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BEYOND STANISLAVSKY: 
THE INFLUENCE OF RUSSIAN MODERNISM 
ON THE AMERICAN THEATRE 

DISSertation 

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for 
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate 
School of The Ohio State University 

By 

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***** 

The Ohio State University 
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ABSTRACT

Russian modernist theatre greatly influenced the development of American theatre during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Several developments encouraged the relationships between Russian artists and their American counterparts, including key tours by Russian artists in America, the advent of modernism in the American theatre, the immigration of Eastern Europeans to the United States, American advertising and consumer culture, and the Bolshevik Revolution and all of its domestic and international ramifications. Within each of these major and overlapping developments, Russian culture became increasingly acknowledged and revered by American artists and thinkers, who were seeking new art forms to express new ideas. This study examines some of the most significant contributions of Russian theatre and its artists in the early decades of the twentieth century. Looking beyond the important visit of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1923, this study charts the contributions of various Russian artists and their American supporters.

Certainly, the influence of Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre on the modern American theatre has been significant, but theatre historians’ attention to his influence has overshadowed the contributions of other Russian artists,
especially those who provided non-realistic approaches to theatre. In order to understand the extent to which Russian theatre influenced the American stage, this study focuses on the critics, intellectuals, producers, and touring artists who encouraged interaction between Russians and Americans, and in the process provided the catalyst for American theatrical experimentation. The key figures in this study include some leaders in the Yiddish intellectual and theatrical communities in New York City, Morris Gest and Otto H. Kahn, who imported many important Russian performers for American audiences, and a number of Russian émigré artists, including Jacob Gordin, Jacob Ben-Ami, Benno Schneider, Boris Aronson, and Michel Fokine, who worked in the American theatre during the first three decades of the twentieth century.
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INTRODUCTION

The first third of the twentieth century is an exciting era in America’s artistic history as technological advances and changes in the nations’ demography and economy made Americans broadly aware of and concerned with international cultures, politics, and art. Advancements in communications, travel, and finance coupled with waves of immigration, world war, and revolutionary activities encouraged international artistic experimentation. In the early part of the twentieth century, American artists and intellectuals increasingly came into contact with and looked to European artists as they sought new ideas in art, music, and performance to parallel the emerging modern society. Inevitably, as many American theatre artists came into contact with these important European artists and their ideas, they sought to change a number of standard theatrical practices and ideas about theatre and its value and purpose in the United States.

Of course, this innovative spirit sprang from many sources and grew in numerous directions, but some key events, such as important publications, artistic tours, and collaborations, helped to establish important relationships between Americans and European theatrical innovations. The discovery of the writings of notable theorists played an important role in the spread of European ideas to Americans. For example, Gordon Craig’s ideas greatly influenced the thinking of
the young scenic designers Robert Edmund Jones and Lee Simonson, who became leaders in the movement toward the “new stagecraft.” Early in the twentieth century, many American artists, Jones and Simonson among them, also visited European theatres and brought back new ideas and strategies for making theatre. In the 1910s and 1920s, several important European artists worked or performed in the United States. The opportunities to work with or to see the work of such figures as Max Reinhardt, Harley Granville-Barker, Jacques Copeau, and the Abbey Players, for instance, greatly affected the work of innumerable American artists. Additionally, the American theatre companies that grew out of the “Little Theatre Movement” encouraged the production of works by leading European modernist playwrights such as Ibsen, Shaw, Strindberg, Hauptmann, and Maeterlinck. Certainly, the contact between American artists and European modernists aided the development of modernism on the American stage.

During this era of modernist exploration, Americans also first became aware of Russian art, performance, and culture on a large scale, and soon they looked to many Russian artists and intellectuals for guidance in the development of American theatrical modernism. Every scholar and artist in the American theatre acknowledges the impact Konstantin Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre had on the approaches to acting, directing, and training in the United States. In general terms, we understand the significance of the Russian stage in the shaping of our own. Aside from Stanislavsky, the names of Chekhov, Meyerhold, Evreinov, Diaghilev, Bakst, Benois, Nijinsky, Pavlova, and Fokine,
(to name only the most recognized,) grew increasingly prominent in our vocabulary of important stage identities. Since the early twentieth century, American historians and artists have been increasingly interested in Russian theatre, art, ballet, and opera, and many Russian theatre styles and theories served to stimulate American stage artists. Yet very little has been written about when, why, and how this occurred. Some Russian artists came and went, with very little attention from Americans. Some Russian artists achieved fame on the American stage because they had been heralded in England and Western Europe first. Others gained recognition in America because of their political affiliations, while some adamantly had to claim their work was apolitical in order to be welcomed upon the American stage. Some Russian artists, who had brilliant publicists and millionaire backers, arrived as celebrated stars; others, who came penniless, struggled for attention, and only slowly did they earn their reputations through their work within the American theatre. My aim in this dissertation is to provide a new understanding of Russian influence on American theatre by investigating a wide-range of Russian performance activity on American stages in the early twentieth century.

Oliver Sayler, an early American historian of the Russian stage, suggests in an overview of Russian theatre in America, that by 1922 (the year of his study and the popular success of Nikita Balieff’s Chauve-Souris in the U.S.), Americans were finally “ready to deny the barriers of a foreign tongue and accept and appreciate where once we were indifferent and even hostile” (Russian Theatre
This statement offers a place from which to begin an investigation of the American recognition and eventual acceptance (even glorification) of Russian theatre. How were Americans made “ready” for a foreign language production by a touring Russian theatre group? How could a Russian theatre company in 1922 overcome the bias, prejudice, hostility, and indifference of Americans to become financially successful in the United States? Why were Americans drawn to Russian theatre throughout the 1920s? In this study, I will be looking at a broad range of theatrical performance in order to explore the avenues by which American audiences and artists were made “ready” for Russian theatre. In doing so, a significant portion of this study uses examples from various Russian ballet, operatic, and vaudevillian performances which figure prominently into the developments in Russian performance on the American stage. That Russian ballet and opera productions aided the acceptance and understanding of the spoken drama becomes clear, for example, in the second chapter of my study.

An investigation of Russian theatre and the American stage could be organized in a number of different ways; therefore, the limitations I set upon this analysis will certainly exclude some very important artists, theatre groups, producers, and events. For example, my study focuses on key Russian artists whose performances were produced on the American stage; therefore, I do not investigate the American productions of plays by Tolstoy, Chekhov, Andreev, or Gorky. Additionally, I have attempted to concentrate on the influences of the under-explored Russian avant-garde artists rather than surveying the activities of
Russian realists, who have received more attention elsewhere, though it proved impossible to ignore their contributions altogether. The dates I have imposed on this study also limit the artists under investigation. For example, I have ended my study in the early 1930s, during the height of revolutionary activity in America, which sent Americans looking toward Russian artists and intellectuals for guidance. Had I extended the study, I might have included a section on Michael Chekhov, who came to the United States in 1935. Instead, I wish to focus on the early Russian influence, which has been inadequately studied. Also, constraints are placed upon this investigation by my decision to focus on activities in New York City, where so much activity occurred. Though I stray into other regions of the country at times, out of necessity as I track particular figures and touring companies, I deliberately excluded numerous developments in other cities in order to focus on the expansive and definitive interaction between Russian and American artists and intellectuals that occurred primarily in New York City.

With the exception of a few studies that focus on the careers of individual artists or groups, very little scholarship has been produced which tries to understand the growing American interest in Russian theatre during the early decades of the twentieth century. American historians have long acknowledged, for instance, that the Ballets Russes had a shaping influence on American scenic designers, performers, and choreographers in the early part of the twentieth century. While several fine books have been written by American scholars on Russian artists, groups, and schools of thought, no work exclusively examines the
way these artists, with the exception of Stanislavsky, came to contribute so significantly to American modernism in the theatre. My investigation, therefore, seeks to identify and survey the range of Russian theatre in America, focusing primarily on the significance of non-realistic Russian theatre styles on the American stage in the first few decades of the twentieth century. It explores America’s interest in Russian modernist theatre within the shifting social, cultural, political, and economic conditions that were affecting American notions of Russians in volatile periods of both nations’ histories.

While the Stanislavsky tradition in America cannot be overlooked in this study, Stanislavsky’s importance and value to the American theatre has been well documented. In fact, the popular narrative of Russian theatrical influence in the United States looks almost exclusively at the contributions of Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre to American theatre. The history of the narrative that emphasizes Stanislavsky’s influence and excludes the value of Russian avant-garde artists can be traced back at least to Oliver Sayler’s essays and books, written before the Moscow Art Theatre ever reached American soil. Stanislavsky and his followers’ influences will be explored briefly in the first chapter of this work. However, my primary aim is to explore American interest in and experience with other Russian modernist artists in the early part of the twentieth century. Focusing on the non-realistic theatre actually allows me to identify many important connections between Russian avant-garde activities in the United States and Stanislavsky’s eventual domination in American modernist theatre.
The term “modernism” in the theatre generally denotes the period beginning in the late nineteenth century during which developments in both realism and non-realism became increasingly present as styles of production on the Western stage. Ensemble acting, three-dimensional staging, the rise of the director, and the emergence of independent theatres across Europe and later America mark the start of “modernism” as a movement in the theatre. The early non-realistic, avant-garde movements in theatre, beginning with symbolism in the late nineteenth century, are additionally components of “modernism.”

Accordingly, after providing an overview of early American modernism, the significance of Russian realism, and the Stanislavsky heritage, I consider primarily (though not exclusively) American interest in the Russian avant-garde in the early twentieth century in an effort to examine the non-Stanislavskian Russian activities on the American stage. This is why, for example, a discussion of the careers of Richard Boleslavksy and Maria Ouspenskaya, who established the American Laboratory Theatre and instituted the Stanislavsky-based actor-training system in America, has been eliminated from this study. Without doubt, their contributions were significant, but their work and influence in America has been documented. Still, Stanislavsky and his followers unavoidably spring up in each chapter.

I have organized this study into three chapters, which are arranged more topically rather than chronologically. The first chapter, “Russia in the American Imagination,” offers an overview of America’s relationship with Russia, the
changing attitudes toward Russians, and the initial American interest in Russian realism that began in the late nineteenth century. This chapter explores some of the earliest American interest in Russian art and literature, investigates the role of Eastern European Jews in providing a link between Russian and American cultures, and demonstrates the significance of Russian realism, which long dominated American interest in Russian art and culture. Chapter two, “The Commodification of Russian Theatre,” describes the way the audiences for Russian theatre were developed. The chapter evaluates the growing popularity of Russian performance through the 1910s and early 1920s, beginning first with ballet and opera and then continuing with dramatic theatre. The central concerns of this chapter are two major contributors to the commodification of Russian theatre: the little-known impresario named Morris Gest and his wealthy ally, Otto Kahn. Gest, the producer whose name is behind some of the most significant Russian performances in New York between 1911 and 1924, learned his publicity techniques through years of involvement with the circus. His application of these marketing strategies, his early failures, and his eventual success reveal how the desire for Russian theatre among American audiences was created. While looking at how both Gest and Kahn financed and marketed Russian productions, chapter two also explores the influences on American modernist theatre that these productions had. Chapter three, “Revolutionary Art/ Revolutionary Theatre,” investigates the contributions that post-revolutionary Russian avant-garde made to American theatre. After an overview of Russian avant-garde experiments, the chapter tracks the way Americans learned about these experiments through
accounts by English-speaking writers, the tours and publicity of Russian companies, and the work of Russian émigrés in America. Finally, the chapter examines how Americans developed Russian avant-garde techniques for their own revolutionary purposes. The study spans events from the 1880s to the 1930s. It begins by looking at importance of Russian-Jewish immigration in the United States in the 1880s, and ends by exploring the “heyday of American Communism” in the early 1930s as key contributing factors in American interest in modernist Russian theatre.

Several key studies, which examine some aspects of Russian theatre in America, provide a foundation for this dissertation. *Wandering Stars: Russian Emigre Theatre, 1905-1940* (1992), edited by Laurence Senelick, contains a number of important articles which invite a more extensive look at Russian modernism in America. Senelick’s own article, “The American Tour of Orlenev and Nazimova, 1905-1906,” explores America’s reaction to the first Russian company to tour in the United States. He analyzes the timing and management of the tour, the search for an American audience for the productions, and the reactions of the American press to the company’s appearance in the United States. Senelick’s article is important for establishing a number of questions about the relationship between the American public and the Russian theatre. My study essentially picks up where his leaves off as I continue to investigate later Russian tours in America leading up to and beyond the famed Moscow Art Theatre tour in 1923.
Other articles in *Wandering Stars* significant to my own study include Alma Law’s “Nikita Balieff and the Chauve-Souris,” Elena Poliaikova and Anatoly Smeliansky’s articles on the Moscow Art Theatre in America, and Sharon M. Carnicke’s “Boleslavsky in America.” To varying degrees, these articles examine the impact of Russian émigré artists on theatre in the United States, the challenges facing Russian artists in America, and American views toward Russia and its art. This important compilation of articles on Russian émigré theatre is the catalyst behind my research in this area.

Several other works precede my own in exploring aspects of Russian theatre in America. Christine Edwards’ *The Stanislavsky Heritage: Its Contributions to the American Theatre* (1965) supplies a brief overview of important early Russian theatre productions in America. And it notes some key Americans who saw the Moscow Art Theatre in Europe and Russia. Edwards also documents the significant publications that introduced Stanislavsky’s works to Americans. She establishes an important method establishing Stanislavsky’s influence in America. Sharon M. Carnicke’s important study, *Stanislavsky in Focus* (1998), tracks Stanislavsky’s influence in America through the Art Theatre tours, the use of his system by the American Lab Theatre, The Group Theatre, and the Actors Studio, and the publication history of Stanislavsky’s writings.

Additionally useful to my study are many works on the development of American scene design, which rarely fail to mention the influences of the Russian designers, such as Leon Bakst and Alexander Benois. Also, general indexes and
studies on stage design reveals the breadth of the involvement of Russian-born artists in American theatrical production. These types of resources have been helpful in understanding the degree of Russian influences on and participation in American theatrical production early in the twentieth century.

Also, many important books and articles on Yiddish theatre in Russia and in America point to the cultural exchanges between Russian and American artists, though the link the Yiddish theatre provided between American and Russian theatre has not been taken up in these works. Among the most useful studies on Yiddish theatre for my work have been David Lifson's *The Yiddish Theatre in America* (1965), Nahma Sandrow's *Vagabond Stars* (1983), and Jeffrey Veidlinger's *The Moscow State Yiddish Theatre* (2000). Edna Nahshon's *Yiddish Proletarian Theatre* (1998) provided an important connection between Soviet revolutionary theatre practices and the American theatre through the Yiddish workers' theatre, Artef. Equally significant is David Levy's study of the Hebrew Theatre, *The Habima - Israel's National Theatre, 1917-1977* (1979).

The Organization

Overview of Chapter One: Russia in the American Imagination

This chapter provides the context for the study of Russian modernism in America in the early twentieth century. By examining American perceptions of
Russians, Russian-Jewish immigrants, and Russian cultural products from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, this chapter establishes the complex political, economic, social, and artistic network through which Russian artists made contact with American audiences. The chapter, arranged by topic rather than chronology, discusses Russian-Jewish immigration and influence, the growth of Yiddish theatre, the spread of political radicalism, the advent of modernism in art and theatre, and the significance of Russian realism in America.

In America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the term “Russian” implied a variety of complex and often contradictory meanings based on developments in Russia, in America, and in the relationships between the two countries. Early on, Americans condescendingly regarded Russians as backward and barbaric. Yet with greater awareness of Russian art, music, and literature in the early twentieth, many Americans perceived Russians as deeply passionate and artistic people. However, following the Russian Revolution in 1917, and particularly by 1919, the majority of Americans had developed a suspicion and even fear of Russians, who were perceived increasingly as a threat to American freedoms and religions.

All of these images of Russians were complicated by the influx of Russian immigrants, primarily Jewish, and the small, but vocal and active Russian-Jewish intelligentsia. Along with American-born liberals and radicals, this intelligentsia popularized the literary theories and literature of Russian revolutionaries, especially the works of Russian realists. As liberalism in America grew, suspicion
of a world-wide Bolshevik conspiracy mounted in the first "Red Scare" in America. Government investigators, the police, and journalists often blurred all forms of liberalism and radicalism into a cohesive identity characterized by affiliations with Russia.

Meanwhile, American progressives, who were often receptive to modernism in art and theatre, grew more and more interested in developments in Russian theatre. As Americans became increasingly aware of events in Russia, they began to seek Russian art and literature, which painted a picture of a far away land that could inspire them both politically and artistically. Russian artists began to present their work in America with growing popularity, and the American artists, searching for European models, soon found illumination from leading Russian theatre artists. Konstantin Stanislavsky became a favorite inspiration. This chapter tracks the various intersections between the cultural and political relationships between Americans and Russians that enabled such an influence to occur.

Overview of Chapter Two: Commodification of Russian Theatre

Chapter two investigates the way that an American audience for Russian modernist theatre grew in the 1910s and 1920s. In the case of the most significant Russian tours in America during those years, an interesting pattern occurs: the
phrase, "produced by Morris Gest and F. Ray Comstock," appears more often than not, and regularly, Gest produced the work with the millionaire banker, Otto H. Kahn’s money (Larson 76). These two men, who are no longer familiar figures in American theatre history, brought a great number of Russian performers and performances to America. This chapter examines the motives these men had for importing Russian performance, the techniques they used to popularize and depoliticize those performances, and the significance of these Russian imports.

Otto H. Kahn funded multiple artistic projects that promoted modernism in America; his interest ranged in art, ballet, theatre, and opera from all over Europe, and his contributions, mostly financial, to the American stage were incredible. Morris Gest, whose personal finances weren’t so great as Kahn’s, worked to find the money, negotiate the deals, and make the profit. He was not always successful, but his efforts helped to establish Russian modernism in America. (Gest’s partner, F. Ray Comstock, placed his energy in intimate musical theatre productions, and had very little to do with producing Russian imports.) Gest and Kahn are the key figures responsible for bringing Russian theatre in America in the 1910s and early 1920s. Together, they made and lost millions of dollars as they attempted to create an American audience for Russian theatre.

This chapter explores the Russian performances Gest and Kahn brought to America, the methods they used to create an audience for those performances, and the impact that their efforts had on American modernism. As I outline and
describe the pre-Stanislavsky Russian productions that Gest and Kahn financed, I will discuss these works in terms of (1) the publicity and diplomacy required for acquiring the performers and promoting the work, (2) the reactions of American critics, artists, and audiences, and (3) the scenic and staging qualities that distinguish these works from the theatre, opera, and ballet offered in America at the time. The popularity of Anna Pavlova, for example, encouraged a new appreciation for ballet which had been largely absent before her American performances. Also, the vibrant decor and costumes of the Ballet Russe markedly contrasted with the drab, earth tones popular in American fashion at the time (Simonson *Part of a Lifetime* 26). This chapter examines these and other important influences of Russian modernist performance on the American stage, which were made available to audiences by Morris Gest and Otto Kahn.

