling matches in Russia. His costume was apparently a “cap”, high boots, and a long-waisted coat. He is described in the dialogue as a great fighter, Lazarenko, in the role of Uncle Vanya, who, “can pin any wrestler—...Sidorenko, Karpenko, Enko (I believe these to all be circus performers, as I can find at least one of them mentioned as famous performer by A. Kuprin (The Soviet Circus, 199), but I am unsure whether they are wrestlers or clowns). ...But I’m not a wrestler today, I’m a referee.” He goes on to discuss the fight that the audience is present to witness, which is “not an ordinary fight—but a class struggle. ...in well-matched pairs: they’re here to eliminate each other. Parade Allez!” “Action” or “Go” are verbal signals given by a referee to begin action. “Parade Allez” literally means “Parade Go”, but “Allez” was also a short story written in the 1890’s about a circus acrobat written by A. Kuprin, a short story writer and circus enthusiast. The story was quite popular in Russia, but whether there is a direct connection I cannot be sure, though it is certainly an interesting idea to entertain.
200 British Prime Minister David Lloyd George’s (1863-1945) involvement in the war with the Soviets came about in concert with Woodrow Wilson. Together the two helped orchestrate much of the allied involvement in support of a White Russian army victory (Pipes, A Concise History of the Russian Revolution, 249). However, the support that the White Russians enjoyed was extremely limited. Historical footnotes suggest that Lloyd George did not mind the new Soviet government and felt them to be less of a threat than a newly unified and democratic government that might form from the White victory(Pipes, 250). It was in fact Winston Churchill who felt that the Britain had an ideological obligation to put down Communism and assist the White Russians in their efforts (Pipes, 251). However, Wilson and Lloyd George came together to attempt negotiations between the warring Russians, but to no avail. Ironically it was the Bolsheviks who believed they could negotiate and bring peace, but the White Russians would take no part in the plan. They rejected any attempts the Allies or the Bolsheviks made (Pipes, 250). The British government came to the agreement that they would continued assistance to the Whites, but under the conditions that 1) they would not attempt to conquer the Bolsheviks by force, 2) the area controlled by Kolchak and Denikin (both White army leaders) would remain anti-Bolshevik, 3) the
Alexandre Millerand, French President and former Socialist.\textsuperscript{201} As they are paired off, the Referee enlightens the audience as to why they are fighting: profit. The next pairing of champions are also wrestling for financial gain; Woodrow Wilson\textsuperscript{202}, the American Champion, competing with the Profiteern Sidorov\textsuperscript{203}, an ordinary Soviet citizen, for the gold coin. The Crimean Champion, White Army General Wrangel\textsuperscript{204}, fights Marshal Piludsk\textsuperscript{205} the Polish Champion, not for money but for power; they fight for a crown.

anti-Bolshevik armies would not work to restore the Tsarist regime and impose feudal conditions on the lower classes (Pipes, 251-251). However by November of 1920, the approximate time that the Mayakovsky and Lazarenko piece was performed, Lloyd George had decided that the cost of supporting the White army was too great to continue and that it was clear that the Bolsheviks could not be defeated by force (Pipes, 270). It was time for Britain to pull out of the conflict, a devastating blow to the White army.

\textsuperscript{201} Alexander Millerand (1859-1943) was the French Premier in 1920, later becoming French President that same year. Worked in concert with the allied forces of Britain and the United States, as well as with Polish Marshal, Joseph Piludski to eradicate Bolshevism in the new Soviet Russia (Carley, The Politics of Anti-Bolshevism, 176). Millerand’s most profound move against the Soviets was an allegiance with Poland that attempted to help secure the country from Bolshevism from 1919-1920 (Carley, 166). In late 1920 that attempt was curtailed, as other members of the Allied, namely Lloyd George, desired a peaceful withdrawal from Soviet Russia. Lloyd George reasoned that if France relinquished interest in the country, Poland would have no choice but to also make peace, ending outside financial and political obligations to opposing the new regime (Carley, 167). In post-WWI Europe, most countries were left without the means to uphold a continued conflict with Soviet Russia.

\textsuperscript{202} Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) was the American President from 1913 to 1921. His involvement with the Russian Revolution was initially welcoming; believing the removal of a Tsarist regime for a free people was a cause worth supporting (Foglesong, America’s Secret War Against Bolshevism, 25). It was when he learnt of the Bolshevik ideologies behind the new government that he felt support should be given to the White army in the civil war (Foglesong, 25). The political situation between the United States and Soviet Russia appears to have followed this pattern; they would seek peace momentarily before decrying the incompatibilities of their ideologies. Throughout the duration of the civil war, U.S. primarily followed British lead in the intervention of the civil war, bowing to the strategies of Lloyd George.

\textsuperscript{203} According to Deak, Sidorov represents “a common name- denotes Joe Blow, or lower class (Deak, 53).” In context of the piece this character represents a citizen who profits off of the misfortune of war, making deals and smuggling goods, or simply one guilty of resisting a non-capitalist market.

\textsuperscript{204} General Peter Nikolaevich Wrangel (1878-1928) was an anti-Bolshevik leader in the White Russian army, from 1917-1920 (Stone, A Military History of Russia, 182). It was Wrangel who, while not responsible for a White defeat, can essentially be described as the final hold-out in the civil war. In June of 1920, he led the final White Russian invasion into southern Russia from the Crimea (Hingley, Russia: A Concise History, 162). Wrangel was ultimately defeated in November of that year. After Wrangel’s defeat, the American, British and French troops stationed in Russia finally vacated and abandoned the endeavor (Stone, 182).

\textsuperscript{205} Joseph Pilsudski (1867-1935) was head of the Polish republic from 1919, 1920 and by force in 1923 until his death in 1935 (Pipes, 250). Initially he felt, as did many European nations, that the new Bolshevik government was less of a threat to Poland than the former Empire (Pipes, 250). In his youth Pilsudski was himself a socialist, his involvement in a plot to assassinate Emperor Alexander III insured his exile to Siberia in 1887 (Pipes, 257). Though his experiences had ingrained him with a sense of the Russian socialist agenda, it was not his beliefs that initially brought Pilsudski to hope for a Red victory. Pilsudski
The Almost Champion— the Menshevik— does not wrestle with anyone, but is present merely to get in the way of the action. As described in the stage directions, the Menshevik is “staggering around and getting under everyone’s feet.”