Overview of Chapter Three: Revolutionary Art/Revolutionary Politics

The final chapter focuses on the ways that the post-revolutionary Russian avant-garde came to the American stage. After providing a survey of the experiments in Russian theatre following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the chapter explores various avenues through which Americans came into contact with those experiments: written accounts by English speaking visitors to Russia, Russian companies touring and sending publicity abroad, Russian émigré artists in the United States, and political organizations employing Russian theatrical strategies for their own productions. The primary concerns here are American
interests in and the adoption of Russian innovations in theatre which were stimulated by idealistic notions of the power of theatre to transform and restructure society.

The Russian avant-garde theatre following the Revolution was stimulated by pre-revolutionary explorations in theatricality, reconfigurations of stage and audience space, and the transformative potential of theatre. Though some Russian theatre artists tried to remain apolitical, many of the leading artists believed that new forms in the theatre could promote acceptance of the revolution and encourage the reconstruction of Russian life. Among the most extreme innovators was Vsevelod Meyerhold, who led the "October in the Theatre," which he believed required the complete rejection of traditional practices, to be replaced by entirely new techniques and forms to mirror the ideal new Soviet system. In their search for an ultra-industrialized and modern Russian state controlled by the workers, Russian avant-garde artists in line with Meyerhold developed approaches to scenic design and performance which were stimulated by Futurism and Collectivism. Of course, Russian avant-garde methods varied, based on such factors as the artists' political affiliations, the desired audience, and theatrical and cultural background of the artists and their audiences. The many diverse experiments in Russia following the Revolution soon drew attention from artists and intellectuals throughout the western world.

The post-revolutionary Russian theatrical experiments primarily came into American consciousness through three major sources: the writings of progressive scholars interested in modernist theatre, the work of Russian artists
who toured or immigrated to the United States, and the activities of theatres affiliated with leftist theatre organizations. This chapter examines the works of Oliver M. Sayler, Huntly Carter, and Hallie Flanagan, which give contemporaneous accounts of the Russian theatre at different stages after the Revolution. Next, it explores the work of the Hebrew theatre, the Habima, which toured the United States in 1926-1927, and the American response to its rigid stylization and theatricality. A discussion of the Habima also offers the opportunity to compare the work of Habima with productions at the Neighborhood Playhouse and the Yiddish Art Theatre, which were both strongly influenced by the Russian avant-garde at the time. The final section of chapter three examines the Russian-inspired Yiddish workers’ theatre, Artef, which combined Russian approaches to theatre with Communist political ideology in the late 1920s and early 1930s. As with chapters one and two, the final chapter points to important moments in the cultural exchange between the United States and Russian artists, without attempting to provide an exhaustive account of the many Russian influences on American theatre.

A Note on Transliteration

Transliteration of the Russian in the text follows the Library of Congress system which omits diacritical marks; however, the familiar spellings of Russian names and places has been maintained (Meyerhold, Stanislavsky, Tolsoy). Additionally, in reference to Russian émigrés, I have used the English spellings of their names which they used after their emigration (Theodore Komisarjevsky, 17
Nicholas Roerich, Nikita Balieff) because my work primarily explores these artists’ contributions after they left Russia and the Soviet Union.

1 Many articles in *Wandering Stars: Russian Émigré Theatre, 1905-1940* (1992), edited by Lawrence Senelick, provide details on individual Russian artists and groups who performed in the United States. Other works on groups and individuals establish important Russian influences on American theatre. For example, Raïkin Ben-Ari’s *Habima* (1957) describes the significance that company had on American Yiddish theatre artists. Dawn Lille Horwitz’ *Michel Fokine* (1985) gives a detailed account of Fokine’s work in America, Cyril Beaumont’s *Anna Pavlova* (1945) includes a discussion of the great dancer’s influence on American dance, and Jacqueline Decter’s *Nicholas Roerich: The Life and Art of a Russian Master* (1989) discusses Roerich’s important relationships with American artists.


3 Stanislavsky’s influence on American theatre is well documented in such studies as Jean Benedetti’s *Stanislavski* (1988), Sharon M. Carnicke’s *Stanislavsky in Focus* (1996), Christine Edward’s *The Stanislavsky Heritage: Its Contributions to the American Theatre* (1965), and Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky’s *A History of Russian Theatre* (1999).

4 Robert Leach’s article, “Russian Theatre and Western Theatres,” in *A History of Russian Theatre* (1999) looks at some of the significant influences Russian theatre has had on other theatres in the west. He focuses on the Stanislavsky influence in American theatre and briefly discusses Michael Chekhov’s work in the U. S. in the 1940s.


CHAPTER I
RUSSIA IN THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION

The attempt to isolate and track any historical development necessitates a process of selection which gives less significance to, or even negates, any number of important influences. By identifying a number of strands of influence, rather than a single line of development, events can be viewed within multiple overlapping and sometimes contradictory contexts, which help to shape the way the events came to be understood. Although this type of historiographical model produces a less concise and singular narrative, it enables historians to explore possibilities which have previously been overlooked. Therefore, in an attempt to open the narrative concerning the Russian influence on American theatre, this chapter explores a number of interwoven currents which helped to establish the American climate in relation to Russian culture in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. The five areas of investigation for this chapter include 1) the culture of immigration, 2) the perceptions of Russians in America, 3) the transmission of Russian cultural products, 4) the advent of modernism in America, and 5) the placement of Russian realism in the American imagination. These developments intersect with
the founding and growth of Yiddish theatre in America, with the activities of Russian Jewish intellectuals, with the emergence of political radicalism, with the Red Scare politics as played out in the American press, and with the relationship between Stanislavsky and American theatrical modernists. Discussions of each of these topics, which have each inspired volumes of commentary, must be limited here to an introductory rather than an exhaustive inquiry. However, the themes which are set out in this chapter will provide a context for the Russian performances examined in the following chapters. Here, it is most important to establish a sense of the relationships between American and Russian cultures which first began in the nineteenth century.

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth in America, the concept of “Russian” came to connote a variety of ethnicities and ideas. This was partially due to confusion about the identities of Eastern European immigrants in America. Of the estimated three million Eastern European immigrants who came to the United States from 1880-1924, perhaps only 300,000 were Russian by nationality, yet the Czechs, Poles, Gypsies, Hungarians, Serbians, Croatians, and Romanians were often vaguely categorized as Russian (Handlin 242). The United States Census Bureau in 1910 and 1920 included immigrants from the Russian territories, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Finland in their count of Russians living in America. One author in 1922, trying to clarify the term, stated “By Russian, as used here is meant the Great Russian, inhabiting Central Russia; the White Russian, living between
Poland and Russia; and the Little Russian, from what was formerly South Russia. It does not include the Jews . . .” (Davis viii). However, many Jewish intellectuals from Russia concealed their Jewish identity, making it impossible for historians to make that distinction (Cassedy Building 6). Authors of immigration reports make no distinctions between Russian Slavs and Russian Jews (Johnston 6). Adding to the confusion, early official documentation made clarification among immigrants from Eastern Europe difficult because immigration papers listed the country of departure rather than nationality or religion.

In addition to denoting a region of origin during these years, the term “Russian” also referred to liberal ideology and its adherents. Following the Bolshevik Revolution, during the first period of the Red Scare in the United States, radicals, regardless of their birth, were regularly associated with Russia by the conservative public. For instance, in New York in 1919, Alderman Arnon L. Squiers, in response to the Socialist party, declared, “If they don’t like it here, let them go back to Russia” (quoted in Jaffe 97). Such a statement reflected the degree to which Russians in America were often openly associated with but sometimes also mistakenly identified with socialist organizations. However, “Russian” denoted more than a nationality or an ideology. The term “Russian” in America in the early part of the twentieth century ranged from such contradictory characteristics as backward or progressive, mystical or rigidly materialistic, and naturally introspective and intelligent or innately dull-witted. Like all American stereotypical inventions, the image of the Russian was ambivalent: Americans
were fascinated by the exotic qualities and culture of the Russians, but ultimately feared and distrusted their difference.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the American public had little reason to contemplate Russia, its history, and its many cultures. Then, in the 1860s, several major events brought Russia into American consciousness. Firstly, Alexander II's support of the Union during the American Civil War influenced, in some measure, its outcome. According to a speech by a General Banks in 1868, (just as France and England were ready to recognize the confederacy), two Russian fleets arrived in United States harbors (one in San Francisco and the other in New York). The arrival of these fleets “shocked the world,” and very soon after, France and England both withdrew their support of the Confederacy (Tverskoi 410). Piotr Tverskoi, a Russian writer who lived in the United States from 1881-1893, wrote in 1893, that the "remarkable sympathy with which the American people regard the Russians" seemed to be connected to this event (409).

The second major event which put Russia in the American press in the 1860s was the U.S. purchase of Russian territories in North America. Secretary of State John Seward negotiated the purchase of Alaska from Russia for $7,200,000 (or about two cents per acre) in 1867. Following an extensive propaganda campaign by Seward and Baron Eduard de Stoeckl, Russian foreign minister to the United States, Congress ratified the treaty for the purchase by an overwhelming majority. The national press lampooned Seward for the purchase, referring to Alaska as “Seward’s Icebox” or “Seward’s Folly.”
focusing American attention on Russia again, this event also established an early

generation of Russian Americans. The treaty enabled non-native inhabitants of
Alaska either to return to Russia within three years or to become United States
citizens.

Americans’ attention again turned to Russia on a large scale when the
tsarist pogroms and economic policies of the early 1880s initiated a wave of
immigration into the United States from Eastern Europe. The quickly growing
Jewish population in America in particular spoke out against the despotism of the
Russian tsar, Nicholas II. American opposition to tsarism increased, especially
when the Russian famine of 1891, which took an estimated 400,000 lives from
starvation and typhus, doubled the number of Eastern Europeans pouring into the
United States. The famine in Russia gained international attention when the
Russian government sought relief from abroad. Although the United States
government did not organize a relief effort, American philanthropists, led by the
Red Cross’ Clara Barton, provided the greatest international support to end the
famine (Smith 609). Shannon Smith, in her article "From Relief to Revolution:
American Women and the Russian-American Relationship, 1890-1917," argues
that the Russian famine “seemed to demonstrate the primitive cultural and
agricultural level of the Russian peasantry and the political and technological
failures of the Russian State” (606).

The Society of American Friends of Russian Freedom, an American
organization founded in May 1891, brought national attention to the oppression of
the Russian peasantry and Jews and organized anti-tsarist sentiment in America. The reported object of the organization was "to aid, by all moral and legal means, the Russian patriots in their efforts to obtain for their country Political Freedom and Self-government" (*Free Russia* 1). Among the founding members of this group of philanthropists, writers, and church leaders, was Mark Twain, who wrote in *The American Claimant* (1892) and "The Czar's Soliloquy" (1905) about his support for a Russian revolution (Zwick 1). Through lectures, a pamphlet *Free Russia*, short stories, and newspaper editorials, this group presented its views on the harshness of the Siberian exile system, the severe economic and religious restrictions placed on Russian Jews, the economic hardships of the Russian peasantry, and the growing revolutionary fervor in Russia. The group declined in activities in 1893 due to a lack of funding, suggesting a loss of public interest in Russian events. However, the group re-emerged during the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 with greater support from American progressives (Smith 609). The group contributed significantly to America's awareness of revolutionary efforts in Russia and helped to popularize socialist ideology in the United States. In 1904, for example, it helped to finance the fundraising tour of the Russian revolutionary activist Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia who lectured in a number of eastern cities in the United States about the need for revolutionary action in her country (Smith 610).

American response to the anti-tsarist movement and the Russian revolutionaries was split long before the Red Scare. While some progressives of
The Society of American Friends of Russian Freedom supported extreme action in the efforts of the revolutionaries abroad, others supported only peaceful and diplomatic revolution. Contrarily, American conservatives like the U.S. Ambassador to Russia, George von Lengerke Meyer, saw the revolutionaries as “dangerously radical and wholly unrealistic,” and did not support their anti-tsarist movement at all (Smith 610). These dissenting positions would continue to gain support until the Red Scare of 1919 strengthened the conservative position.

Additionally, the seemingly endless stream of Eastern Europeans arriving in America only complicated these multiple perspectives on Russian activities.

The few progressive American intellectuals who had read Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Chekhov were bewildered by the daily flow of dirty, poor, uneducated, and unhealthy Eastern Europeans by the hundreds into Ellis Island during the late decades of the nineteenth century. These new people, an impoverished, heterogeneous multitude, included Catholic Croats and Slovenes, Muslims from Bosnia, Greek Orthodox Serbians, Russian Orthodox Russians and Ukranians, Ruthenians who practiced an amalgam of Roman Catholicism and Greek Orthodox, and, constituting the greatest numbers, Jews from throughout Eastern Europe. Despite the fact that their languages, customs, and dress distinguished them from each other, all of these people were often identified as a group because of the common assumption that they all spoke variants of the same language and came from a common, though vast, region of the world. Moses Rischin, in The Promised City, even claims that “at the turn of the century all East
Europeans, despite their diversity, were characterized as “Russians,” which certainly complicated the way Americans understood and viewed Russia and Russian culture (110).

The actual number of Russian nationals who immigrated to the United States remained quite small from 1880-1917. A census of 1910 revealed only an estimated 47,000 foreign-born, non-Jewish Russians living in the United States, and this number, as stated earlier, also contains nationals of the Baltic states and Finland (Davis 8). Therefore, the number of non-Jewish Russians can be assumed to be much smaller than most figures indicate. Oliver Handlin explains this in *A Pictorial History of Immigration*, "The Russian government while tolerating the departure of Jews, was reluctant to permit the loss of any part of the dominant stock" (246). Thus, the largest representatives of Russia in the eastern United States, and New York in particular, were Russian Jews, for whom everything representative of tsarist Russia was anathema (Rischin 137). Obviously, this designation lacks specificity, but because most of the Eastern European Jews came to America from countries heavily under the influence of the Russian government and culture, historians have referred to the massive group as Russian Jews. Because this study seeks to explore how Russian ideas and culture reached America, I will maintain the practice of using the word “Russian” to designate that dominant cultural influence rather than geographical location in reference to Russian Jews.
In his study published in 1949 by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, L.J. Levinger argues:

The Jew in Germany felt he was a German, in America he was an American, but the Jew in Russia was a Jew and not a Russian at all. He has his own courts, his own local community organizations, with its own Jewish heads. He lived in a Jewish neighborhood of the city, or even in a Jewish village . . . . The Russian Jew on the whole was never at home in Russia . . . he never became Russian [. . .] (qtd. in Johnston 5)

While Levinger's statement ignores the Russian Jewish intelligenstia who had become “Russian,” certainly the majority of Jews felt alienated from Russian culture. The imperialist Russian government cast the Jews as outsiders and limited their participation in numerous economic and cultural opportunities. Of course, even the Jews who considered themselves Russian abhorred the authority of the tsar. Aiding the anti-tsarist sentiment in America, the more affluent and educated Russian Jews largely supported the revolutionary activities in Russia, held leadership positions in the various socialist groups in the United States, and kept people in America informed about anti-tsarist activities in Russia.

The Eastern European Jews began emigrating to the United States in large numbers in the 1880s, in part because of the pogroms. But, Arthur Hertzburg, in *The Jews in America*, argues that the Russian pogroms alone do not explain the mass migration to America (141). He points out that there were no pogroms in Austria-Hungary or Romania, yet many Jews came to America from these
countries as well as from Russia. Hertzberg cites poverty as the main reason the Eastern European Jews came to America. He writes that “almost all middle-class Jews managed to find ways of re-establishing themselves elsewhere in Russia; it was the peddlers and tailors who left for America.... The Jews from Russia arrived in the United States penniless and largely uneducated...” (141).

Certainly, a much smaller number of more affluent and educated Jews left Russia as tsarist economic policies threatened their freedoms and when tsarist police began arresting socialist Jews, but the great numbers who emigrated to America had little wealth or education on which to build. For example, in 1905, the average Jew arrived in the United States with only eight dollars while the average non-Jewish immigrant had an average of sixteen dollars (Hertzburg 150).

In the early years of the mass migration, American Jews established charities to enable the poor Russian Jews to assimilate into American culture. The wealthy, French-Jewish philanthropist, the Baron Maurice de Hirsch, arranged a fund of over two million dollars in 1890 for the aid of Russian Jews in America. However, the tens of thousands of impoverished Russian Jews who arrived annually overwhelmed the organizations which had been established to aid their transition. Of the goals of the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society, which had hoped to help immigrants find work and establish agricultural colonies throughout the United States, only the temporary housing, feeding, and clothing of many immigrants could be met (Price 269). Resentment and hostility toward these immigrants mounted in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and
continued into the first few decades of the twentieth century. They provided
cheap labor, broke picket lines, and tapped the resources of shelters for the poor.

In 1888, the United Hebrew Charities urged Jewish leaders abroad to
discourage immigration to the United States. Their *14th Annual Report* states:

> When shiploads of unhappy Rumanian and Russian Jews who were fleeing
> bitter persecution, were landed, and in crowds, dejected, apprehensive,
> half-clad, miserable, they asked for shelter, no one preached political
> economy or wondered at the strain upon American labor that twenty or
> thirty thousand exiled Jews might occasion. But times have changed. It is
> no longer a matter of a few thousand immigrants, whom American
> freedom welcomes with open hand. It has become a social, financial, and
> business question. This annual increase of our population has been
> indiscriminately caused by European nations, and the time has come when,
> in the best interest of American Judaism, we should warn our brethren in
> Europe not to encourage the emigration of people who cannot earn their
> livelihood and who cannot be deemed a welcome accession. We have
> burdens enough. (qtd. in Price 278)

Undoubtedly, Jewish leaders in America worried that the same causes for
resentment toward and finally the exclusion of the Chinese would lead to anti-
Semitism in America if the massive immigration were not curtailed. At the turn
of the century, the more affluent American and German Jews largely separated
themselves from the Russian Jews whose intimidating numbers and differing
religious practices threatened the identity of Jews already established in America. In 1880, only 300,000 Jews lived throughout America, and less than a fifth lived in various neighborhoods in New York City. By 1890, 300,000 Jews lived in New York City alone, and the bulk of them were Russian Jews, cramped into a twenty-five block neighborhood on the East Side (Price 329). American attitudes toward immigration hardened until new policies in 1924 made it nearly impossible for Eastern European Jews to emigrate to the United States.

The stereotypes of the Russian Jews that emerged in the United States resulted from their massive numbers, their poverty, their religious practices, and eventually their political affiliations which seemed extreme to many Americans. In *The Ambivalent Image*, Louise Mayo traces the American perception of the Eastern European Jews in novels, drama, and media. She finds that the stereotypes were tied to “images of a lack of cleanliness, basic inability to accept American law, dishonesty, and permanent alienation resulting from a fanatic religion. . .” (150). Unlike the easily assimilated, middle class German Jew, the exotically dressed, poor Jew from Eastern Europe was characterized at in the nineteenth century American press as “barbaric” and “uncouth.” The predominant images later shifted, and Eastern European Jews were characterized as "anarchistic," "intellectual," and "socialistic" (Rischin 97). The stereotypes of these Jews bled into American notions of Russians also. For example, Hutchins Hapgood's description of the Russian Jewish intellectuals provides insight into
American impressions of Russians in 1901 as he was writing his study of Jews living in New York's East Side:

In their restless and feverish eyes shines the intense idealism of the combined Jew and Russian - the moral earnestness of the Hebrew united with the passionate, rebellious, mental activity of the modern Muscovite.

(49)

This blending of qualities makes it difficult to establish any specific stereotypes of Russians that do not overlap with images of Russian Jews. Distinctions between Russian, Russian Jews, and Eastern European Jews increasingly blur in American writing in the early part of the twentieth century, and stereotypes increasingly overlap as enemies of liberal ideology sought to create a distinct and cohesive enemy. For example, even though they would contradict long-standing ideas about the intellectual passions of Russians and Jews, immigration officials in 1919 invented statistics to “prove” that both Russians and Jews were among the least intelligent ethnicities and also the least likely to be assimilated into American culture (Hertzberg 226).

Contradictory images of Russians and Russian Jews existed long before the Red Scare. Disparity among the education levels of the Russian Jews partially explains the ambiguous characterization of Russian Jews in fin de siecle America. Although much smaller in number, the most influential Russian Jews were the intellectuals who had access to a Russian education and had learned their politics in the Russian revolutionary movement. According to Steven Cassedy, in To the
Other Shore: Russian Jewish Intellectuals Who Came to America, these intellectuals, unlike the Eastern European Jewish masses, considered themselves “Russian, first, and Jewish second, or not at all” (Cassedy 64). When they first came to America in the 1880s, the Russian Jewish intelligentsia organized through publications, community centers, and labor unions. They worked toward two causes: to help free the Russian people of tsarist authority and to aid and educate the Jewish workers in America.

Members of this intelligentsia included such famous political and artistic leaders as Philip Krantz, editor and publisher; Morris Hillquit, leader of the Socialist Party of America; Jacob Gordin, Yiddish playwright; Abraham Cahan, editor of the Jewish Daily Forward; and Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkham, famous anarchists. These and other Jewish intellectuals represented a range of political and cultural views, but they had been schooled in the Russian revolutionary leftist doctrines of the 1860s, and they brought their ideas with them to the United States. Hutchins Hapgood’s The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter of New York, first published in 1902, reveals a distinction between the intelligentsia and the less educated worker. He writes about women in East Side:

As we ascend in the scale of education in the ghetto, we find women who derive their culture and ideas from a double source - from socialism and from advanced Russian ideals of literature and life. They have lost faith completely in the Orthodox religion, have substituted no other, know
Russian better than Yiddish, read Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Chekhov, and often put into practice the most radical theories of the new woman [. . .]

(84-85)

Certainly, the educated Russian Jews in New York City brought Americans into contact with many aspects of Russian culture and helped to generate American notions of Russian and Russians.

In America, these Russian Jewish leaders established presses in Russian, Yiddish, and English to take their ideas to the people. Although many Russian Jewish intellectuals spoke Russian, they decided to use the Yiddish language of the Jewish masses in order to educate the people. Jewish radical leaders in the 1890s founded publications such as Di Arbayer Tsaytung (The Workman’s Paper), Abend Blat (Evening Paper), Forverts (The Jewish Daily Forward), and Di Tsukunft (The Forward) in America as organs of their political organizations. These periodicals, ranging wildly in format and political persuasion, contained articles on events in Russia, issues that focused on workers (sometimes specifically Jewish workers) in America, contemporary literary criticism, political essays, and translations of socialist, nihilist, and anarchist writings as well as translations of contemporary Russian literature.

Organizing Jewish workers in the United States became one way Jewish intellectuals could combine their politics with activism, an important characteristic of their political upbringing. Because the uneducated and poor Russian immigrants knew little English and had few trade skills, they were
regularly taken advantage of by labor management in the United States. Jewish leaders founded the Russian Labor Union in 1883 to educate, train, and organize the workers. By 1891, the Federation of Jewish Labor in the United States and Canada included an estimated fifty unions (Price 353). Added to the American fear that the growing numbers of Jewish immigrants caused, their affiliation with Russian labor unions and anti-tsarist activities made them a prime target of the Red Scare of 1919-20 and Immigration restrictions in 1924.

While leftists in America came from various backgrounds, a large number of the members of socialist, communist, and anarchist groups came from Eastern European countries. Organizations such as the Union of Russian Workers included Jewish and non-Jewish members as well as Russian and non-Russian members. By contrast, the Industrial Workers of the World included American citizens and resident aliens from Western and Eastern Europe. Despite these differences, the American press and government blurred or ignored the distinctions between various left-wing political organizations and their activities, and by 1919 all dissident activity would be labeled “Red” and connected to Bolshevism.

Official resentment toward radicalism and leftist politics grew in America in 1917 with America’s involvement in World War I. Prior to 1917, socialism and pacifism had been accepted, even respected, political positions in America (Gengarely 32). Socialist membership had rapidly increased in the first two decades of the century as economic hardships grew. Additionally, the primary
presidential candidates of 1916 pledged America's neutrality because of the popular pacifist stance (39). However, when the United States entered the war in 1917, pacifism became a threat to policy. American loyalty and patriotism rose as the government sought support for its war efforts. New governmental policies made it difficult for leftists to maintain a pacifist stance without breaking laws.

Many radical and leftist groups continued to oppose the war and campaigned against such new policies as the Conscription Act of 1917, which established a wartime draft. In its efforts to contain subversive activities, the U.S. government declared that "inciting others" to ignore the draft became a punishable offense in 1917. Therefore, when radicals like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman gave public speeches against the draft, both of these famous anarchists were sentenced to two years imprisonment and $10,000 in fines (Jaffe 49). Laws of sedition soon made it nearly impossible to advocate any kind of change in the form of government in the United States without violating laws (Gengarelly 98). In addition to the new governmental policies that attempted to control dissidence, private groups, such as the American Protective League formed in 1916 and the Ku Klux Klan, organized "loyalty investigations" and found most of their evidence of disloyalty among labor organizations and minority groups (Jaffe 49).

Such vigorous efforts to stamp out socialist organizations and other leftist groups certainly grew out of the conservatives' fears that the socialists were making significant headway. In 1914, Russian immigrant Meyer London became
the first member of the Socialist Party of America elected to Congress, and he
was the only member of Congress to vote against the Wartime Espionage Act
(Jaffe 23). In the 1917 elections, many socialists gained public offices in New
York City, and Morris Hillquit gained enough votes for the office of Mayor to
frighten the established political parties. The Russian Revolution in the same
year invigorated socialist efforts in the United States, but it also made the
dominant majority in America fear the possibilities of revolutionaries and
reformists.

In 1919, Congress appointed a committee, chaired by Senator Clayton R.
Lusk, to investigate radical activities, and the Red Scare officially began (Jaffe
23). A sub-committee, the Overman Committee, which was formed to investigate
American relations with the Bolsheviks, reported findings that revealed “a
conspiracy” among left-wing groups in collaboration with the Russian Bolsheviks
who supposedly intended to overthrow the American government (Gengarelly
89). Of course, left-wing groups in America had no such cohesive organization,
although many groups had been inspired by the Russian Revolution and had
openly expressed such inspiration. Nevertheless, the fear of a worldwide
conspiracy sent panic throughout the United States and particularly in New York.
In April, New York City placed a ban on all foreign language meetings. In May,
Congress had made it illegal to display the red flag at any public gathering. Later,
the New York Police Commissioner ordered a public hall boycott, making it
impossible for socialists and other left-wing groups to assemble. Additionally,

Then came the raids. The first raid occurred in June, 1919, in the New York office of the Russian Bureau. On November 8, 1919, on the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, 700 policemen and agents raided 73 branches of the Communist Party, searching for seditious and other illegal materials (Jaffe 84-90). Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer ordered raids in 1919 of the Union of Russian Workers and the Russian Seamen’s Union. The evidence of sedition found during these raids led to the deportation of 249 Russians (Jews and non-Jews) on December 20, 1920 (Murray 219). Although public opinion quickly turned against the Red Scare activities (because the Justice Department officials often used brutal and sometimes illegal means in making arrests), the effect of the press at the time secured a widespread suspicion of radical activities and foreigners, and of Russians in particular. The fear of Russians and their revolutionary ideologies would long remain slightly below the surface in American politics and mainstream culture. The campaign against radicalism helped to solidify a dominant, conservative American public distrust of Russians and Russian ideas until the end of the cold war.

Despite these political conditions, a program of cultural exchange existed to mediate and bridge the gulf between Russian and American cultures. American libertarians and progressives, who had long been attracted to the
Russian struggle for social and economic freedom, developed and maintained an interest in the cultural products of Russia. Beginning with literature and music in the later part of the nineteenth century, then moving into painting, dance, and theatre in the new century, Russian art triggered American curiosity. Although the cultural products of Russia merely trickled into the United States at the turn of the century, Russian literature, dance, music, art, and theatre flooded the American marketplace by the 1920s and 1930s.

Early in the artistic exchange between Russians and Americans, Russian literature and art met cultural road blocks. Unfamiliar Russians literary styles and subjects encountered an American readership raised on European aesthetics. In 1904, W.L. Courtney, a British writer and literary critic, demonstrated this cultural gap in his study of several European writers including Maurice Maeterlinck, Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy, Maxim Gorky, and Dmitri Merezhkovsky. He decided,

"We can understand Turgenieff, mainly because he was not wholly representative of Russia, but the product, rather of European civilization. Tolstoi is a more difficult task. Dostoieffski is frankly impossible. We talk superficially about Gorky . . ." (121).

Taking into account many differences between English and American cultures at the time, Courtney's failure to understand Russian writers sheds light on some of the difficulties non-Russians encountered when reading Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, and even Gorky for the first time. "[They] bring us tidings of
something novel and unfamiliar and strange; they suggest to us ideas of another race, a different national feeling and temperament with which we have little or nothing in common" (131). Courtney found Turgenev to be the most accessible Russian writer because he wrote in a style and about situations which were more familiar to Europeans. A select number of Americans, too, found Turgenev accessible, and as American readers gained more awareness of Russian life, they explored and struggled with Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gorky, and Chekhov. Although these writers often seemed strange, exotic, and, sometimes, terrifying, Americans were increasingly drawn to this new "other."

Russian literature and culture moved slowly into American consciousness, aided by literary circles, immigration, and leftist politics. Russian music and literature shows up variously in American culture at large in the last decade of the nineteenth century. From leisurely literary clubs on the west coast, where small Russian settlements had sprung up, to elitist musical societies and leftist political organizations in the east, Russian writers and artists become increasingly popular commodities. In the late 1880s and early 1890s, a few Russian artists had already found fame in America. For example, in 1891, Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky toured throughout the United States. In a letter home, Tchaikovsky expressed surprise to find that his compositions were frequently performed in America. In particular, he found it amazing that his composition "Hamlet" had played in the United States several times, although it had not yet been performed in Moscow (Tchaikovsky 400). In 1888, the American Art Gallery in New York City
exhibited the works of the Russian realist painter Vassily Vereshchagin, achieved in his paintings “the same sense of kinship with the people as did the finest works by Russian writers” (Nikoljukin 432). His works toured the United States again in 1901 and 1902. Adding to these early cross-cultural contacts with Russian artists, the popular and powerful actor-manager Richard Mansfield popularized streamlined dramatic adaptations of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* in 1895 and A. Tolsoy’s *Death of Ivan the Terrible* in 1904. The latter remained popular enough to stay in Mansfield’s repertory until 1906, for it no doubt fed an American appetite to grasp an understanding of imperialist Russia, as sensational and inaccurate as that understanding may have been.

America’s increasing interest in Russian literature and art could also be found in the activities of amateur literary, music, and dramatic clubs. For example, the Russian writer and publicist, Piotr Tverskoi (pseudonym for P.A. Dementiev), who spent twelve years in the United States and published *Sketches of the North American United States*, noted his surprise in 1899 when he found the Women’s Friday Morning Club in Los Angeles had discovered Turgenev and Pushkin. One woman apparently expressed her delight to him that “in such a barbaric country as Russia, she had discovered such a penetrating, such an undoubtedly great writer as Turgenev” (Tverskoi 412). The women in the club had developed and maintained friendships through letters with several women in Russia who sent them copies of contemporary Russian writers. When the literary club learned about the Pushkin Centenary Celebrations in Russia, they compiled
the few English translations of his work, and held their own Pushkin celebration. While most Americans found little interest in Pushkin until Russian art and literature became more commonplace, the activities of this women's group illuminates the varied ways Americans gained access to and interest in Russian literature.

Apart from major institutions such as the Metropolitan Opera House and the American Art Gallery and amateur artistic societies who contributed to the new interest in Russian culture, perhaps the most significant organizations responsible for bringing Russian culture to America were left-wing political groups. Both Jewish and non-Jewish intellectual leftists in the United States at the turn of the century found inspiration in the works of Russian realism. For the politically radical, Russian realism exemplified the artist's duty to show the truth while teaching progressive ideas. For those who supported the Russian revolutionary movement, Russian realism depicted the oppressive conditions of the imperialist regime and strengthened their resolve.

Before I discuss members of the predominantly leftist Jewish societies, who brought their first-hand experiences with Russian art and culture with them to the United States, I want to point out that non-Jewish interest in Russian realism also existed. It's important to explore this avenue briefly before looking at the cross-cultural influences simply because the Jewish influence on America's interest in things Russian is so vast. Many of the non-Jewish literary and dramatic clubs, which I discussed earlier, had discovered Turgenev, Gorky, and
Tolstoy independent of political associations. American-born, non-Jewish radicals had also discovered Russian realists, though their interest was tied to Russian revolutionary culture. Frequently, translated works by Chekhov, Gorky, and primarily Tolstoy showed up in the American radical press in the 1880s and 1890s. In To The Other Shore, Steven Cassedy explains that American progressives were drawn to Chekhov “because he was a realist,” and to Gorky, “because he was a revolutionary and a proletarian” (109). At the turn of the century, Tolstoy appeared in the presses more than the others because, according to Cassedy,

He was viewed as a socialist (by some), a supporter of the peasants, a martyr of Russian oppression (as when the Russian Orthodox Church excommunicated him in 1901), and a victim of international persecution (as when the Postmaster General of the United States banned editions of Kreutzer Sonata from the mails). (109)

Writers viewed as political victims gained increased readership in the United States because of the added publicity they received. For example, just as Tolstoy's readership increased after his excommunication, Gorky's popularity skyrocketed in the United States after his imprisonment in 1905. The political life of Russian writers came arose regularly because left wing Americans often came to their literature first through political affiliations

The publisher of the bi-weekly Liberty, Benjamin Tucker (1854-1939), serves as a significant example of an American-native who made the works of
Russian revolutionary writers and other realists available in English. Of the many articles in *Liberty* on Russian writers, Russian Nihilism, and Russian revolutionary martyrs, Tucker’s translation and publication of Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s novel *What Is To Be Done? (Shtodelat?)* and some of his critical writings, is perhaps most telling. Chernyshevsky, a radical utopian socialist, outlined a program of literary criticism that shaped Russian revolutionary approaches to literature. Chernyshevsky wrote that “the true, loftiest beauty is precisely the beauty of man in the world of reality,” and he stressed that the responsibility of the artist was “to approach reality normatively, to decompose and judge it” (Cassedy 20). Tucker's translations of Chernyshevsky's novel and literary criticism reveal the astute level of awareness he had of the key theorists shaping Russian revolutionary critical thought. Steven Cassedy, in both *To the Other Shore* (1997) and *Building the Future* (1999), emphasizes the role Chernyshevsky played in establishing an intellectual and literary style in Russia, which tied together the cultural with the political. "They worshipped Chernyshevsky," Cassedy claims, referring to educated Russians, and adds:

One could plausibly claim that Russia's founding Marxist theoreticians, Gregory Plekhanov and Lenin, owed more to Chernyshevsky than to Marx or Engels. And it is safe to say that Chernyshevsky and his contemporaries in Russia had more to do with the elaboration of socialist realism . . . than did Marx or Engels. (*Shore* 19)
Regardless of whether or not Cassedy overstates Chernyshevsky's influence, the fact that Tucker found him significant enough in the 1880s to make his works available to American radicals suggests an early interest in Russian culture, particularly in its notions of realism. Literary realism, which emerged as the pre-eminent style of political activism, became, for many Americans, an essential feature of Russian art and literature. Cassedy's definition of Russian realism, as it developed in the late nineteenth century, explains what type of realism Americans came to anticipate in Russian works. "Realism," Cassedy states, "is not simply a style characterized by its attention to truthfulness and authenticity, by the choice of a setting that could pass for a real historical setting, by a style of narration that mimics the style of historical discourse . . .; it is a style that combines all of these qualities with a didactic, moral, political intent" (Cassedy Shore 24). In addition to this didactic aspect of Russian realism, Americans also seemed to identify Russian literature and drama as particularly gloomy and depressing because of its commitment to authenticity. Therefore, left-wing Americans also imagined Russians themselves as gloomy and depressed but always politically inclined.

The politically charged Russian writer found a counterpart in the Russian Jewish writers who arrived in the United States at the century's end. Writers like Jacob Gordin, an important Yiddish playwright and leader, demonstrated the influence of Russian revolutionary literary criticism in their writing. Like many Jewish intellectual playwrights infected with the "Russian Flu," (as Irving Howe
describes it in The World of Our Fathers 474), he brought his politics into his writing and found that the stage could serve as a platform for educating the audience and exploring contemporary problems. While his plays do not achieve the ideals of Russian realism, many of them reveal the attempt to depict the everyday struggles of Jews and Russian peasants. The best of his dramas attracted progressive audiences from uptown as well as from the Lower East Side, particularly because they were publicized as examples of Russian realism.

Unlike many Russian-Jewish intellectuals and political activists who came to America while in their teens and twenties, Gordin arrived in America in 1891 at the age of thirty-eight. In the Ukraine, where he lived before coming to the United States, he earned his living as a journalist for Russian and Ukrainian presses and founded a separatist religious sect. Gordin had intended to organize agricultural communes for Jews in the United States, but once he learned of earlier failures in this pursuit, he settled in New York City, taught himself Yiddish, and wrote for various Yiddish and Russian presses before he began writing plays. In an effort to support his wife and eight children, Gordin started writing for the theatre in 1891, and by his death in 1909, he had written an estimated 60 plays. Although he was criticized by the more traditional Yiddish playwrights for his realism and by a younger generation of playwrights for his lack of it, Gordin and his supporters established a place on the Yiddish stage for contemporary problem plays.
Like the uptown theatres in New York at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Yiddish theatres provided a variety of theatrical entertainments: vaudeville, musicals, comedies, melodrama, Shakespeare, and a handful of problem plays. The first professional Yiddish theatrical production in New York, organized by a 13-year-old Boris Thomashefsky, had taken place in 1882. The sold out performances for the show revealed the desire for and the possibilities of Yiddish theatre in America (Sandrow Vagabond 73-74). Stimulated by an immigrant population's psychological and emotional needs in their transitions to and assimilation in America, Yiddish theatres at the turn of the century served as "the common meeting place, the common topic of conversation, the common dispeller of estrangement" (Cohen Hester 3). The theatres recreated familiar, if sentimentalized, versions of life in the old country and depicted romanticized or comedic representations of life in the new country. For the uneducated Yiddish-speaking masses, the theatre provided them with a fanciful escape from the lives they spent in sweatshops. It also gave them a sense of community.