The champions pair off and begin to wrestle one another as the final champion, the Revolution enters. All the wrestlers pause as the Revolution declares, “I challenge all these fighters. How many of you, dried, will make a pound?” At once the tone changes from boastful to frightened as the champions refuse to continue, shying away from the Revolution’s might.

Yet the piece does not end here. The Referee is the one who has organized the fight, declaring “Introductions are finished. This championship match has been arranged by me.” As the wrestlers begin to fight, taking each other down one by one, it is clear that the Referee will play the role of the moral superior. He elucidates the crowd as to the reasons why the champions battle: money and power. The Revolution alone will stand to fight for belief. As the champions battle, the Revolution arrives and begins to fight them until they are afraid to approach him. The referee declares that they will break for ten minutes whereupon they will finally fight for the title of Champion. All the champions agree that a break is best aside from the Revolution who declares:

All you who want
the Reds

too underestimated the Bolshevik regime, believing a Red victory would pose less of a threat to Poland’s borders than a White victory (Pipes, 257). In July of 1919, Poland and Russia began engaging in secret discussions concerning the future of Poland and Russia’s borders, Poland ostensibly willing to trade an assurance over its border rights for a promise not to assist White Russian General Denikin (Pipes, 258). Denikin had refused to recognize a Polish border that was not in accordance with those recognized by the Congress of Vienna, created over a hundred years prior in 1815 (Pipes, 257). Poland in turn agreed to assist the Bolsheviks, helping turn the tide of the war decidedly in their favor, while simultaneously preparing to defeat them once they had disposed of the White army. Thus later in 1920 the Polish-Soviet war began, although initiated by the Polish, it seems that Soviet Russia had its own designs to invade and occupy Poland before the war began. Though initially in the summer of 1920 a Soviet victory seemed inevitable, by 1921 Poland had won the war and signed a peace treaty with Moscow in March (Pipes, 295-297).

206 Deak, p. 60
207 Mayakovsky, 61.
208 Deak, 60.
to win after the ten-minute break, 
should go home 
and tomorrow go to the front as volunteers-
to wring Wrangel’s neck. 
I am 
ready 
to go there today. 
To get there faster 
I’ll even take a carriage. 209

The piece ends with the Referee calling for an intermission to allow the champions (aside from the Revolution) to catch their breath. The Referee calls upon all good Soviets to not wait for the return of the show however, but to run home and prepare to go to the front lines of the war to support the Red army. Yet there is no return to the piece, it has ended with this command, and all who want the Reds to win have received their orders: go to the front and fight like true Soviets or face the consequences in either a return to bourgeoisie Russia, or the Cheka.

The choice to have all of the world powers played by circus clowns invokes Bakhtin’s carnival, levels of power are inversed as the high become low. Coupled with the concept of wrestling, in this scenario the physical battling over world power and class struggle, the clowns begin to embody layers of meaning: they are not only clowns, but clowns playing world leaders. If high were not already low through that action, now they are undertaking a truly common sport as they battle, not through armies, but with one another at a wrestling match within an arena.

209 Mayakovsky, 63.
Situating the Historical: Russian Civil War and Post-Revolution Politics

The political conflicts that arose during the Russian civil war stemmed from tensions that were present even before the revolution. The men that made up the White and Red armies were separated by class as much as they were by politics. White Russians represented those who were from an aristocratic or bourgeoisie background and desired a return to the Tsarist government. The Red Russians were fundamentally made up of the revolutionary groups, those who resisted a return to old Russia in any form, but envisioned a new society free from Tsarist law. These groups were in conflict well before the revolution had occurred and continued to battle over to the future of Russia; a civil war thus arose that pitted the two against one another, as well as their political allies.

The allies who fought alongside these armies were not consistent and shifted as the nation’s future political makeup became more defined by Lenin and the Soviets and less by the former Provisional Government and Tsarist officials. Though during World War I Russia had initially been allies with some of the nations depicted in *Championship*, namely the United States, Britain and France, after the Soviets took power from the post-Tsarist Provisional Government, these alliances were altered. Germany had assisted the new government in returning an exiled Lenin to Russia and expected unlimited support in return.210 While the Bolsheviks initially did not give in to their demands, the Germans forcibly took the territorial demands they felt they were owed. In order to settle further discord, the Bolsheviks finally accepted Germany’s terms, thus also creating new enemies out of former allies. The allied nations that had sent supplies to Russia now invaded to protect and retrieve their investments.211 Instead of backing a revolution that had once seemed a democratic move towards freedom, these governments now found themselves facing an enemy in the Soviets.212

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210 Stone, 177.
211 Stone, 177. While Stone does not go on to say what fighting occurred on Soviet land with the allies, he does describe their retribution after the world war had officially ended, which primarily consisted of supporting the White Russian forces.
212 I do not mean to suggest that the opposition to Soviet Russia was merely financial, the ideology of the Soviets certainly was a part of the political opposition.
In 1920 this fight was primarily located on the border between Russia and the Crimea. General Peter Wrangle (1878-1928) was the White army commander in charge. It was Wrangel who, while not responsible for a White defeat, can essentially be described as the final hold-out in the civil war. In June of 1920, he led the final White Russian invasion into southern Russia from the Crimea.²¹³ Wrangel was ultimately defeated in November of that year. On the 7th and 8th of November, Wrangel and his troops were finally pushed back into Crimea, the civil war was for all intents effectively ended 10 days thereafter.²¹⁴ After Wrangel’s defeat, the American, British and French troops stationed in Russia finally vacated and abandoned the endeavor.²¹⁵ This final battle was effectively the last vestige of the White army in 1920, which casts perhaps a more furtive shadow on *Championship*. With the White Army so close to defeat, a victory needed to be won and citizens needed to be mobilized in support.