Many of the educated and politically charged Yiddish patrons and writers found the frivolity and sentimentality of the popular stage deplorable. Like the early modernists elsewhere in Europe and America, they believed the theatre, like art and literature, should be more elevating for the patrons and hoped to raise the level of artistic merit. Yiddish theatre scholars mark Jacob Gordin's entry into the theatre as a significant moment in the history of Yiddish theatre in the United States. Jacob Adler, the popular Yiddish actor and advocate for seriousness in the
theatre, met Gordin through the socialist editor Philip Krantz, who encouraged Gordin to write plays. In a section of his autobiography entitled "My Great Moment Comes - I Meet Jacob Gordin," Adler states, "Like everyone else, I had heard of Jacob Gordin. I knew he was a socialist, a follower of Tolstoy, and a writer whose stories of Jewish life under the tsarist terror were making a stir in our literary circles" (316). Attracted to the possibilities of such a writer, Adler staged Gordin's first play, Siberia, in 1891. The play attempted to present the harsh and fearful living conditions in Russia, without the sentimental style and tone that audiences expected. Revealing the tastes of the actors in the company and their audiences at the time, Adler explains that the actors "listened to the play in a gloomy silence. There were no nationalistic speeches, no music. The setting was drab, modern. The characters spoke in simple ordinary language. They felt the audience would never accept it" (321). Nevertheless, Adler believed in this new style of playwriting, so he supported the playwright's complaints against the actors who wanted to insert songs and improvise comic bits. The audiences, expecting the usual entertainment, responded as the actors had warned. According to Nahma Sandrow, the opening night audience giggled and talked throughout acts one and two until Jacob Adler reputedly addressed the crowd between the acts, saying:

I stand before you ashamed and humiliated, my head bowed with shame, that you, my friends, are unable to understand a masterpiece by the famous Russian writer, Jacob Mihaelovich Gordin. Friends, friends, if you only
understood what a great work we are playing for you today, you wouldn't
laugh and you wouldn't jeer. (qtd. in Sandrow 139).

Following the speech, which the audience vigorously applauded, it remained
attentive for the rest of the performance (Sandrow 139). Undoubtedly, much of
the audience probably applauded the melodrama of the speech of its favorite actor
rather than the new play, which ran for only a few nights; however, the incident
introduced Yiddish audiences to some of the tenets of Russian realism that would
increasingly appear on their stages.

While it wouldn’t become the dominant form on Lower East Side stages,
realism grew in popularity as more intellectuals and politically active Jews
encouraged its development. The critic and journalist Hutchins Hapgood noted in
1902 that the “very up-to-date element of the ghetto . . . (was) dominated by the
spirit of Russian realism. It is the demand of these fierce realists that of late years
has produced a supply of theatrical productions attempting to present a faithful
picture of actual conditions of life” (127). Preferring the romanticism and
melodrama of the popular theatre, Moishe Hurwitz, a Yiddish playwright from
Rumania, blamed realism for “the deplorable conditions of the Yiddish stage”
(Hapgood 130). Hapgood, himself an obvious proponent for realism, reported
that Hurwitz condemned the “young writers from Russia” with their “heads filled
with senseless realism” who had viciously attacked the early generation of
Yiddish authors in public and in the press (130). Controversies over the merits of
the popular forms of theatre and realism occurred almost immediately after
Yiddish theatre arrived in the United States and lasted for many decades. Between 1903-1905, for example, a fierce debate between advocates of romanticism and advocates of realism appeared in *The Forward*. Later, a younger generation of Yiddish playwrights including David Pinsky, Shalom Asch, and Sholom Aleichem argued about the merits as well as the limitations of realism and other styles of modernism. Although Yiddish theatres continued to offer a range of popular fare and politically charged drama well into the 1930s, realism remained an important staple of the Yiddish art theatres.

In addition to developing their own dramas inspired by Russian realism, the left-wing Yiddish theatres imported Russian plays in Yiddish translations and adaptations. By 1905, Yiddish stages had produced Alexandr Ostrovsky’s *Belugin’s Wedding*, Gorky’s *Children of the Sun*, and Tolstoy’s *The Awakening* and *The Power of Darkness*. Although the Yiddish theatre had been gaining some attention in the popular New York presses, Jacob Adler’s 1903 presentation of *The Power of Darkness* invited new acclaim for Adler and his theatre. After noting the Slavonic gloom of the piece, the critic for *Theatre* magazine wrote:

> Would that some of our managers - and actors too, for that matter - make the pilgrimage downtown to receive lessons from this gifted actor who is unquestionably one of the great players of our time. If Adler could perform in English in a Broadway theatre he would be idolized. (qtd. in Adler 355)
Again in 1911, he achieved wide acclaim when several New York papers reported that Adler had received the first American rights to Tolstoy’s final play, *The Living Corpse*. In November 1911, translations of the play appeared in the Sunday issue of *The New York Times* and in the theatrical magazine *The Call*. Adler premiered the play on November 3, just two days after its translation had appeared in the *Times*. Reviews in *The New York Times* and the *Dramatic Mirror* claimed success for the production among the mixed audience made up of Jews and non-Jews, intellectuals and factory workers, and Yiddish and non-Yiddish theatre artists (Adler 367-370). The two previous Broadway productions of Tolstoy works had received little recognition, and Tolstoy’s works would not appear on Broadway stages again until 1918, when Arthur Hopkins, John Barrymore, and Robert Edmund Jones produced *Redemption* at the Plymouth Theatre. Certainly, Yiddish theatre’s imports of Russian dramas significantly aided the acceptance and the anticipated style of Russian performance on American stages.

Many Yiddish theatre artists and audiences also contributed to the influx of Russian theatre in America by supporting Russian artists touring in the United States. The relative success or failure of early Russian artists in America depended in part on their appeal to Eastern European Jewish theatre audiences. The first Russian theatre company to tour the United States in 1905-1906 evinces the importance of Jewish audiences and Yiddish theatres in their success. Pavel Orlenev’s St. Petersburg Dramatic Company premiered at the uptown Herald
Square Theatre with Evgeny Chirikov’s Evrey (The Jew) under the title The Chosen People then moved its repertory to theatres on the Lower East Side. The radical anarchist Emma Goldman became the company’s manager, press agent, and translator, though she used the pseudonym Emma G. Smith (Senelick 5). Russian Jewish immigrants composed the bulk of the audience for the Russian company’s productions, and when the company again moved uptown, they severely lost revenues and had to return quickly to the Bowery (Senelick 5).

Orlenev’s company, and its star Alla Nazimova in particular, also received recognition outside of the Russian Jewish community. Laurence Senelick has argued, however, that interest in the company lay in the popular public opinion that the Russian artists were “victims of a despotic and arbitrary regime, the latest refugees from Russia’s injustices” (6). Trying to muster support for the Russian performers, the press agents presented Orlenev and Nazimova as needy refugees and valiant opponents of the tsar’s brutal dictatorship. Wealthy philanthropists raised funds for the company, which garnered support from Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, and Daniel Frohman, though it continued to receive support from radical groups. Orlenev, however, mismanaged the business operations, and apparently had difficulties maintaining support from such diverse sources. Though the company served the Jewish population artistically, it served the larger populace, as Senelick has argued, primarily in solidifying stereotypes of Russians in the popular imagination.
The American press, often ignoring the artistry and talents of visiting foreign artists, regularly misrepresented Russian visitors to the American public. The desire of journalists and press agents to sensationalize added to their inability to speak Russian regularly generated false accounts. For example, as early as 1893, the Russian writer Vladimir Korolenko became enraged when the American newspapers falsely reported his intended emigration to America with headlines like “Another Victim of the Czar” and “Novelist Korolenko Speaks About His Cruel Persecutions” (Nikoljukin 415). In a letter to his wife, he complains, “It will be read in Russia before long, damn it all. The paper appended my life-story complete with a variety of fantastic details” (415). The Russian opera star Fedor Chaliapin experienced a similar encounter with American journalism. His first tour in the United States began in 1907. Following the barrage of questions by reporters at the harbor upon his arrival, answered by him through his interpreter, the newspapers printed statements that shocked Chaliapin. In his autobiography, written as much by Gorky as by Chaliapin, he lists the incredible ideas reported in the papers, “I was an atheist, I hunted bear, alone, despised politics, could not abide beggars, and hoped that on my return to Russia I would be put into gaol” (Chaliapin 172). Following his performances at the Metropolitan Opera House, one paper apparently stated, “Chaliapin is not an artist for America” (Chaliapin 174). Certain that he would never return to the United States, Chaliapin claims to have told the reporters as he was departing that, “frankly, where art was concerned, they were decidedly lacking in sensibility” (175). The next day's
papers attacked Chaliapin’s rudeness and barbarity in addition to his musical talents (175).

Maxim Gorky had fallen prey to the American press in 1906, two years before Chaliapin’s New York visit. Gorky’s mission to America, supported in part by the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party, was intended to gain American support for the revolution, to raise funds for the revolutionary movement, and to prevent the tsarist government from collecting a loan from the United States (Yedlin 68). Gorky had become well-known in America after his arrest in Russia in 1905, which launched a successful international “Freedom for Gorky“ campaign. An organization of American writers and journalists, including Mark Twain, Upton Sinclair, Jack London, Leroy Scott, and Ernest Poole, who had supported his freedom the previous year, planned to make Gorky’s U.S. mission a success. Socialist organizations planned receptions, meetings, and lectures for Gorky in major U.S. cities. Unfortunately, as Tovah Yedlin details in Maxim Gorky: A Political Biography, when the press discovered that Gorky’s female companion, the Moscow Art Theatre actress Maria Fedorovna Andreeva, was not his wife, the newspapers destroyed the hopes for his mission. On April 14, 1906, four days after his arrival, the front page of the World presented two detrimental photographs: one of Gorky with Andreeva and the other of Gorky and his estranged wife and their children. Very shortly after this revelation, many Americans who had strongly supported Gorky’s mission, cancelled meetings and removed their financial support. Some Gorky
supporters, such as Professor Frank Giddings in an article titled, "The Social Lynching of Gorky and Andreeva," tried to turn Americans’ attention back toward Gorky’s purpose rather than his morality. However, other Gorky supporters knew that the American passions for morality would prevail, so they stopped publicly supporting him for fear of being caught in the crossfire (Yedlin 68-78).

In addition to confronting the image-making press in America, Russian artists visiting the United States faced a public largely ignorant of modernistic advances in art and performance. Added to the language and cultural barriers, artistic barriers made it difficult for theatre groups like Orlenev’s company in 1905 and Vera Kommissarzhevskiaia’s company in 1908 to draw large audiences. Little enthusiasm could be generated among mainstream audiences for the modernist plays they performed or their styles of presentation. Fedor Chaliapin and Theodore Komisarjevsky believed that Americans lacked the artistic sensibility needed to appreciate their talents early in the century. Though they had toured successfully in Europe, American audiences were generally disinterested in Russian performance until a few star dancers gained celebrity in the United States. Chaliapin’s modernist sensibility had not yet reached a significant portion of his American audience. As the modernist spirit in art moved into American consciousness, Russian performers found greater artistic and financial success in the United States.

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, modernist European art and thought infiltrated American stage practices and dramatic
techniques. Leading European avant-garde artists, writers, and theorists had been consumed, imitated, and lionized by America's leading artists and intellectuals as they searched for styles and ideas that reflected their American experiences and perspectives in the new century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the process of infiltration and adaptation of European modernistic trends came slowly and sporadically, but by the mid-1910s leading American stage artists, producers, and historians very actively sought inspiration from the trend-setters across the Atlantic. A growing segment of the educated elite of America aimed to find alternatives to the commercialism of Broadway, and, as Americans had done in the past, they looked to their European counterparts for answers. Between 1915 and 1925 theatre critics and historians such as Sheldon Cheney, Kenneth McGowan, Oliver Sayler, and Thomas Dickinson all wrote about the European art theatres and how the American theatres could improve their standards by emulating them. Scene designers Robert Edmond Jones and Lee Simonson both toured the theatres of Europe in search of examples of the "new stagecraft" expounded by both Edward Gordon Craig, whose journal The Mask had become available to them in 1908, and Adolphe Appia, whose work they had only read about in poorly interpreted second-hand descriptions (Sayler 12). And, significantly, these new scenic designers published records of their impressions, thereby, broadening the range of discourse about modernist theatre. Some of the new companies in the Little Theatre Movement, such as the Washington Square Players and the Neighborhood Playhouse, commissioned new translations of
works by Leonid Andreev, Maurice Maeterlinck, Chekhov, Ibsen, and Strindberg
for production, while progressive publications like Alfred Stieglitz’s *Camera
Work* were making European modernist plays available to larger audiences
(Watson 72). Key publishers and booksellers like Brentano’s and Browne’s also
made the works of the popular European modernist playwrights accessible to the
American public. Meanwhile, a small group of American theatre producers and
entrepreneurs paid millions of dollars to bring the leading European artists and art
theatres to an American public without any assurance that an American public
might take interest.

It is not possible here, of course, to pinpoint all of the events which made
the phenomenon of "Modernism" spread throughout the United States. However,
it is important to outline a number of major factors that enabled the advent of
modernism in America. In the last few decades of the nineteenth century and the
first few decades of the twentieth century, new perceptions of “truth” and
“reality” emerged as numerous technological advancements changed the world’s
understanding of time and space. Notions of relativism and impermanence in the
works of philosophers like William James, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Henri
Bergson supported by the scientific discoveries of Marie Curie's radium and
Albert Einstein's space-time continuum prompted a break with traditional (or
widely accepted) modes of thought, behavior, and representation (Singal 11-12).
While Americans became increasingly familiar with new studies in psychology,
economics, and anthropology, they began to challenge the traditions under which
America operated.

As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, Americans organized
themselves into a variety of liberal humanist societies which examined
individual rights and freedoms in the modern, mechanized world. Harvard’s
Socialist Club and the Men’s League for Women’s Suffrage challenged
nineteenth century “Truths” regarding class, race, and gender. These groups
and others like it represented the emergence of a large-scale liberal
consciousness among the young and elite of America. At the turn of the
century, young dissidents formed groups, particularly in large cities like Boston,
Chicago, and New York, challenging capitalism, nineteenth century morality,
and the cultural products of such traditions. The young avant-garde, consisting
of artists, writers, critics, journalists, salon hosts, and producers, founded art
galleries such as Arthur Stieglitz’s 291 in New York, magazines like *The
Masses* and *Theatre Arts Magazine*, theatres such as Maurice Browne’s Little
Theatre in Chicago and Mrs. Lyman Gale’s Toy Theatre in Boston. In these
various venues, artists explored the problems of modern life from multiple
perspectives. These new institutions aimed to promote a new culture based on
their various responses to the works of Darwin, Marx, Freud, Jung, and
Nietzsche, among others. They hoped to use art to explore new aspects of
human experience and consciousness that the nineteenth century had not
confronted and to uncover and resolve the “absolutes” that the preceding
generations had constructed. Of course, how the artists and scholars approached the problems of representing human experience and consciousness varied wildly in an era excited by explorations of "the new" and rejections of "the old."

By 1908, some American theatre artists, including David Belasco and Jacob Adler, had embraced the new forms of "realism" and "naturalism" which modernist studies in psychology, economics, and anthropology had prompted. But for the most part the avant-garde trends of European modernism had not yet made a significant impact on American theatre. Despite a movement toward lifelike imitation in acting and production styles, American theatres in 1908 primarily still housed either spectacular and romantic melodramas or "low comedy" vaudeville acts (Sayler 3). As Oliver Sayler points out in Our American Theatre (1923), American theatre critics in 1908 remained conservative and moralistic in their appraisal of drama (3). That year, George Pierce Baker, the professor who fought to add drama and theatre to Harvard's curriculum, complained, "So long as the theatres in America are run like bargain counters, with the management continually on the outlook for ready sellers, the drama in America will remain at a low ebb" (Baker 127).

In 1908, the year Chaliapin and Komissarzhevskaya met disaster at the box office, few of the people who generated enthusiasm for modernism in America had adopted European modernist practices for theatrical production. Many young supporters of modernist theatre, including Eugene O'Neill, Robert E.
Jones, Lee Simonson, Kenneth MacGowan, Winthrop Ames, Walter Hampden, and Agnes Morgan (producer at the Neighborhood Playhouse) had not yet completed their education, which included Professor Baker's significant course at Harvard, English 47. Some other important later supporters of modernist developments in theatre, such as Arthur Hopkins and Morris Gest, worked in the commercial theatre without challenging production methods and popular styles (Sayler 2). Additionally, a large group of modernist innovators who would work in the American theatre had not yet immigrated to this country, and few popular European innovators toured in the United States. Thus, in 1908, European avant-garde experiments had made almost no visible impact on the American stage. Nevertheless, an important publication piqued American interest that year which would have immeasurable influence on the theatre. In July, 1908, the fifth issue of Gordon Craig’s journal, Mask, contained American contributions, and two American printers were making the journal available to the public.

Also, the establishment of the New Theatre in New York in 1909 reveals the impulse to improve American standards of theatrical production in an attempt to overcome the profit-motive driving other theatrical endeavors. A group of wealthy financiers including Otto H. Kahn, William K. Vanderbilt, and John Jacob Astor founded the New Theatre, hoping that the theatre would become America's national theatre and promote artistry in theatrical production, as they believed the national theatres of Europe did. The project, which folded in 1911, proved to have been poorly conceived and short-sighted, for even the building
itself was inadequate for theatre production. Nevertheless, the company's high standards of technical production and its effort to achieve ensemble acting challenged the standards of the popular theatre (Connors 328). Additionally, the promising, young director Winthrop Ames, whom the founders hoped would be a visionary director in the mode of Max Reinhardt in Germany, produced several provocative productions in the theatre's two brief seasons. Despite a few critical successes, however, the theatre simply could not generate the income needed to meet the costs of production in the immense auditorium. Perhaps most significantly, the failure of this theatre prompted Otto H. Kahn, a major patron of the performing arts, to develop his important theory of the role of an art financier. As he explained years later in 1925, in an address at the Conference on Drama in American Universities and Little Theatres, Kahn came to see that his role as a patron of the arts was "to aid talent and find his sole reward in the joy and usefulness of that service" (4). He believed that no amount of funding entitled the art financier to any "power behind the throne of the artistic director" (4). This sort of wealthy patronage coupled with innovative artists working in close proximity would soon enable the emerging modernist culture.

By 1908, modernist cultural centers were forming in Boston, Chicago, and New York. In that year, the early modernist American painters who formed The Eight held their first exhibition of non-realist art at the MacBeth Gallery in New York. The Swedish painter, B.J.O. Nordfeldt had established an artists' colony in the Chicago warehouse district, where Susan Glaspell, George Cram Cooke,
Floyd Dell, Maurice Browne, Ellen von Volkenberg, Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandberg and others would soon congregate. Also in 1908, Arthur Stieglitz's gallery 291 in New York held its first exhibition of European modernists, including Cezanne, Matisse, Brancusi, and Picasso. Leo and Gertrude Stein's collection of modernist paintings in Europe had grown to become the largest collection of modern art in the world. (Their home had become a meeting place for the New Society of American Artists in Paris by 1910). And Carl van Vechten, who was writing for The New York Times, became a central figure on the "cutting edge of advancing culture," as he devoted his Times' column to the fashionable in dress, music, dance, theatre, and art, which kept Americans up-to-date on the latest modernist trends in Europe (Watson 51). Thus, by 1908, an alternative culture began to challenge the existing order, although at first it lacked the numbers and influence to make a serious impact.

However, a number of events in the 1910s revealed that the contributions and disruptions of a rebellious group of artists and intellectuals would have to be acknowledged by the dominant culture. More than any other single event related to modernism, The Armory Show of 1913 stirred the interest of the general urban American public. The exhibition coordinators, the Association of American Painters and Sculptors, advertised the event as "a great collection of the most radical art in Europe" (Dwight 34). The Armory Show presented the more revered works of the French Impressionists, shocking works by Fauvists, Cubists, and a few Expressionists, and works by the more radical Duchamp-Villon...
brothers and Constantin Brancusi. The exhibit also housed many works of contemporary American artists, but these works received less press coverage than the European art. The Armory Show Anniversary catalogue describes the violent reactions art critics had toward the new European art:

It was not until the critics took over from the reporters that the bricks began to fly. They spewed venom on Matisse and ridicule on the cubists. Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* became the butt of cartoons, jokes, and jingles. The 'crazy' art of the Armory Show became the talk of the town and, as publicity increased, attendance skyrocketed.

(34)
The attendance in New York was estimated at around 75,000, with 12,000 reported in attendance on the final day of the exhibit (34). The exhibit then toured to Chicago and Boston, where the response was less clamorous, due perhaps to the advance press preparing the masses for the show's shock value. Despite its waning popularity, the exhibition introduced thousands of Americans to European modernism and re-directed the work of a number of young artists. *The Boston Globe* exclaimed that "American art would never be the same" *(Armory Show 34).*

Around the same time, a number of events brought attention to new, non-realistic approaches to theatre, primarily though scenic and costume design. In 1910, Anna Pavlova and Mikhail Mordkin presented a sample of the Ballet Russe at the Metropolitan Opera with designs by Leon Bakst and Boris Anisfeld. To
coincide with the event, Alfred Stieglitz mounted an exhibition at 291 of the already exalted, though unseen costume and scene designs by Bakst. The exhibition of scene and costume designs became increasingly popular as design came to be viewed as a distinct artistic endeavor. For example, in 1914, Samuel J. Hume, another student of Harvard's Professor Baker, organized the first exhibit of the innovative staging in European art theatres. The exhibit, which included original designs as well as prints and photographs of works by Craig, Appia, Reinhardt's designers, Bakst, Benois, R. E. Jones, and various Moscow Art Theatre designers, received a two-page spread with pictures in the *Boston Globe*. The exhibit originated in Cambridge and travelled to Boston, New York, Cleveland, Chicago, and Detroit (Larson 46-52).

The American artists came into contact with the ideas of Edward Gordon Craig beginning around 1908, the year of the publication of Craig's journal, *The Mask*. In 1911, when Craig's collection of articles on new trends in theatre, *On the Art of the Theatre*, his theories of stagecraft became widely known in the United States. Englishman Maurice Browne, who founded the Chicago Little Theatre with his American wife Ellen von Volkenberg, called Craig's *On the Art of the Theatre* his "bible" (Browne 172). Even after a disappointed meeting with Craig in 1914, Browne continued to revere the ideas of a man whom he no longer worshipped (173). Many American theatre artists idolized Craig in the first few decades of the twentieth century, and his direct influence on the development of modernist techniques and ideas in the theatre cannot be overestimated. Yet even
as they looked to him for guidance, Americans discovered other European
geniuses. For example, it was through Craig’s writings that many Americans first
learned of the work of the Moscow Art Theatre, Max Reinhardt, Jacques Copeau,
and the Ballet Russe. Robert Edmond Jones, after graduating from Harvard and
teaching there for a few years, toured Europe hoping to study with Craig. When
Craig rejected him, Jones worked with Reinhardt in Germany before bringing
ideas about “the new stagecraft” to the American stage. Likewise in these years,
Lee Simonson, who later became a critic of Craig, sought to discover “the new
stagecraft” firsthand, so he, too, studied stagecraft and art in Europe, where he
was deeply impressed by the bright, elaborate, and fantastical setting and costume
designs of the Ballet Russe (Simonson 4).

While many American theatre artists were exploring the possibilities of
realism in playwriting and staging, an energetic group of critics, designers, and
producers were drawn to experiments in impressionism and symbolism in
theatrical production. In 1911, William Prichard Eaton argued that realistic
settings and scene painting are too expensive, impractical, and too limiting to the
imagination. In his article, “The Question of Scenery,” he advocated the “new
stagecraft” in his conclusions:

The question arises then, why not be frankly symbolic and done with it?
Why not devise scenery which shall suggest rather than attempt to
reproduce? Why not readily grant that scenery often cannot be a
reproduction of reality, but rather strive to be an impressionistic picture, to evoke a mood of place? (qtd. in Larson 39)

Eaton’s article is one of the first serious statements of Gordon Craig’s ideas made by an American. In the following years, Americans saw first hand some of the European experiments in staging which used the new “relief stage,” vibrant and impressionistic scene painting, and the abandonment of realism as a unifying idea. Joseph Urban, a Viennese artist, interior decorator, and architect, became the artistic director for The Boston Opera in 1911. His settings for the Boston Opera, and later the Metropolitan Opera Company and Ziegfield Follies, were characterized by the simplicity in line and bold use of primary colors, much like the Russian scene painters who were influenced by Asian art and design. In 1912, Winthrop Ames imported Max Reinhardt’s “Oriental fantasy” Sumurun. The original settings by Ernst Stern accompanied Richard Ordynski’s staging for the New York production (Larson 39). The simplicity of the design, the use of lighting to shape space and create mood, and the fantastic use of color in the German production paralleled some elements of Joseph Urban’s style, which was receiving acclaim in Boston. The work of these and other European designers greatly influenced a generation of American designers and producers who abandoned realism in staging and continued to explore new forms.

Theatrical design became a central focus in the emergence of non-realistic modernism on the American stage because of its potential to borrow stylistically from the advancements in the fine arts and because design could be viewed as a
unifying force for the entire theatrical production. Both Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia had proclaimed the value of design for creating unity in a production, an important concept for new, modernist modes of thought. From Craig, American scenic artists learned to use the "unity of mood" as a unifying principle. As Sheldon Cheney, a leading proponent of the "new stagecraft," pointed out in The Art Theatre in 1917, American artists were experimenting with a number of ideas Craig promoted in The Art of the Theatre: the use of suggestion over imitation, the artistic value of simplicity over elaboration, and the need for an emotional or spiritual relationship between the setting and the drama (Cheney 38). From Appia, Craig, and Reinhardt, American designers found that lighting could be utilized as an all-pervading and potentially spiritually unifying force. Although some nineteenth century theatre artists, like Henry Irving, had exploited gas lighting for emotional and thematic effects, stage lighting had primarily served to provide visibility. In the new century, lighting emerged as an area for exploring atmosphere, movement, shape, form, line, and color. By the early 1920s, theatre personnel viewed scene, lighting, and costume design as exciting artistic endeavours. American designers, guided by their European counterparts, pushed the American theatre toward avant-garde experimentation.

Although non-realist continental approaches to theatre made its earliest visible and most distinct impression through scene design in America, the areas of playwriting and performance also gave way to experimentation. By 1910, symbolist works by Maurice Maeterlinck and Gerhart Hauptmann had appeared at
the New Theatre and the Lyceum in New York, and by the early 1920s, Americans had staged plays by Paul Claudel, Leonid Andreev, Josef and Karel Capek, Luigi Pirandello, and other new European playwrights. A number of young American playwrights, many of whom were graduates of Baker's English 47, wrote dramas that experimented with conventional methods of playwriting. Zoe Akins, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elmer Rice, Eugene O'Neill, Susan Glaspell, Philip Barry, Percy MacKaye and several other less enduring writers explored new dramatic forms, ranging from lyrical and allegorical symbolism to expressionism in the late 1910s and early 1920s. These plays tested the ingenuity of the directors, designers, and performers in the little theatres where they were first staged. A few auteur directors, such as Arthur Hopkins and Winthrop Ames, appeared in the early phases of American modernism to produce these new dramatic pieces for which a new stagecraft was already developing.

However, the performance styles of the amateur and even professional actors had little in common with these new, subjective experimental pieces. Theories of movement and performance lagged behind the new dramaturgy and design, often leaving the production confused and incoherent. Walter Prichard Eaton pointed out the problem in an article which appeared in Theatre Arts Magazine in 1916:

[I]n my own observation of these experimental theatres, I have been struck with one odd fact. While the experimenters were eager to produce fresher and more vital drama, to create more illusive and effective lighting
effects, to paint more suggestive and beautiful scenery, to get away from
the dull rut of conventional "realism," at the same time they were, almost
without exception, apparently quite neglectful of showing us fresher, more
vital, more illusive acting, or at any rate ignorant of how to do it. (9)

And in 1923, Kenneth MacGowan, after applauding the brilliance and
spirituality of a production designed by Lee Simonson, wrote, "The acting, I need
hardly add, had nothing of this quality whatever" ("And Again Repertory" 100).
Most of the little theatres initially relied on amateur actors, but even when they
had professional actors, the method of presentation seemed to conflict with the
scenery and script. Modernist critics viewed acting in America as a problem in
both the commercial and the little theatres. Numerous articles in Theatre Arts
Magazine and Theatre Magazine in the 1910s and 1920s bemoan the need for a
repertory theatre, a permanent company, and a system for actor training in
America. This problem of acting, which for some critics, seemed to keep the
theatre from achieving the adequate level of high art and beauty, would lead the
American theatre to seek answers in the methods of the Moscow Art Theatre.

In spite of the Red Scare which had prompted hostility toward Russians
and a rising interest in the avant-garde among influential elite artists and theatre
critics, the Moscow Art Theatre generated an overwhelming enthusiasm among
many young American theatre artists when they visited the United States in 1923.
The Moscow Art Theatre performed in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and
Boston in early 1923 and again, in an additional seven cities, from November
1923 to May 1924. The tour inspired American theatre professionals and amateurs, scholars and artists, and realists and anti-realists alike. Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre became a distinct point of reference in the vocabularies of American theatre artists and scholars for the next seventy-five years.

These two tours sparked an eagerness among many aspiring and established performers to know more about Stanislavsky and his system for training. Promoting that interest, Richard Boleslavsky, a former pupil of Stanislavsky delivered a series of ten lectures on Stanislavsky’s approach to acting while the company was in the United States. Additionally, he wrote several articles about Stanislavsky and his system for the leading theatre magazines. Although this was all part of Morris Gest’s publicity campaign (for he sponsored the lecture series), American actors and producers supplied the demand (Camicke 36). Shortly after the departure of the Moscow Art Theatre, Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, another émigré and former member of the Moscow Art Theatre, founded the American Laboratory Theatre, where for seven years they would educate aspiring and veteran actors in the “system” of Stanislavsky. This actors’ training facility, and its offshoots, the Group Theatre and the Actor’s Studio, forever solidified a relationship between Stanislavsky and the American theatre.

The Group Theatre, founded by students of the American Laboratory Theatre, including Cheryl Crawford, Lee Strasberg, and Harold Clurman, became
the American organization most responsible for propagating a Stanislavsky approach to acting in the United States. In, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, Sharon Marie Carnicke explains that in order for Stanislavsky's ideals to survive in America, they "would need translation into the idioms of American culture" (38). The Group Theatre, formed in 1931, took what they learned from Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya and created an American approach to acting based on their understanding of Stanislavsky's training programs in Moscow. Significantly, the three key founding artists had formed their political and artistic consciousness in New York's Lower East Side. Under the influence of socialist ideology, the young artists found the Stanislavsky ensemble approach coupled with the Moscow Art Theatre's record of producing important realistic drama ideal to be a model for creating socially relevant theatre. After the Group Theatre disbanded, the Actor's Studio, founded by Group alumni, followed the path of actor training developed by its predecessor, and cemented an approach to acting, in the name of Stanislavsky, for American culture.

The significance of Stanislavsky's influence in American theatre is certainly vast, though the extent to which Americans (or anyone, for that matter) truly understood Stanislavsky, a man who continuously reconfigured his approach to actor development or his method, remains debatable. The Group Theatre, for example, created its Stanislavsky approach to acting five years before the publication of *An Actor Prepares* (1936). *Building a Character* appeared in English translation in 1949, thirteen years after its Russian publication, and two
years after the Actor's Studio developed its approach based on Stanislavsky's "system" (Camicke 73). Nevertheless, after his appearance in America, generations of American actors and directors would invoke the name of "Stanislavksy" as a means of giving their own ideas significance or credence.

His American opponents used his name as a reference for "realism" in the theatre, or as a stifling tradition of American actor training against which to rebel. After over fifty years of American squabbling over Stanislavsky's true intentions, Mel Gordon points out in his own effort to clarify the system in *The Stanislavsky Technique: Russia*, published in 1987, that "the art and practice of acting is still turning on the revelations and teaching as Konstantin Stanislavsky . . . yet, a vehement, and seemingly inexhaustible, debate rages over the value and exact meaning of Stanislavsky's work" (Gordon ix). And even as Stanislavsky supporters debated over his true meanings and points of emphasis, his detractors in this country invoke his name to refer to the cohesive, unified tradition of realistic actor training against which they fight. For example, in 1999, Charles Marowitz explained in *The Other Way: An Alternative Approach to Acting and Directing* that "the motive behind much of what I do as a director is a profound dissatisfaction with the psychological and naturalistic vogue which, since the beginning of the century, has been associated with, and to a certain extent glorified by Stanislavsky and, in America, codified by the method" (1).

Volumes have been written regarding Stanislavsky, his American tour, and his influence on American theatre; therefore, I will offer only a brief summary.
and analysis of Stanislavsky’s relationship to American modernism as it relates to my own study. However, for a more in-depth look at Stanislavsky in America, I recommend Sharon Carnicke’s *Stanislavsky in Focus*, Christine Edward’s *The Stanislavsky Heritage*, and Elena Poliakova and Anatoly Smeliansky’s articles in *Wandering Stars: Russian Emigre Theatre, 1905-1940* edited by Laurence Senelick. In addition to evaluating Stanislavsky’s approaches to acting and the development of the Moscow Art Theatre, these works explore such issues as the impact of the actual Moscow Art Theatre performances in the United States, the history and responses to publications of Stanislavsky’s works in the United States, and the importance of the work of former Moscow Art Theatre performers who emigrated to the United States.

By the time the Moscow Art Theatre arrived in New York in 1923, American theatre artists were familiar with the company’s work in Russia and Europe. This, in part, was due to Morris Gesf’s extraordinary publicity campaign, which began a year before the company’s arrival, but it was also due to articles and books about Russian theatre available in America as early as 1906. During its first European tour, the Moscow Art Theatre inspired the American critic Christian Brinton, and he included it in his article on Russian art, "Idols of the Russian Masses," which appeared in *Cosmopolitan* magazine in 1906. Reviews of the Moscow Art Theatre began appearing sporadically in American theatre magazines during the nineteen teens and early twenties, and scholarly works that focused on the new theatre in Europe increasingly included chapters on the
Moscow Art Theatre. American theatre artists in touch with European innovations knew of the Moscow Art Theatre's significance long before the company visited America. In 1914, Maurice Browne and his wife Ellen von Volkenberg cancel a trip to Moscow during their European tour when they received word that the Art Theatre's rehearsals had been postponed (Browne 167). Undoubtedly, Browne and von Volkenberg's interest in the Moscow Art Theatre came from the article about the theatre in their "bible," Craig's *On the Art of the Theatre*.

Aside from Brinton's article in *Cosmopolitan*, very little attention had been given to the Moscow Art Theatre in America until 1909, when Gordon Craig praised the theatre's work and Stanislavsky's acting in *The Mask*. His article, which reappeared in *On the Art of the Theatre*, influenced the way early American modernist theatre artists and scholars would view the Moscow Art Theatre. In his article, Craig, despite his distaste for realism in the theatre, glorifies Stanislavsky and Vladimir Ivanovich Nemirovich-Danchenko for their successful establishment of a non-commercial theatre in which all details are invented "with consumate care and patience and always with vivid intelligence" (*The Mask* 221). He even points out his disagreement with their preference for realistic portrayals, adding quickly, "... in the dust jewels are sometimes found . . . . It is quite enough to say that what they do upon the stage they do to perfection" (221). With this assessment, which he would later abandon, Craig enabled his American followers, who sought beauty in the theatre through suggestion rather than
photographic representation, to find value in the quality, seriousness, and patience of the Moscow Art Theatre's approach to theatrical production. Additionally, Craig's praise of the Moscow Art Theatre's performers as "the best set of actors upon the European stage" certainly drew the curiosity of the American modernists who were seeking higher standards in the theatre. The first American modernists had a new model (in addition to the Abbey Theatre) for organizing their theatrical enterprises, since the founders of the Chicago Little Theatre, the Washington Square Players, and the Neighborhood Playhouse all acknowledge the Moscow Art Theatre as an inspiration. For example, Lawrence Langner, one of the founders of The Washington Square Players and later the Theatre Guild, revealed how Americans used ideas from the Moscow Art Theatre before they had even seen its work:

Since our earlier efforts within the Washington Square Players had been largely inspired by what we had heard of the Moscow Art Theatre, we visited all the performances [during their 1923 tour]. (Langner 168)

Just after Craig's *On the Art of the Theatre* appeared in the United States, a number of American works on the "art theatres" in Europe began to appear, each adding more to the discussion of the Moscow Art Theatre and Stanislavsky. This growing commentary greatly influenced the way Americans would approach their own "art theatres." Works on the Moscow Art Theatre with which Americans were familiar often indicate an alliance with Craig's concept of art in the theatre, but they, like him, found inspiration in various aspects of the work of the
company. For instance, in 1913, Huntly Carter’s *The New Spirit in Drama and Art* included a chapter on the theatres in Moscow, emphasizing, of course, the Moscow Art Theatre. Like Craig, Carter indicated his preference for symbolism over realism, and he applauds the Moscow Art Theatre’s efforts to counterbalance its program of realism with elements of symbolism:

Tchekoff practically recreated the Moscow Art Theatre and inspired it anew with his genius. It may be that his lyricism came at the right moment to balance its overnaturalism, and thus enabled it to avoid being sloughed in the rut of the brutal realism of Gorki, and to pass easily from this to the symbolism of Ibsen, and later, Maeterlinck. (200)

Sheldon Cheney’s *The Art Theatre* also devoted a section to the Moscow Art Theatre, though instead of searching for a way to resolve a modernist interest in non-realistic forms with Moscow Art Theatre performances, he placed his accolades in the company’s artistic aims, organizational structure, and lengthy rehearsal process.