This desire for victory was certainly not exclusively demonstrated in the circus. The artistic community of the period was already mobilized in their own right; creating pamphlets and posters to motivate and inform the people. Though the revolution was three years past, its fervor had not yet died. This was a propaganda that was desired by most, but enforced for all. Though not all work was censored at this period, it was not far off in the future. Coupled with the anti-White violence of the period, known as the Red Terror, many artists were beginning to align themselves with the encouraged ideology of the Soviets.

This movement also had its parallel in the circus when, in 1918, a resolution was passed by Circus House and circus performers to “work for the common people, not so much for the exploiters.”²¹⁶ Lunacharsky and his colleagues concentrated on several elements that were viable points within the circus that needed to be addressed, mainly that the clown needed to evolve from the naïve jokes and buffoonery. “Their jests are

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²¹³ Hingley, 162.
²¹⁴ Stone, 182.
²¹⁵ Stone, 182.
²¹⁶ Hammarstrom, 58. Though I am unable to confirm this theory, I believe the reference to “exploiters” to be the capitalists, aristocracy, and religious figures that had their rights stripped under the 1918 constitution.
the favorites of the people, and that is aesthetically pleasing... but we demand more from a clown. In the ‘renewed circus,’ the clown must have an extensive repertoire. The clown must dare to be a publicist. The [stance] of the clown, of [his] national character, must be totally believable, and deeply democratic.”

This renewed circus would have been problematic for performers such as Bim-Bom, whose humor was not always in line with the Soviet ideology, or readily intelligible to them. Yet for the Bolshevik Lazarenko, Lunacharsky had laid out the ground work for a circus style that he would readily adhere to through his work.

It is here that the circus clown and the politics of the Bolsheviks meet: the clown is taking up the call to engage a politically tenuous public, not only laying out an ideology, but also delivering clear messages concerning the right and wrong choices for Soviet citizens. The clown has effectively become a military tool to combat the White army. For Lazarenko, it was a connection that he had already put in place in his own work.

Although I am unable to find accounts of either Mayakovsky or Lazarenko in attendance at these meetings, it is undeniable that the two, if not present, would certainly have been influenced by the decisions made by Lunacharsky in 1918. Meyerhold was present at these meetings and largely supported the focus that the circus was receiving, yet was wary of overly interfering with long adhered to training and traditions. He went so far as to warn against the potential destruction to the circus that could result from too much tampering. He felt that though the “masters” of each discipline could work together, they should never attempt to replace the circus with the theatre. Lunacharsky and the members of the artistic community did not take heed and proceeded in their attempts to theatricalize the circus. Also in attendance at these meetings was Vladimir Durov, the surviving member of the famous Durov brothers. Although Lazarenko was the protégé of Anatoly Durov and the

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217 Hammarstrom, 50.
218 Von Geldern, 116-117.
219 Von Geldern, 117. Though there is no mention of what Meyerhold felt about Mayakovsky and Lazarenko’s pieces, it would be interesting to know whether he felt they were crossing that line.
connection between he and Vladimir is unclear, as a respected member of the circus community, his thoughts on the matter must have significantly impacted the discussion. As an ardent Bolshevik, there is little doubt the Lazarenko would have either been in attendance or followed the dialogue closely. His subsequent pieces with Mayakovsky, The Soviet Alphabet and Championship can perhaps even be seen as a response to Lunacharsky’s demands.

Championship is a piece that directly reflects this need to re-align the circus with the Soviet ideology and was perhaps particularly efficacious not only due to the stature of Mayakovsky and Lazarenko, but because of the mass appeal that the circus held in Soviet culture. It also reflects a Soviet society of ever-shifting allegiances; the performance text is layered with political, ideological, and artistic inferences about life and politics under the new regime. The country was at civil war, the White versus the Red Russians, or rather the new Soviets. Though the Russian Revolution had concluded in 1917, a civil war was subsequently fought to determine whether the Whites, whose make-up was ideologically diverse, but generally rallied around an opposition to the Bolsheviks, or the Reds, or rather the Bolsheviks, would retain control over the newly fractioned country. The Red Terror was a response to the Whites by the Red Russians; any individuals who were suspected of agreeing with White Russian politics were brutally tortured and killed. It was a “with us or against us” politics of a truly aggressive nature. Names and crimes of the accused were published in newspapers\(^ {220} \) as both a record of activity as well as a possible threat to those who would challenge the new regime.

The text of the performance reflects this opposition in several respects. While the piece does address the necessity for ideological unity, it couches that need in a broader political choice. The initial impetus for the wrestling match is to war for the class struggle or rather the freedom from that struggle that the revolution implies.\(^ {221} \)

\(^{220}\) Hammarstrom, 50. It is known by historians of this period that only a fraction of the murders were recorded.
\(^{221}\) When revolution is capitalized I am referring to the character, when it is not I am referring to the Russian Revolution.
Yet as the piece continues to develop, the choice becomes less about the greater world struggle, and primarily about the immediate political choice facing the Soviets, the Civil War and the need to keep the people ideologically in line. This need is not only reflected in the character of the Revolution, described clearly as the World Champion, as reference to what was felt as the impending revolution that would sweep the working classes of the world, but also in the portrayal of the other champions.

The characters in the piece, all played by circus clowns, principally represent the world factions in opposition with the new Soviet power. The Champions are American, French, Polish, British (Entente)\textsuperscript{222}, and Crimean, all of whom are represented by specific political icons. The American Champion becomes a caricature of Woodrow Wilson, while the Crimean is Wrangel, also a White Russian general. The others likewise were caricatures of figureheads from their representative country. In post World War II Russia, these major ideological figures presented an oppositional force not only on a global scale, but became players within the propagandistic art and literature that was seen by the Soviet people. Placing them within the performance frame was sure to be an immediate rallying point for the audience. The audience itself would consist of a cross section of men and women, ranging from military and government officials to ordinary citizens of varying backgrounds, yet all were sure to recognize these characters as the enemy. British Prime Minister David Lloyd George’s (1863-1945) is represented as the consummate villain in the group, who seizes control and exploits not only the Russians, but his fellow allies in his attempt to win.