During the 1920s, many American theatre critics and historians, referring to the Moscow Art Theatre, sought to ease the dichotomy separating realism from symbolism, finding the latter more lofty and artistic than the other. Shortly after the Moscow Art Theatre’s first season in the United States, Oliver Sayler, revealing a Craigian sensibility, would use the language of symbolism to elevate (lowly) realism. He proclaimed that the American theatre “shall demand the spiritual realism disclosed to us by the Moscow Art Theatre, the vivid and
psychologically accurate revelation of the mystic and subconscious recesses of the human soul..." (272). Sayler, who was a member of Gest's publicity team, aligned the Moscow Art Theatre's performances with Craig's principle that the theatre is a place for seeing shows as opposed to hearing literature. In *Our American Theatre*, he appealed to the aethetes of "the new stagecraft":

How ironical it would be... if the Moscow Art Theatre should thus serve as encouraging god-father to the theatre where Sight and not Sound is the patron saint! Founded in reverent respect for the literary drama and preserving its faith in realism as the ablest esthetic means of interpreting drama, it has held its ground doggedly against innovators like Meyerhold and Tairoff who would shift the emphasis from the ear to the eye. (272)

Many of the essays and books by the leading American theatre scholars, including Cheney, Dickinson, Moderwell, Sayler, MacGowan, and Eaton reveal their preference for symbolism and stylization, as advocated by and presented by the Russian avant-garde artists. But they also esteemed the Moscow Art Theatre's sense of professionalism, its elimination of the star system, and its devotion to high quality dramas, as Kenneth MacGowan, stated in April 1923:

The visit of the Moscow Art Theatre is, therefore, uncommonly significant as a lesson in the most essential part of the art of the theatre. It shows us sharply individualized characterizations, a virtuosity of impersonation on the part of each player, the highest proficiency and the most sincere and sustained spiritual effort, and the welding of all the various performers of
a play into an ensemble of fluid, varied, yet concerted and pointed quality.

... We may not care to imitate such highly detailed and naturalistic playing, but we must learn how to train and develop our actors - whatever the style. ("And Again" 90)

In this article, MacGowan's indicated his preference for what he calls "poetic expressionism." And he called for symbolism in the theatre by highlighting American theatre performances and productions which have gone beyond the realism of the Moscow Art Theatre. As examples, he applauded John Barrymore's attempt at stylized acting in and Jones' stage designs for Arthur Hopkins' 1923 production of Hamlet, which he valued over the Russians' "peep-hole realism and old-fashioned false perspective" (99). Despite their disassociation with realism, MacGowan and other American modernists admired the skilled acting and repertory system of the Moscow Art Theatre. Even Lawrence Langner, whose Theatre Guild presented a season of symbolist plays directed by Theodore Komisarjevsky during the Moscow Art Theatre season in the U.S., wrote, "Stanislavsky at this time was my god in the theatre and I tried to learn all I could from him," in spite of their seemingly antithetical stylistic approaches (Langner 169).

In addition to provoking an interest in Stanislavsky's approach to actor training, American contact with the Moscow Art Theatre stimulated the already forming interest in other Russian approaches the theatrical productions. Oliver Sayler's study, The Russian Theatre (1920), not only details the work of
Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, but also explores the experimental activities of Vsevolod Meyerhold, Theodore Komisarjevsky, Evgeny Vakhtangov, and Alexander Tairov. The book is an expansion of his article "Theory and Practice in the Russian Theatres" which appeared in *Theatre Arts Magazine* in July, 1920. And during the Moscow Art Theatre tours in the United States, between 1923 and 1924, *Theatre Arts Magazine* and *Theatre Magazine* both contained sporadic articles about other Russian theatres and Russian theatre artists. The articles nearly always compare or relate the Russian artists to the Moscow Art Theatre. For example, Anna Louise Strong wrote about the Kamenny Theatre in relation to the Moscow Art Theatre in "The Cubist Theatre of Moscow: as it looks to an American layman in the audience" which appeared in *Theatre Arts Magazine* in July 1923. Babette Deutsch explores Meyerhold's rebellion against Stanislavsky's realism in "The Theatre of the Future" in the March edition of *Theatre Magazine* in 1924. By contrast in 1928, Irma Kraft discusses Meyerhold in *Plays, Players, Playhouses: International Drama of Today* with a reminder to his audience that Stanislavsky strongly encouraged Meyerhold’s experiments and had “the greatest respect for his productions” (42).

Although Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre remain icons for America’s overwhelming interest in realistic actor training and performance, they also helped to foster an interested in the theatrical activities of Russians working in a non-realistic vein. Of course, interest in the Moscow Art Theatre had been generated in part by American interest in other Russian artists. The Moscow Art
Theatre's performances in the United States came when interests in Russian art and culture peaked. Just before their arrival, Nikita Balieff's *Chauve-Souris* cabaret theatre drew large Broadway audiences, Michel Fokine choreographed *Russian Toys* for the Mark Strand Theatre in New York, Fedor Chaliapin gained fame at the Metropolitan Opera House, and Prokofiev's *The Love For Three Oranges* premiered in the United States. Even as the Moscow Art Theatre appeared in America, Theodore Komisarjevsky directed a symbolist season at the Theatre Guild, and the Brooklyn Museum housed an exhibition of Russian painters featuring Leon Bakst, Boris Anisfeld, Serge Sudeikin, and Vassily Kandinsky. Additionally, an advertisement in the May 1923 edition of *Theatre Magazine* advertised an upcoming article about the Kamerny Theatre, "shortly to come to America." Although the Kamerny tour never materialized, the advertisement revealed that Americans had developed an interest in a wide range of Russian theatre that soon became overshadowed by the glorification of Stanislavsky in American theatre training programs.

Progressive Americans and residents had long been interested in Russian realism for its ability to engage cultural production with political activism. Russian realism offered Americans a glance into the struggles of the peasant and proletariat in the strict tsarist regime, sensationalized in the United States press for its brutality and oppression. Realism offered Americans a way of understanding the Russian immigrant at their door. It provided a model of writing for Yiddish audiences that provoked commentary and debate about
American and international politics and lifestyles. And eventually, it provided American theatre actors and directors with a systematic approach to performance, while also pointing them toward alternative Russian forms.

American’s introduction to non-realistic Russian approaches to performance occurred even as Russian realism was solidifying American expectations of Russian art. Seemingly apolitical and vigorously colorful and energetic, Russian dancers and their designers brilliantly contrasted the grim world of the Russian realists. In order for non-realist Russian performance to succeed on the American stage, alternative expectations of Russian art and modernist performance had to be produced and propagated. The following chapters examine how these performances reached the American stage, how a desire for these products was generated, and how they helped an American audience form new ways of “looking” in the theatre.

1 See Chapter Four of Carnicke’s Stanislavsky in Focus for an in depth look at “The Publication Maze” which complicated American reception of Stanislavsky’s ideas.
"It's a funny thing," remarked a manager the other day, apropos of the Russian invasion. "Arthur Hopkins produced Gorki's *Night Lodging* a season or two ago, and played to about $200 a night. He produced it in English, so that everybody could understand it. Then along comes Morris Gest and produces it in Russian, so that nobody can understand it. Result: $50,000 a week." - "Heard on Broadway," *Theatre Magazine*, March 1923

In 1927, three Americans became honorary members of the Moscow Art Theatre: David Belasco, Morris Gest and Otto H. Kahn. David Belasco received this recognition for his commitment to excellence in the American theatre; whereas, Morris Gest and Otto Kahn earned it for successfully bringing the Moscow Art Theatre to America. This venture marked only one of the many contributions that Kahn and Gest made to the American theatre. Through their work in the theatre and opera in New York, Gest and Kahn, a pair of unlikely collaborators, served as cultural ambassadors in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Both men repeatedly sought out foreign talent, and through
sometimes difficult negotiations, they arranged for some of the most
distinguished European artists and theatre companies, including Anna Pavlova,
Michel Fokine, Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes, Jacques Copeau, Max
Reinhardt, the Habima, the Moscow Art Theatre, Nikita Balieff's Chauve-Souris,
and Le Theatre de Firmin Germier, to come to the United States. These artists
and their performances contributed directly to the modernist transformations of
American theatre and Americans' perceptions of Russians in the early twentieth
century.

For various reasons, which will be explored throughout this chapter, the
contributions of Otto H. Kahn and Morris Gest do not fall neatly into any
narratives on the advent of modernism in the American theatre, although they
both played major roles. Beyond funding the importation of some leading
modernist foreign artists, the millionaire Otto Kahn also provided financial
assistance for George Pierce Baker's Workshop 47, the Provincetown Players, the
Theatre Guild, and the Civic Repertory Theatre. And in addition to his
involvement in importing modernist theatre, Gest worked with the designers
Joseph Urban, Boris Anisfeld, and Norman Bel Geddes on a wide range of
theatrical projects. However, it's impossible to view the work of Kahn or Gest as
altruistic. They were both capitalists who, though certainly appreciating and
encouraging art, saw great profit potential in the entertainment industry. Without
the profit motive, a very anti-modernist notion in the theatre or in art, some of
the most important modern developments in the American theatre, particularly those involving cultural exchange, may never have occurred.

Accordingly, in this chapter, I will explore the commodification of Russian performance as it entered into American consciousness. The ways that Russian art and performance were made available, marketed, and consumed by and for the American public reveals much about American perceptions of Russians and how their art came to have a lasting impact on American culture. Additionally, I will investigate some of the ways that the Russian companies and artists who came to the United States under the aegis of Kahn and Gest raised challenges for American artists about the nature of theatre and its possibilities for both realistic and non-realistic production.

By the 1930s, it was difficult to imagine a modernist theatre company in America without an interest in or connection to Russian theatre or dance artists. But in order to understand this major development, we need to consider not only the influence of key artists such as Stanislavsky but also the contributions of Morris Gest and Otto H. Kahn. From 1909-1925, many of the high-profile Russian artists in the United States were in some way associated with one or both of these men. There were, of course, other impresarios, like Sol Hurok who made their “bread and butter” and sometimes “caviar” off of Russian performers (Impresario 5), but only Kahn and Gest took the risks, made the profits, and absorbed the losses involved in bringing entire Russian companies as well as individual artists to an American audience for the first time. This chapter,
therefore, focuses on these two men in addition to the significant cultural exchange they helped to initiate. In contrast to the political American progressives who sought Russian artists who expanded their comprehension of revolutionary politics, Gest and Kahn sought Russian artists who would heighten America's appreciation of artistic performance but who could also help the two impresarios earn substantial profits.

The partnering of Kahn and Gest can be explained, in part, by exploring what each man offered the other in their artistic and capitalistic pursuits. A wealthy banker, Otto Kahn labored to control his public image as a respected businessman even while collaborating with some of the most scandalous and disreputable bohemian artists. As a scrupulous businessman, Kahn tightly controlled his finances and the finances of the Metropolitan Opera Company. For him, the theatre was a hobby and a passion, not his livelihood; he was no showman. He, therefore, always left the production side of the theatre business to others. Kahn needed a man like Morris Gest, a flamboyant idealist whose taste for the extravagant and the highly theatrical earned him the reputation of being a "colorful showman" (Matz 120). After making some profits on a few of Gest's musical extravaganzas in the late 1910s, Kahn backed Gest's efforts to import large-scale productions in the 1920s. They had both shown an interest in Russian performance and had imported Russian artists before they joined forces, but together, relying on Kahn's money, respectability, and influence and upon Gest's negotiating powers, showmanship, and publicity talents, they successfully
imported Nikita Balieff’s Chauve-Souris, The Moscow Art Theatre, and Moscow Art Theatre Music Studio. Histories of these endeavors tend to credit one man’s role in the project over the other’s, but actually the efforts of both men made these ventures possible. Without Kahn’s influential and venerated presence or Gest’s dogged pursuit of contracts and publicity, it is doubtful that these projects could have made such an impression on American audiences.

“Otto the magnificent,” “The Great Otto Kahn,” “The American Maecenas” - these are various titles applied to Otto H. Kahn, the American financier whose public and financial influence aided modernist developments in art in America. Characterized as a man with a double life, a hard-nosed banker by day and impresario by night, Kahn crossed and navigated multiple borders in his personal and professional life to become one of the most recognized and influential American businessmen and philanthropists in the first three decades of the twentieth century. One writer described Kahn as “the perfect Wall Street type, he is likewise the cultured boulevardier, the artistic dilettante, the social lion, the benign benefactor, and – yes – the sugar daddy” (Cruiskshank 26).

Kahn, who claimed allegiance to developing American artistic aesthetics, enabled numerous highly esteemed European dancers, singers, and actors to perform in the United States. Nevertheless, this millionaire patron of the arts, often accused of interest in foreign artists only, also helped to finance the Washington Square Players (and later the Theatre Guild), the Provincetown Players, the Civic Repertory Theatre, and individual artists such as Paul Robeson, Isadora Duncan,
Robert Edmund Jones, and Norman Bel Geddes. As a Jew surrounded by Protestants, a businessman surrounded by bohemians, and a capitalist surrounded by socialists, Kahn operated within a number of seemingly contradictory contexts. An exploration of Kahn’s activities in various public spheres in America reveals the way he shaped himself (and how others construed him) to allow himself flexibility for border crossing while maintaining the necessary image of serious-minded businessman and respectable citizen.

Born to a financially secure German-Jewish family in the artistically rich city of Mannheim, Otto Kahn developed a taste for art, music, poetry, and opera as a child. His family encouraged his study of the arts even as he learned the family’s banking trade. In 1890, he moved to London where he began his career at the Deutsche Bank, and he maintained his interest in the arts and frequently attended music recitals, operas, and theatre productions. In 1893, the American banking firm Speyer and Company lured Kahn to New York City where he would become one of the most significant patrons of the arts in America.

After leaving Speyer and Company, Kahn made his millions and reputation as a partner at Kuhn, Loeb & Company in New York. One of his responsibilities with the firm required him to tour Europe annually to maintain relations with major banking institutions in England, France, and Germany. The annual pilgrimage served a two-fold purpose. As a board member at the Metropolitan Opera, beginning in 1903, Kahn used his European excursions to survey developments in European theatre and opera and to scout out European...
talent which could be brought to America. He often began contract negotiations with European artists immediately following impressive performances. Thus, his professional career aided his secondary interest in art and his professed desire to “bring the best of European achievements in dramatic arts before the eyes of the public and artists of America” (Art and America 17). Kahn easily justified his “double life,” and he effectively maintained a serious career as a banker while becoming the largest shareholder and “watchdog” of the Metropolitan Opera Company.

Kahn apparently entered the American art scene by way of the Metropolitan Opera Company with some hesitation. Many American businessmen in the early part of the twentieth century regarded art as merely trifling or a feminine endeavor. This attitude was noted by Laurence Langner, one of the founders of the Theatre Guild, when he wrote that “we who pioneered art in the theatre had to meet and overcome . . . the philistine attitude of the American public toward the arts, an attitude which was generally prevalent except for a small handful of people in the larger cities who were looked upon as cranks, eccentrics, or ‘sissies’ by their fellow rugged individuals” (90). As an example, Langner tells of his friend from Ohio who, after seeing Nijinksy dance at the Met, exclaimed, “Doesn’t that guy work for a living?” (90). Another modernist, George Cram Cook parodies that philistine attitude toward the arts in his one act play, Change Your Style (1915). In the play, Marmaduke Marvin, a well-to-do businessman, threatens to cut off financial support to his son, a young abstract
painter, unless he learns to paint in the more conservative and more lucrative style of realistic portrait painting. Marvin acknowledges his son's worth only after learning that one of his paintings has sold. However, after the son loses the deal, Marvin exclaims, "The revelation he has made of his business capacity forces me to the conclusion that I owe it to society to support him - as a defective!" (Cook 299). Besides satirizing the profit-motive approach to artistic creation, the play caricatures the no-nonsense American businessman in contrast to the Greenwich Village bohemian.

When Kahn was asked to join the board of the Metropolitan Opera Company, his friends warned him that he would lose standing with "serious-minded people" (qtd. in Matz 55). Kahn's mentor, Edward Harriman, a broker and chairman of the Union Pacific Railroad board, advised him to accept the position at the Met as long as he made it a serious endeavor and kept it from interfering with his work as a banker. Kahn recalled his mentor's words as "[I]t will do you no harm. On the contrary, it will exercise your imagination and diversify your activities. It ought to make a better businessman out of you" (qtd. in Matz 55). The statement hardly sounds like it came from Harriman, a man "who wouldn't give you a nickel for art," but, in his writings, Kahn often invoked the image of the austere businessman such as "old war horse" Harriman, most likely as a persuasive tactic meant to lend more seriousness to business endeavors in the arts (Gilbert 2).
Kahn endlessly encouraged business associates and other “serious-minded” members of the American public to experience the value of artistic pursuits. In numerous speeches, Kahn argued that the spiritual need for beauty, the importance of expanding the imagination, and the well-being of the social environment could be derived from a healthy artistic community. In 1924, Kahn was mocked by the press for his views when he intimated at a public meeting with the mayor that the stimulation and cultivation of an arts program in the community could be effective toward diminishing crime (Kahn *Of Many* 74). In contrast to many prominent figures in American business and politics, Kahn simply saw the arts as a necessity. In one speech Kahn urged, “We all, rich and poor alike, need to give our souls an airing once in a while. We need to exercise the muscles of our inner selves just as we exercise those of our bodies” (qtd. in Kobler 64). Throughout his life, Kahn was seriously committed to expanding Americans’ understanding and appreciation of art and culture.

His patronage of the arts, while not always as selfless as he made it seem, certainly aided the growth of the arts in the United States. He almost single-handedly guided the nearly shipwrecked Metropolitan Opera Company into becoming one of the most revered institutions for artistic performance in the world. By paying Oscar Hammerstein I an exorbitant fee in 1910 not to produce opera at the Manhattan Opera House for ten years, Kahn enabled the Metropolitan to thrive without competition until it could afford to entice the world’s most renowned performers, directors, and composers to present their work in America.
He had hoped to build such an institution for the theatre, when he supported the construction of the ill-fated New Theatre, a huge and poorly designed theatre which was intended to serve as a national theatre. To his dismay, the theatre was lampooned for its millionaire sponsorship and high price tickets, and the venture failed in 1910 after just one season of performances. As this failure made clear to him, he had to mask his wealth and personal desires as charity and philanthropy in order to maintain his desired image in the public view, for Kahn had learned that the American public was often suspicious of the show of wealth.

Otto Kahn wrote no autobiography in order to present himself to the world in a pleasing light, yet he managed to fashion and control his image in the public eye. He relished publicity. In numerous lectures, which were published later both individually and as a collection in, Of Many Things (1926), he publicly presented his views on everything from economics and war to art and society. He carefully controlled his image through these public addresses and through interviews in which he demanded that the journalists never directly quote him (Gilbert 1). In an address to the American Newspaper Publishers Association on “High Finance,” he acknowledged that “men occupying conspicuous and leading places in finance as in every other calling touching the public’s interests, are the legitimate objects for public scrutiny in the exercise of their functions” (30). In his speech, he encouraged other men of wealth to face such public scrutiny openly, for he warned that any attempt to remain private leads to suspicion. In his address on Edward Harriman, he cites Harriman’s neglect of publicity as his
primary fault. He wrote that one “reason for the wide-spread and popular misconception as to Mr. Harriman’s motives, character and methods, arose from the fact that he failed to recognize” the importance of public opinion (128). By contrast, Kahn knew how to make publicity work for him; he spoke often with reporters, who usually found him personable and candid, and he responded quickly to negative press. As a negotiator in business matters, Kahn knew the importance of diplomacy and the necessity of careful and select language required for maintaining a powerful position in the public eye. Many accounts of the Kahn and Hammerstein relationship, for example, regard Kahn’s buy-out as a kind gesture to save the nearly bankrupt Hammerstein. In the eyes of the public, Kahn emerged from a long time rivalry with Hammerstein as a gentleman rather than a capitalist power-monger, thanks in no small measure to his careful control of the press and public relations. Kahn carefully crafted an image of himself that enabled him to acquire tremendous wealth and influence. From this position, he served American theatre and art for nearly three decades.

Two published biographies on Kahn, Mary Jane Matz’s *The Many Lives of Otto Kahn* (1963) and John Kobler’s *Otto the Magnificent* (1988), both present a larger than life hero for the arts and a dignified, reserved, shrewd, and highly respected American. He was a significant financial force behind many artistic endeavors in American art, theatre, opera, and dance. Publicly, after the failure of his pet project the New Theatre in 1910, Kahn explained that he offered financial support but did not make any artistic decisions regarding the projects. This isn’t
altogether true because he often influenced Metropolitan Manager Giulio Gatti-Casazza, whom he had hired, in selecting the season and the performing artists. Also, without Kahn’s pressure, Gatti-Casazza, who was reputedly uninterested in dance, would not likely have contracted Anna Pavlova in 1910 or Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes in 1916. Furthermore, Kahn sometimes stepped in to resolve conflicts or to establish relationships between important international and American artists. For example, after Nijinsky and Diaghilev proved incompatible during the first season of the Ballets Russes at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1916, Kahn signed Nijinsky rather than Diaghilev as the Ballets Russes director for their second season at the Met. Diaghilev was not invited to return. Failure to include Diaghilev in leadership of the company certainly had an effect on its second, and less successful, tour. So, though he did not oversee artistic production, Kahn still directly influenced the course of these artistic ventures in America. He controlled artistic decisions simply by meeting or not meeting the financial or other demands of artists in the projects he financed.

Kahn’s first involvement in the cultural exchange between Russians and Americans occurred just after he saw Anna Pavlova’s dance company and Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes perform in Paris in 1909. Immediately, Kahn wanted to bring them to the United States. Although negotiations were under way to engage Diaghilev’s company, the arrangements to bring Pavlova’s flowed more smoothly, and her company arrived in America long before Diaghilev’s. As the first Russian ballet dancers in the United States, Pavlova, Mordkin, and their
small corps paved the way for others, but they also established the standard by which later Russian dancers and other performers would be measured. Ballet in the United States before 1910 had endured a sporadic existence; some European classical touring companies occasioned the American stages, but few serious and credible schools and academies offered any ballet training in the U.S. In the main, American ballet dancers merely adorned grand opera productions. Other dancers, residing in vaudeville and burlesque acts, hardly achieved recognition as artists. Pavlova, among a handful of other star dancers, would initiate a change of attitude toward ballet and dance in the United States.

Metropolitan Opera House manager Gatti-Casazza doubted the public’s interest in dance, so when Kahn contracted Pavlova and Mordkin to perform at the Met in 1910, the manager scheduled their first New York performance for immediately after an entire opera. Somewhere after eleven o’clock at night, according to Sol Hurok, Pavlova’s later American manager, Pavlova and Mordkin, with a small corps de ballet, made their first appearance (Pavlova 53). In spite of Gatti-Casazza’s hesitation regarding the appearance of Pavlova at the Metropolitan Opera House, she soon gained fame in the United States. Her success in America “was even greater than her triumphs in Europe,” according to her husband V. Dandre, who recognized that the publicity efforts in the United States had been more grandiose and pervasive than elsewhere (279). From his wife’s experiences during her first American engagement, Dandre learned the meaning of “advertisement on the American scale” (279). He reported that
"posters were pasted up at every step, the papers were constantly printing notices and electric signs were placed in three of the best sites in town. All this cost [the impresario] about 30,000 dollars" (279). Outside of New York advertising included a poster depicting "a flying Pavlova about five times her natural size" (282). The dancer, who had recently been honored personally by Tsar Nicholas II for expounding Russian art to the world, had to restrain her American press agents from generating absurd stories for the sake of sensationalism which, in her estimation, would cheapen her artistry (282).

Although Kahn had little involvement with the Pavlova tour after it left New York, the tour managers Max Rabinoff and Ben Atwell kept Kahn up-to-date on the successes and failures in each town. Kahn frequently supplied funds to maintain the tour when necessary. Additionally, Kahn managed Pavlova’s personal finances, which he continued to do for many years after her first tour. Kahn’s persistent support of the tour assured the great success of Pavlova’s first tour, which prompted a second and more elaborate season in New York, followed again by a tour of the United States in 1910-11. Had her first experience been less successful, perhaps she would not have continuously toured the United States, nor would she have made the impact on American attitudes toward dance which her popularity allowed. The great Russian opera star, Feodor Chaliapin, it should be remembered, refused to return the United States for many years after his bleak failure in 1908. Fortunately, Pavlova’s engagement was more carefully managed and maintained.
American dance historians often note Anna Pavlova’s influence on the development of dance in the United States. Sol Hurok marks Pavlova’s debut as “the beginning of the ballet era in our country” (Pavlova 54). After her 1910 tour, Pavlova returned to perform in America repeatedly until 1926, bringing respectability to the art of dance in the United States. Her popularity in this country established the possibility for other Russian artists and dance performers to perform here. For instance, Gertrude Hoffmann’s organization of various Russian dancers in “La Saison Russe” performed on the heels of Pavlova’s first tour and in concurrence with the second. And the Metropolitan Opera Company announced a tour of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes shortly thereafter. Although this tour never materialized, the company finally came in 1916. Pavlova, by then a star in America, appeared in the audience at the New York premiere of the Ballets Russes. One historian wrote that “[O]f the 3,000 members of the ‘present world’ filling the Century Theatre that night, it is safe to bet that 99% had seen her, quintessence of the Russian ballerina, on their home ground. She would be hard to follow” (MacDonald 137). This suggestion is reinforced by the words of one critic who complained that the Ballets Russes premiere program offered nothing new. “We have often seen Anna Pavlova in that sort of thing, and in that sort of thing Anna Pavlova is incomparable” (qtd. in MacDonald 139). Though Pavlova sometimes shared the stage with circus performers and vaudevillians, as she did at the Hippodrome in 1916, she became, for many Americans, an icon of grace, fragile beauty, and advanced ballet artistry.
Kahn’s next contribution to the cultural exchange between the United States and Russia occurred when he finally succeeded in bringing Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes to the Metropolitan Opera in 1916. An advertisement in 1911 suggests that plans had been made to bring the company to the United States under Gatti-Cazzaza’s management. Diaghilev had invited important international impresarios to Ballets Russes performances in Paris in May, 1909. Among those guests were the Metropolitan Opera Company board chairman and manager. While Kahn immediately hoped to bring the performers to the United States, Gatti-Casazza remained hesitant. As mentioned earlier, Gatti-Casazza doubted the public’s interest in dance and feared that the subscribers might be enraged if instead of opera, and entire season would be devoted to dance (MacDonald 129). Additionally, early negotiations with Diaghilev frustrated Gatti-Casazza who wired to New York in 1910, “(It is) not my way (to) handle business matters (in) such a frivolous and incoherent manner” (qtd. in MacDonald 129). He was frustrated because Diaghilev continually changed his decisions regarding the company members who would be engaged for the tour (qtd. in MacDonald 129). It is likely that the 1911 tour never occurred because Diaghilev had not met the Metropolitan’s requirements to engage the company’s star performers, who would alleviate the “incalculable risk” Gatti-Casazza predicted.

Gatti-Casazza’s predictions weren’t altogether incorrect because when Diaghilev did arrive in 1916 without star performers, the New York critics quickly and consistently pointed up these absences. Because Diaghilev had
guaranteed his sponsors that he would bring Vaslav Nijinsky, who was in an Austro-Hungarian internment camp, and his other star performer Tamara Karsavina, the publicity for the New York engagement and U.S. tour featured them. Despite early American frustrations when these stars did not appear, the first New York season ultimately drew large profits and general enthusiasm. The company's success, even without the stars, is partially explained by the amount of publicity and commentary the company had received for nearly seven years prior to the tour. The New York public had long read newspaper articles about Diaghilev's company, particularly related to the numerous scandals surrounding the company and its stars. The anticipation grew greatly in 1915 due to a massive, year-long press campaign, and although it emphasized the star performers, it also lured an audience on promises of novelty, sensuality, exoticism, and authenticity. The ads proclaimed that finally, at long last, the "DIAGHILEV Russian Ballet and that is THE Russian Ballet . . . the real Russian Ballet" would perform for Americans. Earlier versions of Ballets Russes productions in the United States presented by Gertrude Hoffmann, Morris Gest, and Theodore Kosloff, for example, prompted the special attention given to authenticity. The press campaign also enticed audiences with heightened descriptions of the exotic and often risqué dances, the vivid and beautiful designs by Leon Bakst and other less known Russian painters, and the brilliant cohesion and unity of the ballets. The Ballets Russes first season in New York, limited to only two weeks at the Century Theatre, sold out entirely in advance. This brief
engagement served to arouse interest for the U.S. tour and for the company's second engagement, this time at the Metropolitan Opera House, six months later. According to Diaghilev, Otto Kahn claimed that the first season in New York of the Ballets Russes had exceeded his financial expectations: "It's a thousand dollars above the success mark!" (qtd. in MacDonald 181).

The company performed a repertoire which included its most successful and scandalous ballets, *L'Apres-Midi d'un Faun, Scheherazade, Firebird, Les Sylphides, Le Carnaval* and *Petrouchka*. The performances demonstrated the skill of the performers, the exotic and theatrical themes, the visual poetry of the designs, and the novelty and range of choreography that had brought the company its fame. The ballets aimed to unify the dramatic action, the movement, and the scenic and costume designs through music, and the dancers, even the corps de ballet, expressed emotion rather than simply displaying their technical proficiency. Though many of these concepts had been introduced to Americans by previous artists and theorists, the modern endeavor to create a total work of art had rarely been seen on American stages.

As expected, some the performances raised cries of immorality, and the New York Police Department investigated the company and the ballets. The business manager promised to have the company adjust a few questionable moments in the performances, but the season was allowed to continue with continued police presence (MacDonald 149). Protesters against indecency remained a fixture for the Ballets Russes throughout their tour, but these
demonstrations did not have an adverse financial effect, except perhaps in Chicago. Throughout the country, the public responses varied. According to Marcia Siegel, the reactions included "hostility from competing managers, jocular put-downs from nervous journalists, boycotts of its high ticket prices . . . . Cultural snobs announced that Pavlova's company presented real ballet" (1). Despite these mixed reactions, only in Chicago did the Ballets Russes fail to attract large audiences, causing major financial problems for its backers there (MacDonald 156). The lack of financial success can be attributed to a number of factors, including the immorality campaign, cultural snobbishness, anti-elitism, and simple disinterest. One smug reviewer wrote that "people in general were either powerfully for [the Ballet Russes] or powerfully bored by it" (qtd. in MacDonald 156). In other cities, the company earned enough profits for local backers and impresarios to encourage another, more extensive United States tour the following year.

During the first season, Kahn had been determined to bring Nijinsky despite the bitter conflict between the dancer and Diaghilev. Kahn's determination as well as his personal influence can be measured by the lengths he went to get Nijinsky to the United States. Nijinsky had been in Vienna when the first world war erupted, and he had been interned as an enemy alien. Kahn wrote letters to the Secretary of State, the Ambassador to Austro-Hungary, and an influential Parisian Countess, urging them to plea for Nijinsky's release to the United States, and finally, the Austro-Hungarian leader approved the dancer's
release (Kobler 56). Shortly after his release, however, Nijinsky was seized by
the Russians for military service while he was in neutral Switzerland. Again,
Kahn worked with the State Department and now the Russian Ambassador for
Nijinsky's release. This time, Kahn applied diplomatic pressure and argued that
such an important cultural exchange would certainly open Americans to aiding
Russia, who after years of famine and economic hardships sought relief from
abroad (Kobler 65-67). Once Nijinsky arrived in the United States on military
leave, more problems arose. Reputedly, Diaghilev forbade the other dancers to
speak to Nijinsky, his former lover. Additionally, Nijinsky, still in disfavor for
marring, demanded more money to perform than Diaghilev was willing to offer
any performer, and the dancer refused to perform until a contract could be agreed
upon (MacDonald 170). Kahn's biographer, Mary Jane Matz, indicated that Kahn
gave Nijinsky the additional money he desired to perform, but a threat of
departation seems also to have been part of the encouragement Nijinsky needed to
perform at last (Matz 42 and N.Y. Tribune 9.6.16).

In order to deter any further conflict between Nijinsky and Diaghilev,
Kahn first appealed to Pavlova to take over leadership of the company on its tour.
When she declined the offer, Kahn placed Nijinsky in charge of the company. It's
possible that in addition to being tired of trying to resolve conflicts between
Diaghilev and Nijinsky, Kahn had grown weary of working with Diaghilev.
Diaghilev became increasingly known for his un-business-like manner; he
repeatedly failed to meet the contractual agreements and refused to work with
anyone in management other than Otto H. Kahn himself. According to Merle Armitage, Diaghilev treated Kahn as his primary contact rather than Gatti-Casazza or Ben Stern, who were responsible for managing the Ballets Russes in the United States. "There was only one man whom (Diaghilev) recognized. Desiring instructions of even minor importance, Diaghilev always cabled Kahn for advice" (qtd. in MacDonald 134). Kahn, who had a full-time banking career distinct from his theatrical ventures, had little interest in overseeing the day to day operations of the company. Whatever his other reasons, Kahn ensured the performance of the star Nijinsky only by ousting Diaghilev from the 1916-17 season.

Reputedly, the second season of the Ballets Russes was no longer "directly allied with the Metropolitan Opera activities but instead as a personal artistic enterprise of Chairman Otto Kahn" (qtd. in MacDonald 183). Kahn also made arrangements for Nijinsky and Robert Edmund Jones to collaborate on a new ballet for Richard Strauss' *Til Eulenspiegel* for part of the new season. This ballet marked the greatest artistic and lucrative achievement of the second season and tour. Unfortunately for the millionaire investor and the artists, the second season had greater total losses than the amount of profits from the first season. Some historians attribute the lack of success to the loss of shock value or novelty which had stimulated the success of the first season. Other factors, of course, contributed to the financial failure. In addition to a general disinterest in ballet and the high cost of tickets, the season lacked organization. The opening of *Til*
had been repeatedly delayed, Nijinksy injured his ankle which remained a constant problem throughout the tour, programs were spontaneously changed, and in general, chaos, miscommunication, and conflict prevailed. Competition also hurt receipts. For example, Anna Pavlova appeared at the less expensive Hippodrome while the Ballets Russes performed at the Manhattan Opera House, and in Pittsburgh, Theodore Kosloff and his "Imperial Russian Dancers" performed in a vaudeville house during the same week the Ballets Russes performed in that city. In the end, Kahn acknowledged the losses by claiming that he had anticipated such a financial disaster, but wanted the give the American public the chance to see the "superlative quality of the Diaghilev Ballets Russes" (MacDonald 211).

Kahn liked to suggest that he simply offered support for projects that appealed to him artistically. Because he often lost money on investments in art, his biographers Matz and Kobler characterize him as a man who gave his money freely to any artist willing to ask, regardless of profit potential. But Norman Bel Geddes, the important American designer and recipient of Kahn's generosity, suggests otherwise. Geddes reports that Carl Van Vechten cautioned him about Kahn's motives:

Don't misjudge him... He makes chicken-feed investments in young talent like you the way a broker does in stocks. When he finds your stock is good, his investments in you will continue with a zero or two added. His interest in artists is really interest in himself. ... His creative
expression has taken the form of patronage: bringing over Pavlova and Mordkin, Nijinsky with the Diaghilev Ballet, Max Reinhardt’s *Sumurun*, Copeau and his company, (etc.) (120)

Perhaps, then, by investing repeatedly in Morris Gest’s ventures, Kahn believed in the projects both for their artistic potential as well as their profit possibilities. In 1924, he invested $400,000 for Gest and Reinhardt’s production of *The Miracle*, he had recently earned handsome returns for financing Gest’s two previous projects: Nikita Balieff’s *Chauve-Souris* and the Moscow Art Theatre’s first season in the United States. The relationship between Gest and Kahn is somewhat difficult to decipher, yet it reveals a great deal about each man. Kahn had initially invested $72,000 in 1916 for Gest’s musical extravaganza *The Wanderer*. Though it made no great profit, Kahn underwrote Gest’s next two grand productions *Chu Chin Chow* (1918) and *Mecca* (1920) (Anderson 126). These popular entertainments seem unlikely choices for a man who so regularly presented himself as inclined toward high art and reveal Kahn’s interest in the financial possibilities of art and entertainment.

Gest and Kahn met through David Belasco, Gest’s father-in-law and a sensible link between two quite distinct impresarios. Mary Jane Matz caricatures these three seemingly contradictory men in a way that reveals how historians have characterized their attributes and status:

... they would stroll down Broadway. Gest looking like the hero of a Russian boudoir farce; Belasco, shaking his white mane of hair and
fingering his clerical collar; Kahn in white tie, tails, and a silk top hat.

(Matz 120)

As this comical sketch suggests, by being seen publicly together, these men took on some of the attributes of the others. Indeed, at Kuhn, Loeb, and Company, Kahn came to be regarded as “the more flamboyant” partners due to his affiliation with artists and producers like Gest and Belasco, though his success in railroad financing enabled him to become one of the banking firm’s dominant partners (Roberts 4). Such affiliation with artists enabled Kahn to move easily between Wall Street and Broadway.