... a more disgusting mug you'll never see.

Fattened on the working man's blood,

his cheeks alone weigh seventy pounds.

Now he wants to heave his paunchiness on top of the RSFSR.\textsuperscript{223}

Before, Entente fought alone,

\textsuperscript{222} Prior to the Russian revolution, Great Britain, France and Russia were united as Allies in the Entente. After Russia decided to side with Germany, an Anglo-French Entente remained.

\textsuperscript{223} The RSFSR stands for the Russian Soviet Federative Republic
but now that he's grown flabby and fat,
he is inciting others.
At first the Polish gentry he urged.
But now it's Wrangel he has spurred.224

While it would not be unreasonable to say that many leaders, such as Wilson, followed his advice, it would be an overstatement to attribute the whole of the international support to Lloyd George. Yet the Russians not only see him as doing such, but actively portray him in this manner.

Likewise Wilson, though often bowing to the strategies of the British, was not merely a pawn in Lloyd George’s conflict, but is described as such in the text. When the Revolution appears and begins to fight the other champions Wilson cries, “I'm not hired to fight you, either.”225 However, together both Wilson and Lloyd helped orchestrate much of the allied involvement in support of a White Russian army victory.226 Wilson and Lloyd George came together to attempt negotiations between the warring Russians, but to no avail.227 By November of 1920, the approximate time that the Mayakovsky and Lazarenko piece was performed, Lloyd George had decided that the cost of supporting the White army was too great to continue and that it was clear that the Bolsheviks could not be defeated by force.228 It was time for Britain to pull out of the conflict, a devastating blow to the White army.

The champions in this piece were not only representative of world powers, but groups within Soviet society who also presented a danger, whether political or
ideological, to the new regime. However, a key political menace is presented in a surprisingly non-threatening form. It is the Menshevik, a political foe within the party, who plays the part of the Almost Champion. The Menshevik character represents the minority fraction of the Russian Social Democratic Party who were in opposition to the Bolshevik party. The pair can be literally translated as the minority versus the majority. The Mensheviks were defeated by the Bolsheviks, and thus in the eyes of the Bolsheviks, took on the role of the meddler, those who were in the way of the Bolshevik agenda. The Almost Champion is described in the text as acting accordingly, “staggering and getting under everyone’s feet.” This Champion is also the only character to be described in terms of clown costume, described as a “red-haired Menshevik,” a reference to the Russian folk clown form, the rizhii, who wore a red wig and acted as the fool to the straight clown character. Though certainly a Soviet, the character becomes a buffoon. The piece seems to not take him seriously and the message is clear: do not get in the way of the greater political goal, or you too will be deemed a buffoon, and worse, a menace who only corrupts the party and people.

The other Soviet to be represented, aside from Revolution, is Sidorov, Our Champion Profiteer. Sidorov is a character who profits off the people in times of economic uncertainty. His punishment, according to the text, is his eventual capture by the Moscow Cheka. Although the text does not state it, the suggested fate to be gained from that punishment is severe indeed. Judging by the descriptions of the horrors inflicted by the Cheka during this time period, it was a threat that did not need to be idly given, the mention of the Cheka could strike fear into believers and political enemies alike. While the Menshevik is seen as weak because he is not even fit to be “dispatched to the all-Russian Cheka,” the profiteer will only be lucky to live long enough to evade them “a little longer,” to secure a few deals, then suffer the consequences of his betrayal of the Soviet people.

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229 Mayakovsky, 60.
230 Towsen, 130.
231 Mayakovsky, 59.
The Circus and Wrestling: Popular Culture as Language

*Championship* not only utilizes popular culture forms such as clowning and wrestling to entertain the citizens in attendance, but also works to create cultural functions through the wrestling format. According to Jahn, the act of wrestling in the circus gave way to specific interpretations and meanings in Soviet society.

Wrestling matches were part of the patriotic circus culture. Popular in the Russian circus since the turn of the century, they were promoted in particular by Diadia Vania and had a special place in circus performances, with their own rituals and stars. Soviet scholars interpreted such matches as both an outlet for aggressive emotions in a repressive state and an expression of a subconscious longing for strength and power in society as a whole... Wrestling, however, also includes concepts of justice, as Roland Barthes has shown: the wrestler who fights unfairly must pay for his or her misdeeds (after 1907 there were also wrestling matches between women in Russia). Perhaps this is why wrestling became so popular in Russia, where the century-old idea of Pravda—justice, truth, and right all bound up in one word—was very strong. World War I shifted the idea of Pravda to the international plane. At least in the eyes of the Russian patriots, the war was also fought for justice, as the lubok “Russia for Justice” suggests. Wrestling matches could thus be seen as manifestations of patriotism.232

This concept of Pravda, of truth and justice, was utilized by the artists of the revolution to bring the Soviet people into the political fold. Lazarenko and Mayakovsky also employ this notion of Pravda in their piece. By placing the Revolution against a group of world factions, political and ideological, the concept of Pravda is literally played out physically before the audience through the wrestling match. Yet in the end, the

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232 Jahn, 94-95.
playwright and players do not give the audience a literal ending, but solicit them to assist in creating it instead, by asking them to chose Pravda, to select justice by supporting the Reds. However, the lack of a real close to the piece may also suggest that that request is not a literal one, but perhaps a figurative one instead. The two alter the notion of Pravda, using it not to lay the ground for the appropriate choice, but leave with the assumption that it will be chosen. By not allowing the audience to voice their selection, in a matter of speaking it has already been chosen for the audience.

While the circus had previously existed as a space that would solicit donations of money and clothing for the war effort, this represents a shift in that what is being sought are not physical items, but rather physical bodies to fight in the war and embody the Soviet ideology.233 The Referee does not request a financial contribution to the Red army, but a physical stance against the Whites, just as the Revolution gives in the wrestling match. In fact, according to Von Geldern, “the Russian words for wrestling and [class] struggle are the same” (emphasis his).234 This piece places the act of wrestling as a means of physicalizing and playing out the course of the civil war, as a way to imagine and enact victory over the political and ideological oppressors. Von Geldern goes on to contextualize wrestling in the circus as a largely unexplored interpretive act. The audience as a whole was not used to inferring meaning from a wrestling match above the basic physical encounter. As Von Geldern explains, Championship was among the first circus acts to offer the popular wrestling form as a means to situate and explore a political message, a move that went beyond the basic physical encounter which typically categorized the circus wrestlers.

A wrestling match with a plot— a controlled sequence with an established ending— was unaccustomed entertainment; wrestling as a political language was unfamiliar; and most alien of all was the notion that wrestling could be language. If the message was to find its target, the audience needed to be warned that new cultural functions were

233 Jahn, 93.
234 Geldern, 115.
active. Propagandists had not only to create the message but to highlight it and even supple the proper interpretation.235

By constructing a piece with a clear message, albeit a perhaps interpretive ending, Lazarenko and Mayakovsky mark that shift in the circus performance text. Wrestling no longer stands solely as a physical text, but a political one, an ideological one. Lazarenko positions the clown as the bearer of that message, shaping the message the audience will receive as well as the interpretation of that message. This piece marks the departure of the revolutionary clownering style of the Durovs and Bim-Bom. The Soviet clown is altered radically from one who delivers the ambiguous laughter of Bim-Bom, to one who subverts not the hierarchy of the government, but the people. Lazarenko utilizes the forum of the arena to uphold the ideals of the state, in doing so upholding the regulations of hegemony rather than subverting them.

In his work, “Understanding Popular Culture,” John Fiske discusses the means by which commanding powers adopt and thereby control the oppositional trends of the resistant group. He proposes that once signs of resistance are adopted into the dominant system, they are robbed of any oppositional meaning.236

[It] deprives them of the means to speak their opposition and thus, ultimately, of their opposition itself. It can also be understood as a form of containment— a permitted and controlled gesture of dissent that acts as a safety valve and thus strengthens the dominant social order by demonstrating its ability to cope with dissenters or protesters by allowing them enough stable freedom to keep them relatively content, but not enough to threaten the stability of the system against which they are protesting.237

235 Geldern, 115.
236 Fiske, Understanding Popular Culture, 114.
237 Fiske, 114.
Where once the wrestling of men on stage could be seen as a means to quench the desire for physical resistance, it now becomes a space where that desire is mocked. The controlling powers appropriate the popular form and subvert it to fulfill their needs. The same can be for the circus as a whole. Whereas it was once a location to mock and revel in the carnival, under the new regime it succeeds in becoming an extension of the political power of the State, making void the moment of carnival in this new society. Bakhtin’s carnival functions as a release for a lower class community, where the elitist powers and values can be taken down and mocked by that lower class, giving them momentary power. Lazarenko now appropriates what was once an art form of those individuals, allowing the political authority to command the message, yet under the guise of popular entertainment. While there are potential moments of carnival in the text, it is now subverted to an act of hegemony and containment, not release.

Lazarenko and Mayakovsky’s methods may now be examined on multiple levels, as readings of change or methods to contain and steer any potential resistance. It is not solely then that the political leanings of the audience have been assumed for them, and agency subverted in that respect, but rather that the audience itself has been actively contained through this piece. Feelings of resistance that may have been explored during the piece are effectively silenced at its end. Each character who posits a threat is to the state is defeated on stage, yet that is not enough. The performance then asks the audience to defeat them in real life as well, giving them no choice but to carry on the work of the party both inside the arena and out.

The Performativity of *The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle: Staging A Revolution*

The role of popular culture in Russia, both before and after the revolution, held a place of great meaning for the public. Not only was the circus a place where citizens could congregate for amusement, but it was also important to note that it was a place for all Russians to seek that entertainment, regardless of socioeconomic class.
According to Robert Leach, “The disposition of people in a circus, fairground show or folk ritual was based on the principle of gathering round, which was fundamentally different and more democratic than the expected spatial relationship found in the formal theatre.”\textsuperscript{238} While they may not have sat side by side, separate social classes were still gathering together to witness and be effected by the same performance. Also, unlike the traditional proscenium theatre, these audience members could see each other across the arena, creating not only a feeling of unity but the possibility of becoming effected not only by the performance, but by the audience itself.

This ability to congregate and commune imparts possibility for social and historical meaning, placing texts performed in a position to reflect social traditions, perhaps effectively changing them as well. The text I am addressing is one such piece and I am suggesting that it performed as a sociopolitical text upon the audience present. The clowns are not only performing the history of the civil war conflict, but are also allowing room for the audience’s role as social and political citizen to be performed as well. Richard Schechner maintains that performativity is the construction of social reality, which allows one to infer that the text of this piece worked to construct the social reality of Russia in 1920.\textsuperscript{239}

The text not only signifies what Russians felt about the civil war, but also reinforces those beliefs through the representation of the champions. In the match they are depicted as wrestling over various forms of profit, which all denote the specifics of their perceived role in the greater political conflict. Those forms of profit are represented by circus props, all bearing the name of the item coveted by the champions:

[Throw in: a crown, a huge gold coin, and a bag with the inscription:
"profit from an imperialist war." Lloyd George and Millerand begin
fighting for the profit, Wilson and the Profiteer for the gold coin, Wrangel

\textsuperscript{238} Leach, 7.
\textsuperscript{239} Schechner, 7.
and the Polish Lord for the crown. The red-haired Menshevik is staggering and getting under everyone's feet.]

Though the gold and profit are seemingly synonymous, here gold is interpreted as payment, while profit exists as a monetary and political remuneration. Wilson, depicted as a servant to Lloyd George, and the Profiteer, who exploits his own people for profit, both desire the gold. This aspiration portrays the pair as serving monetary masters as opposed to moral ones. Lloyd George and Millerand are illustrated as those who crave both the monetary and political compensations due to orchestrators of war. The crown, which both Wrangel and the Polish Lord covet, exists as a symbol for either aristocratic power or for independence from the Russian state. Wrangel, the Crimean champion likely wants control of Russia and its territories, but Poland seems to want autonomy over Russian rule.²⁴⁰ Collectively these symbols are unambiguous signs of greed and power, the act of wrestling and embodying those desires enables the clowns to perform those battles and play out an acceptable solution.

This solution is the Red army victory, yet the implications of playing out this appropriate choice do not occur immediately, but demands audience accountability. As the Revolution takes the stage to declare his intentions of supporting the war he declares, “I am ready to go there today. To get there faster I'll even take a carriage.”²⁴¹ The “carriage” is in fact a hoop that Lazarenko climbs inside of and is wheeled out of the arena. The carriage itself can be construed as having a double meaning. It can either signify a satirical comic devise or as an indication to the bourgeoisie to get on the correct side, and to the lower classes to spare no effort or expense to do what is right. Through a seemingly innocuous choice the clown creates his message, delivering it to all of the Russians present. While one could potentially argue that the carriage functions as a carnival moment, high culture brought low, the fact that this message is delivered as an act of political containment, nullifies the release that it once may have embodied.

²⁴⁰ Although at this time Russia and Poland seemingly are combative over each other’s land, each preparing to backstab one another for control.
²⁴¹ Mayakovsky, 63.
The order that the Revolution arrives to wrestle is also a slight, but telling detail. His arrival is last, and carries the most profound impact.

[Whistle. The last fighter, Revolution, enters.]

Referee
Revolution—
the world champion.
The last to come out. Look, how suddenly everything becomes quiet.\(^\text{242}\)

The “last to come out” potentially carries greater meaning besides simply order of arrival. The Soviets believed that their revolution was one guided by issues of class and ideology, as such, more profound than all previous revolutions. They believed that once the word of their revolution got out to the workers of the world, the revolution would spread to every country—beginning with the capitalist nations such as the United States and Great Britain. The “last to come out” indicates a finality in their revolution, the complete ideology. This reinforces the notion that the clown no longer existed to joke, but to deliver a message, and perhaps reinforce that as well.

**Lazarenko and the Shift in Soviet Clowning:**

The clowning style within *Championship* reflects the change in Russian clown tradition in Russia. Whereas once the political message existed in either allegorical or ambiguous terms, Lazarenko creates a language that leaves no room for interpretation. In his clowning legacy political allegiances are in the foreground and are reinforced throughout, leaving no room for misconception as to the loyalties that should be recognized and served.

*Championship* is a piece structurally and ideologically removed from the older clowning generation, such as the Durovs and Bim-Bom. The impetus to serve the state

\(^\text{242}\) Mayakovsky, 61.
rather than an independent political belief is only the more obvious indicator of this change. The connections to theatre that were introduced to the circus are more pronounced in the work of Lazarenko and Mayakovsky. Not only was this piece written by a playwright, but it contains a truly theatrical format. *Championship* has a clear and pronounced message, a linear plot, and unambiguous characters; though not as fully defined as theatrical characters, they are recognizably not working as clowns alone.

Lazarenko helped to redefine clowning, its structure and its intent. To be a clown was no longer about the comedy alone, but about what that comedy would bring to the people, what it could do to their beliefs and choices. The clown was now an agent in bringing political demands to a people in need of selecting the correct agenda, the correct party.
The Soviet clown has a rich heritage in the Russian circus traditions, from folk performer to politically engaged entertainer. From the onset of the Russian revolution, the clown becomes political dissenter, creating politically subversive parables designed to challenge the aristocratic authority in favor of a Soviet power. However, once the revolution concluded, the Russian civil war ushered in another type of revolution, that of the new Soviet clown. The clown’s role shifted in this period from the political dissenter of the Tsarist era to an ardent supporter of the new Soviet regime. The Soviet clown became a force of hegemony, appropriating the folk traditions of the circus in order to utilize them for political battle, not against another country, but against those in Soviet Russia who would refuse to support the new regime.

This shift can be most prominently observed in the working relationship between Mayakovsky and Lazarenko. Although they both derived their art from separate fields, the theatre and circus, their politics united them and enabled the two to produce powerful works of propaganda for the Red army and Soviet government. Their collaboration collided within a moment in art that looked to folk traditions to revitalize a nation. The theatre looked to the circus to embody a new physical language for the stage, one that would combine the athletic strength and artistry of the arena performer to create a new aesthetic language for the body on stage. Concurrently, the circus also looked to the theatre for a means to unite a rich popular culture entertainment with the tools to facilitate a more effective propaganda tool. The circus incorporated the concepts of unity primarily through theme, creating a message fused through the entire show rather than a disjointed collection of acts.

Lazarenko and his fellow clowns also played a dynamic role in the reinvention through their commitment to bring an ardent political message to the audience. No longer would the slapstick and buffoonery or the ambiguous laughter of Bim-Bom be permissible in the arena. The new clown brought an earnestness and clarity to the
meaning of the text being performed. Lazarenko Bolshevik ideology was not only present in the pieces he performed, but was categorically stated and embodied, bringing the message both verbally and physically to the forefront.

The partnership between Lazarenko and Mayakovsky also coincided with a dynamic historical moment as well as an artistic one. 1920, the year *The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle* was performed, was the turning point in the Russian civil war. The Red army was in dire need of a final push to victory. The Whites were near defeat, but Wrangel and his soldiers were holding on. Then, in late November (after *Championship* had premiered), Wrangel conceded and the war was finished. While there may be no evidence to suggest that the playwright and clown had a significant impact on the number of men to volunteer for service, it is certain that they tapped into the political zeitgeist. While the clown had previously connected the realms of politics and the circus, the Soviet clown took a more pointed approach. Lazarenko became a mouthpiece for the Bolsheviks, presenting not only Bolshevik politics, but pushing for military support as well. How immensely Lazarenko influenced a moment in Soviet history is unclear, but he certainly reflected the desire for unity and victory in his work. This relationship with the Bolsheviks was not to end with Lazarenko, the Soviet clown had officially become a spokesperson for the Soviet state.

**Implications for Future Research**

Throughout my research process, I have reached various obstacles that have prevented certain avenues of investigation and development. While the difficulties I have faced in the present are frustrating, the implications those questions present allow much room for future research as my academic career continues. It is my hope to not only further the work I have initiated in this preliminary examination of the Soviet clown, but to address these unanswered concerns in the next step of my scholarly career.
One of the greatest areas I would endeavor to improve is the lack of theoretical examination present in this thesis. My work as a theoretical scholar remains in its beginning stages, as such I have much to learn and explore. As it relates to this study, I would like to incorporate theories of embodiment and power relationships into the perception of the clown’s performance. I believe a study of how the clown enacts layers of embodiment would bring deeper meaning to the characters he/she creates. While the clown remains primarily that, a clown, the character that is placed on top of that initial character brings another interpretation to the piece, yet the initial image of the clown underneath is ever-present. I am interested in breaking down what those layers of interpretation bring to the audience’s understanding of the performance and how that ultimately effects reception of the given message.

To connect to the previous query, I am also interested in ascertaining information on the audience’s response to Lazarenko’s performances, specifically *Championship*. An understanding of how a performer and piece were reacted to would give a direct response to the political and historical efficacy of the work on the historical moment. This comprehension would also create connections regarding how Lazarenko was received outside of the theatrical accolades, which are all I presently able to find, and inside the circus arena where his impact has been the greatest.

In the next chapter of my scholarly career I would like to visit the archive that I believe houses this vital information on Lazarenko, the Museum of Circus Art in St. Petersburg. Where, as a graduate student I have had difficulties attaining information from this archive, as a Doctoral scholar I would have the ability to travel to the Museum and personally peruse what information is available. There are also two Russian language biographies that have presently surfaced on Lazarenko by P. Slavski and I. Yurasov which would be of great assistance. These works would bring perspective on the nature of Lazarenko’s relationship with Soviet audiences, and the efficacy of his performances on the artistic and political landscape. These works may also shed light on the association between Mayakovsky and Lazarenko. I would be most interested in
gauging what their level of collaboration was and what the intentions were behind the pieces they produced together.

As for inquiries that directly stem from the work I began in this thesis, I would like to follow this research by inspecting the trajectory of the Russian clown after Lazarenko’s influence solidified. I would begin by investigating how the clown alters in the 10 years between *Championship* (1920) and *Moscow Is Burning* (1930). With a decade between the two pieces, significant changes must have occurred which would shed light on the function of Lazarenko’s clown as his career and the Soviet Union grow. Essentially, does the “new” clown’s role as political enforcer change by the late stages of this collaborative relationship?

In addition, I am intrigued to understand what happened to the clown after the Soviet clown’s introduction. Specifically, I would like to uncover whether there was another figure that fought against hegemony, as the revolutionary clowns did to the Tsarist government and Bim-Bom did to the Bolsheviks. It seems unlikely that in such a politically repressive state, as Soviet Russia was soon to become, that a clown would not voice his/her opinion. Though it would undoubtedly be challenging and dangerous to do so, the clowning tradition of political dissension is one that demands such behavior. Yet, there also exists the possibility that the clown remained a tool of the government, relinquishing that political autonomy that had been at the heart of the tradition. In 1959, the Soviet government convened a conference titled, “The First National Conference on Clown Craft” to re-introduce the tradition of satire to the clown.243 Had the clown been able to work towards a politically liberated voice, perhaps there would be no need to re-introduce the Soviet clown to his/her craft. However that is a question that I will only be able to engage with in the next step of my scholarly career.

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243 Schechter, 5.
Appendix

The Laugh

Bom: Hello, Bim.
Bim: Hello, Bom. What’s new?
Bom: No, tell me what’s new with you?
Bim: Listen, listen. I go out for a walk in the woods and I see three
trees. Then I come out of the woods and I see three trees again.
Bom: And what next?
Bim: And then I see three trees again. And then I go out further and
meet three trees again. And then as I come out of the woods—three
more trees. And then I go home and, what do you think, in front of the
house—three more trees. And then, listen to this, I am on my way to the
bazaar and I meet a young lady.
Bom: And what then?
Bim: I get to the bazaar and—the same young lady. I walk [some more]—
the same young lady. I walk back again—the same young lady.
And then I come home and again—the same young lady.

244 Schechter, Congress of Clowns, Text translated by Elise Thoron. 39-40
Cast
Uncle Referee: Lazarenko, Vitaly
The World Champion Revolution
Entente Champion (Lloyd George, David)
American Champion (Wilson, Woodrow)
French Champion (Millerand, Alexandre)
Crimean Champion (Wrangel, Baron Piotr)
Polish Champion (Pilsudski, Joseph)
Our Champion Profiteer (Sidorov)
Almost Champion (Menshevik, family name unknown, living with fake credentials)

REFEREE
Hear ye,
Hear ye.
Come in, people.
Listen, people.
Look, everyone who's eager:
Lazarenko, in the role of Uncle Vanya,
can pin any wrestler—
of course, only if he's lying on a sofa.
How many have been defeated by me!
Almost unbelievable:
Sidorenko, Karpenko, Enko.
4,5,
16,

28,
fortyteen.
Who, who hasn't been beaten yet?
But
I'm not a wrestler today,
I'm a referee.
Now there'll be a championship match:
not an ordinary fight—
but a class struggle.
Now before your very eyes—
the noblest nobles—
athletes will strut by in well-matched pairs:
they're here to eliminate each other.
Parade Allez!

The Entente—
Lloyd George—
Look, young and old,
nephews and nieces,
aunts and uncles!
All eyes open wide! See!
Look, first row.
Look, second and third.
Look, fourth and fifth.
Sixth, look.
Look, seventh
and the eighth, too—
a more disgusting mug you'll never see.
Fattened on the working man's blood,
his cheeks alone weigh seventy pounds.
Now he wants to heave
his paunchiness on top of the RSFSR.
Before, Entente fought alone,
but now that he's grown flabby and fat,
he is inciting others.
At first the Polish gentry he urged.
But now it's Wrangel he has spurred.

Wilson—
He is
the American Champion.
Disregard his scragginess.
His power is frightful.
Expansion is his chief force.
He has the devil's luck.
Just try to attack him there across the seas and oceans;
but in time his own workers, after all,
will force him to fall.
[turning to one of the athletes]
Don't worry, wrestler,
he's not very likable.
Primarily,
he is fighting
for
a prize.
How friendly he is with Entente—
even though he nearly gnawed through his throat
because of a German submarine.

Millerand—
France.
Unexpectedly a fighter emerges from a Frenchman.
Yes, his belly is spilling over already.
He is such a glutton;
he's more so than Lloyd George himself.
[turning to the spectators]
If, instead of joining the Red Army,
you blink your eyes at me,
you, too, will be gobbled up.

Pilsudski—
Poland.
Once, he fought successfully;
now
he doesn't want to fight any more,
but he still has it his own way.
Having rested,
he threatens
to pounce on the RSFSR.
Instead of gasping for breath,
the Pole catches his breath.

Sidorov—
speculator,  
our  
countryman.  
One hundred seventy-five pounds of fine flour  
he lifts with one hand.  
He bears high the fine flour,  
while bearing down on us with it.  
These profiteers—  
they are like stones in one's intestines.  
It's as if one had just eaten:  
They fill one's belly,  
but in the end  
one dies from them:  
Devastation corrodes like an ulcer.  
[turning to Sidorov]  
Don't worry, wrestler,  
it's a good deal; fighting against the RSFSR.  
[to the spectators]  
He'll fight a little longer,  
he'll smuggle five deals—  
then he'll run up against the Moscow Cheka.

Wrangel—  
Crimea.  
The sixth wrestler.  
Stand up, everyone.  
Stand capless.  
Autocrat Gurzuski.
Oh, how terrible!
Uf!
One, two, he subdued Gurzuf.
On his head a papakha
his legs in Moroccan leather.
The Gurzuf nation called him Czar—
all the Gurzufs.
He has very little power:
The French aces
inflate him
from behind, like a bubble.
To prevent this cur from growing,
he must be beaten
while he is weak.
If
battlefield and home front
join together,
one fist will be raised
and this fist will strike—
his imperial majesty
will burst for sure.
To the front, brothers!
It's time to fight!

Aprelev—
Who knows from where.
He is neither the devil's advocate,
nor God's right hand.
Nor does he sit in council;
nor is he dispatched to the All-Russian Cheka.
Neither proletarian, nor nonproletarian;
neither capitalist, nor noncapitalist.
Inch by inch,
he creeps before everyone like a worm.
I didn't want to accept him,
thinking—among the bigger ones he'd get lost.
But he begged a lot.
"I," he said,
"even though I'm a Menshevik,
I really want to fight now."
However, someone like that
can be a little terrifying.
He loves unlawful ways so much
that he fights by tripping everyone.

Introductions are finished.
This championship match has been arranged by me,
and all these gentlemen have arrived.
Why have all these gentlemen arrived?

**CHORUS OF VOICES**
These gentlemen have arrived
to get at each other's throats.

**REFEREE**
And now,
throw
some bones to the gentlemen fighters.

[Throw in: a crown, a huge gold coin, and a bag with the inscription: "profit from an imperialist war." Lloyd George and Millerand begin fighting for the profit, Wilson and the Profiteer for the gold coin, Wrangel and the Polish Lord for the crown. The red-haired Menshevik is staggering and getting under everyone's feet.]

**REFEREE**
It begins!

**MILLERAND**
Referee sir,
it's your job.
Stop the damned Lloyd George:
he's biting!

**WRANGEL**
Keep the Menshevik away.
He's wriggling under everyone's feet.

**LLOYD GEORGE**
Och-och-och,
what is he doing with my head?!
REFEREE
Silence! Seizing heads isn't permitted.

POLISH LORD
Stop Wrangel, he's biting my thighs!

REFEREE
They're casting care to the winds.
They're squabbling!
They'll bite each other to death—
They must be separated.

[Whistle. The last fighter, Revolution, enters.]

REFEREE
Revolution—
the world champion.
The last to come out.
Look, how suddenly everything becomes quiet.

REVOLUTION
Comrade referee,
explain:
I challenge all these fighters.
How many of you, dried, will make a pound?

[The fighters interrupting each other.]

POLISH LORD
I don't want to fight.

MENSHEVIK
It's not an intelligent occupation.

WILSON
I'm not hired to fight you, either.

MILLERAND
[to Lloyd George]
You creep forward.

LLOYD GEORGE
No, you.

MILLERAND
No, you.
EVERYONE, in chorus

Let him go,

He's stronger.

Go on, Entente.

[Revolution catches up the Entente and in a minute throws him over by taking him by his head.]

REFEREE

That you call a "head circle tie-up."

And now,

using a little bit

of Red-Army style to pin him down—

Entente will be flat on his back.

[Both fighters become tired. It is difficult to finish off Entente.]

REFEREE

Neither side

can overcome the other.

Armistice.

Phooey!

Break for ten minutes.

In ten minutes, the fight for the decision.
**ENTENTE**

Break for ten minutes?

Hardly.

I think they broke me not for ten minutes
but for a lifetime.

[Revolution leaves, and behind him Entente is pushed out in a
wheelbarrow.]

**REFEREE**

Intermission for ten minutes.

All you who want
the Reds
to win after the ten-minute break,
should go home
and tomorrow go to the front as volunteers—
to wring Wrangel's neck.
I am
ready
to go there today.
To get there faster
I'll even take a carriage.
Bibliography


58, No. 227 (Jan., 1945), pp. 25-34