On the other hand, Kahn and Belasco lent an image of seriousness to Gest, who, for some time, enjoyed the sponsorship and friendship of both of these men, whom historians have rightly acknowledged for their service to the American theatre. Gest’s fondness and admiration for Kahn was widely known, and artists exploited that knowledge for their own benefit. Norman Bel Geddes explained in his autobiography that after numerous attempts to get a meeting with Gest, it was only after mentioning Kahn that Gest would speak to the young designer. Geddes also mentioned that once he contacted Kahn directly, in order to convince him to influence Gest in an artistic decision during the rehearsals for The Miracle. Gest once wrote to Kahn, “Let me repeat that it is my life’s ambition just to be around you . . .” (qtd. in Anderson 135). Certainly, in the presence of Kahn, Gest gained respectability which he couldn’t seem to secure on his own.
The image of Morris Gest which emerges from what his contemporaries said about him largely explains his disappearance from histories of the American theatre: he was not, perhaps, the most likable figure, and definitely not a respectable one. Alexander Woollcott described him fondly as behaving like "a cat with catnip" (162). Channing Pollock described Gest as, "[t]he most wistful person at the Victoria ... a dark, heavily built young Russian Jew, who, in favor one day and out the next, was grateful for crumbs of kindness and forever licking the hand that chastised him" (148). Phrases like "haphazard adventures," "hornswoggling the public," and "spectacular showman" often accompany descriptions of Gest. (Woollcott 159 and Morehouse 157).

Writing about Gest at length in his autobiography, Norman Bel Geddes helped to establish the standard image of the producer-manager:

If I have not made it plain that Gest was a virtually impossible person with whom to attempt an intelligent conversation, let me reiterate here. Psychologically, he was childlike. He had a disorganized mind, an instinctive approach to everything, treated everyone with suspicion, and, so far as possible, avoided every form of positive statement, especially with reference to matters contractual. (289)

Elsewhere, Geddes admitted that "Morris Gest had imagination, mostly on the visual side." Quickly though, he added, "Yet he lacked discrimination" (200). Other authors attest to Gest's "mere passion for color" (Woollcott 162) and elaborate spectacle. But these reductive images fail to describe the man who
produced the Moscow Art Theatre in the United States. So, Gest has largely remained a name with little identity in the histories of that and other distinguished ventures.

Historians who have studied Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre in the United States diminish or even ignore Gest's role in establishing the influential relationship between American artists and the Russian artists. When his role as producer is briefly acknowledged, he is criticized for his publicity tactics and his overbearing personality. For example, Sharon M. Carnicke in *Stanislavsky in Focus* stresses Gest's "overzealous approach to publicity" which "astounded Stanislavsky and his troupe, whose approach to publicity had always been low-key" (17). Nevertheless, both she and others attribute much of the success of the company's first season to the publicity and blame a lack of publicity for the failure of the second season. Facing the obstacles of the language barrier and prejudices against Russians and Bolshevism, Stanislavsky's company required both Kahn's influence and Gest's image-making expertise for there to be any hope of financial success, which was the desired result of the tour for Stanislavsky as well as Gest and his backer Kahn (Camicke 22).

Nevertheless, in an era prone to valuing artistry over showmanship, Gest's place in historical narratives diminished even before his death in 1942. High-minded modernists could write about the Moscow Art Theatre or Max Reinhardt's production of *The Miracle* in America and express gratitude toward the venerable Otto Kahn, but hardly mention Morris Gest, whose "unorthodox"
publicity tactics and unethical managerial style tainted him. Some of Gest's publicity stunts included staging large crowds, with arms outstretched, to greet artists arriving from abroad (to make them seem more important than they were), having unruly Russian artists thrown out of hotels (when a scandal seemed the only way to stir public interest), and posing as a newly arrived Russian immigrant or dignified Russian count in order to attest to the artists' popularity or grandeur (whichever was needed) in their home country. Because many of Gest's ventures relied more on single visits rather than repeat business, Gest often applied a circus-style advertising campaign based on exaggeration, bombast, and outright fraud. Additionally, he would negotiate with an artist to work for a slight salary, then announce to the press a number ten times that size, obviously a point of frustration for artists who worked for him. But his tactics, however exaggerated and occasionally unethical, enabled him to import some of the most significant European artists, who would make lasting impressions on aspiring and experienced American artists. It was, after all, for publicity that Morris Gest arranged for Richard Boleslavsky to lecture about Stanislavsky's acting techniques in 1922. Thus, like P.T. Barnum and Flo Ziegfield, Gest mixed high artistic endeavors with charlatanism and blatant manipulation of the public for profit. Yet unlike Barnum and Ziegfield, he has received little credit or praise in our histories.

Perhaps this historical fate results from the fact that Morris Gest's life obviously differed drastically from that of Otto H. Kahn. Unlike Kahn, Gest
could never gain the kind of respectability he so desperately sought to obtain.

Gest’s desire for respectability is demonstrated in the following anecdote by Channing Pollock, who visited Gest shortly before his death and later wrote:

I met him in the office of Dr. George Colby ... where he spoke to me of his social standing in Russia, and his graduation from a university there. Of course, he knew I knew the truth as to this ... Though it was unnecessary, Morris might have reminded me of the triumphs he had achieved for himself — of the fact that he had the soul of an artist and a loyal heart — but, at the end, these things seemed less important than the advantages of birth and breeding he never had. (149)

Though he never solidified an identity as a serious producer, an intellectual, or an astute businessman, he learned how to influence the most esteemed individuals in all of those three categories. Unfortunately for Gest’s reputation and historical significance, he also adored spectacular performers, sideshow artists, and the game of show business perhaps more than he relished the more revered artists and business of ballet, theatre, and opera.

Born Moischa Gershonovitch in Vilna, Lithuania (then part of Russia) in 1881 and sent to the United States without his parents at age twelve, Gest did not have access to the Russian education of some other wealthy Russian Jews. Unable to endure the structured environment of his relatives in America, he also abandoned the hope of an American education and raised himself in the streets of Boston. Gest began his career in the theatre in 1895 as a property assistant at the
Yiddish Dudley Street Opera House in Boston. Within a year, Gest traveled to New York, hoping to secure a position with Boris Thomashevsky, a leading Yiddish actor-manager. According to Gest, the sympathetic Thomashevsky, unwilling to give the penniless youngster a job, paid for his train ticket back to Boston, where Gest found work in a variety of theatre venues and positions (qtd. in Mullet 159). He played a cannibal in a street show, cleaned monkey cages for a carnival, hung posters, and eventually worked as a theatrical advertising agent for several different theatre companies (Pyros 6-8). In 1899, Gest first tried working as a producer when he rented the Bijou Theatre from Edward F. Albee and presented unemployed Yiddish performers in a dozen or so shows (Mullett 160). Thus, he acquired his knowledge of theatrical arts and the entertainment industry from the ground up. Through his early adventures with performance, he learned how to generate the desire for his product with intensive advertising and an acute awareness of the needs and demands of the public. As any successful showman would, Gest began to understand how to capitalize on an already awakened interest in the public as well as how to stimulate and sustain an interest for his own advantage. For example, in 1901 Gest set up a carnival booth to exploit the public’s outrage at the 1901 murder of President McKinley by an alleged anarchist. Gest modified the popular fairbooth dodger game, calling it, “Hit the Anarchist, three balls for a dime” (Pyros 9).

His adventures in show business continued when he moved to New York later in 1901, and in 1905, after working as a ticket scalper, he became a talent
scout for Oscar Hammerstein I’s vaudeville theatre, the Victoria. In this position, Gest found and publicized such acts as “Abdul Kadir and His Three Wives” (in reality, a German whom Gest encouraged to pose as a Muslim); Machnow, the nine-foot, five-inch Russian giant; . . . ‘the Girl Who Couldn’t Laugh’ (she had suffered facial paralysis); a bogus Carmencita (years after the real Carmencita’s death) . . .” (Pyros 10). By this time, Gest’s publicity tactics fed on the public’s demand for authenticity and its ignorance of what was authentic. As these examples suggest, Gest repeatedly created what was “real” or “authentic” for a public based on what it expected the “real” to look or act like.

While he continued to work for the Hammersteins, Gest also began a partnership with the “more subdued” F. Ray Comstock, who leased the Hippodrome Theatre (Variety obit). Their partnership lasted from 1905 to 1928, during which time their firm produced more than fifty plays, musicals, pantomimes, and other spectacles. Apparently, Gest handled the more mammoth undertakings while Comstock preferred to focus on intimate musicals at the small Princess Theatre. From 1905 to 1928, when Gest declared bankruptcy, he always had his hands in multiple projects simultaneously, often to the detriment of the projects which received less attention and publicity. From 1911 to 1920, he held the lease at the Manhattan Opera House, and from 1917 to 1920, he also leased and directed the Century Theatre, apparently upon the request of Otto Kahn.

His obituary in Variety on May 20, 1942 emphasizes his involvement in the production of spectacles: “Gest’s penchant for producing spectacles placed
him among the leading managers, while his flair for publicity was equal if not superior to other colorful showmen. ..” (Variety 145). The theatrical works of Gest’s career as a producer-manager range from a series of popular spectacles to some of the most revered performances of all time in America. The highlights include Getrude Hoffmann’s “La Saison Russe,” the extravaganzas Chu Chin Chow, Aphrodite, Mecca, and Morris Gest’s Midnight Whirl; and the imports, Nikita Balieff’s Chauve-Souris, the Moscow Art Theatre, the Moscow Art Theatre Music Studio, Max Reinhardt’s The Miracle, Eleonora Duse at the Century Theatre, and The Freiburg Passion Play. Unfortunately, his last major theatrical endeavor, the handling of the Midget Village at the World’s Fair in 1939, overshadowed some of his earlier contributions.

In general, dance and theatre historians ignore Gest’s role in Gertrude Hoffmann’s “La Saison Russe.” Produced and publicized by Gest, Hoffmann’s version of Ballets Russes’ performances marks an important early sampling of the fanciful choreography, exotic and erotic movement, and elaborate production styles of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes in the United States. Although Pavlova and Mordkin offered some examples of the new ballet styles generated under Diaghilev’s watch, they made no attempt to reproduce the production qualities in full. Hoffmann, whose work as a copy artist catapulted her to the top of the vaudeville circuit and enabled her to become her own manager, desired to present an “authentic reproduction” of performances by the Ballets Russes, whom she had seen perform in 1909. Backed by Gest, who had supported her in her stolen
"Salome" vaudeville act, Hoffmann proceeded to scandalize the theatre world and
provoke hostility among competitors and city officials. An exploration of this
rich historical moment reveals much about the game of theatrical publicity,
cultural assumptions and expectations, notions of legitimacy, and historical bias.

Born Kitty Hayes in San Francisco, Gertrude Hoffmann began her New
York career as a dancer in many Broadway musicals. By 1907, she began
performing vaudeville acts at Hammerstein’s Roof Theatre and soon made her
fortune by copying, and generally elaborating, famous acts of other stars. At one
point in her career, she became “the highest paid performer ever and her own
independent producer/ manager” (B. N. Cohen 2). Five years before Diaghilev’s
Ballets Russes appeared in the United States, Hoffmann presented her own
version of what she had seen in Paris in 1909. Backed by Gest and Comstock,
Hoffmann assembled former Ballets Russes or Imperial Russian Ballet performers
who had already come to America. Among them was Theodore Kosloff, the
choreographer of “La Saison Russe”, who had been “driven from the stage of the
Colonial Theatre with rotten apples and who retreated to Bustanoby’s café to
make a bare living” (Sayler and Barkentin 21). Hoffmann also employed Lydia
Lopokova and Alexander Volinin who were performing at the time in the
Broadway musical The Echo. Other performers were lured from Russia, France,
and elsewhere in the United States, including Alexis Kosloff, Alexis Bulgakov,
Jan Zalewsky, Anna Balderova, and Zinaida Shubert. Secretly, they rehearsed the
three borrowed ballets for the program: Les Sylphides, Scheherazade, and
Cleopatre, and they premiered the works at the Winter Garden on June 14, 1911. The souvenir program suggests they practiced secretly because they had hoped to avoid the objections of those who believed the work of the Ballets Russes to be too indecent, yet the publicity efforts emphasized the scandals. It is likely that the rehearsals were kept secret in order to delay any objections to the plagiarism of Fokine's choreography and to give the managers of the Pavlova and Morkdin tour less time to plan any attacks on "La Saison Russe" before its opening.

The advertising and publicity tactics can be gleaned from a description of the premiere, as described by Oliver Sayler and Marjorie Barkentin, press agents for Gest, in the strongly biased article, "On Your Toes - America! The Story of the First Ballets Russes:"

The press attended in full force, for Gest had learned at Hammerstein's and the Manhattan how to create the atmosphere of expectancy and of new in-the-making. Everybody who was anybody - and still in town at this unfashionable date! - was on hand to be thrilled or shocked at the fulfilled promise of daring voluptuousness in Cleopatre and of sensual abandon in Scheherazade. Just how would New York respond when a score of handsome brown-limbed slaves swooped in and overpowered the all-too-willing Sultanas of Shariar's harem? (22)

The press agents had several battles to fight in order to control the perception and reception of the work presented by "La Saison Russe." They needed to capitalize on the exotic and sensual qualities of the show while
maintaining that the show was not indecent, and they had to stir mass interest in
the spectacle while maintaining the image of Russian performance as a serious
artistic endeavor. Gest, Hoffmann, and other associates were brought to court to
defend themselves against charges of public indecency, and David Belasco came
to their rescue, declaring the necessity “for dancers to show their limbs to bring
out all the beauty of dancing” (Sayler and Barkentin 23). Sayler and Barkentin
publicized the “outrage” of the Russian performers who in Russia were “revered
as exponents of the highest of all arts” and in America were accused of being
immoral and salacious (23). The appeal to Americans’ fear of seeming more
backward than Russians might have been an effective tactic this early in the
century, for Russians were still considered less cosmopolitan than Americans in
other matters. However, Russians were gaining the reputation for being deeply
passionate and serious artists as more people read Tolstoy and Gorky and as news
of the Moscow Art Theatre and the Ballets Russes reached the United States.
The advertising and performances of Pavlova and Mordkin had also helped to
foster the image of Russians as serious and expert in artistic pursuits, though they
were still considered backward in political and economic life.

A rivalry between Gest and his competitors Max Rabinoff and Ben Atwell,
who managed Pavlova and Mordkin, escalated in the battle of authenticity and the
conflict between high art and low amusement. This battle is best explained by a
flier that was posted in all the cities where Hoffmann’s “La Saison Russe” was
scheduled to appear. (See Figure 2.2).
The skulls and crossbones in the four corners of the flier signify the danger inherent in succumbing to the fraud of such vaudeville performers posing as “high” artists. Some reviewers would make the same distinctions. Critic George Jean Nathan protested “the indecent bravado of Miss Gertrude Hoffmann (referred to earlier as a player from American vaudeville), who injected her unclothed body and ante-vitagraph ‘art’ into the sacred, definite, authentic and most exalted art of the most picturesque nation in the world” (qtd. in Sayler and Barkentin 27). The language in the flier and the review points out the growing modernist sensibility that tried to separate art and entertainment. Undoubtedly, Russians were expected to stay on the artistic side of the debate.

Gest and Hoffmann countered the attacks by claiming their production had greater authenticity in regard to Russian Ballet than any limited program of a few star performers like Pavlova and Mordkin could offer. The souvenir program remarks that Hoffmann’s goal with her program was “to bring, not one or two individual artists, no matter how great, but an entire Russian organization . . .” (14). Although no advertising credited Diaghilev or Fokine, the program and advertising for “La Saison Russe” proclaimed the authenticity of the Russian Ballets, implying allegiance to the famed Diaghilev company. Although the performers were from various Russian ballets programs, not only Diaghilev’s, and the original ballets had to be pieced together from memory, the claim to authenticity and “wholeness” held some weight in its reception. One critic thanked Hoffmann for “giving us the opportunity to see a complete company of
marvelous Russian dancers" (qtd. in Cohen 8). The program states that “in the matter of costumes, stage equipment and scenic effects these productions are absolutely the last word in the Russian art” (14). The producers claim that they imported the costumes and scenery “down to the smallest details” from St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Paris. Regardless of whether or not Bakst gave permission for the use of his designs (which is open to some debate), these versions of his settings and costumes impressed the critics and added to his growing fame in the United States. Two years later he received his first exhibition in New York. Additionally, Kosloff’s choreography apparently did resemble Fokine’s closely, although there were many slight differences, as noted by Barbara Naomi Cohen (8). It is safe, then, to argue that for all their fraudulent and bombastic claims in advertising, the producers tried to make “La Saison Russe” as similar to its inspiration as possible, as it sought to capitalize on the fame of the Ballets Russes and the perceived American market for its product.

The charge from their enemies that the “La Saison Russe” was a vaudeville-style entertainment had some credibility, though, because Hoffmann had insisted on inserting a Revue, for the touring production, between the three ballets. In the revue, she staged imitations of Ethel Merman, George M. Cohan, Ruth St. Denis, and other performers. Gest and Hoffmann chose to exploit Hoffmann’s roots in vaudeville and popularity as a performer rather than appeal to an exclusively high brow audience. Yet, with all the use of language common to vaudeville advertising, such as “most expensive” and “most gigantic attraction
ever,” the producers also appropriated the language of their critics in order to appeal to a more refined and academic audience. The advertising literature used a phrase such as “the art of dancing is the highest of the arts,” and quickly added, “universal in its appeal” (Program 19). The producers’ desired result of engaging both a high brow audience as well as a popular audience seems to have met with some degree of success. One reviewer noted that Hoffmann’s revue of impersonations was a highly popular part of the entire show. The same reviewer declares that the program bridges “any chasms between the realm of art and the understanding of her audience” (qtd. in Cohen 10). Another reviewer described the production as appealing to “the masses” and “the classes.” He wrote,

This is a school of dancing which will make it just as strong an appeal to the schoolboy who adores melodrama as it will be to the jaded theatregoer.

In taking their company to the Winter Garden instead of to the Manhattan Opera House, as was originally intended, Manager Gest and Miss Hoffmann have placed that theatre management under a heavy debt of gratitude, for these ballets will bring to that spacious playhouse a class of patrons who never have discovered it while extravaganza and vaudeville were its attraction. (B. N. Cohen 9)

In the literature surrounding “La Saison Russe,” the art of Russians continued to be exalted and revered. As suggested earlier, this became one way of countering the moral indignation of an American audience, but this notion of Russian artists also remained a way to entice a high class and academic audience.
Although the producers allowed Hoffmann's reputation as a revue performer to appeal to the masses, the publicity for the show never attempted to knock Russian artists from the pedestal erected to the makers of high art; Russian art was already developing great snob appeal. The publicity of "La Saison Russe" only helped to solidify that image. After much glorification of the Russian Imperial Ballet, the souvenir program concludes, "Thus Russia, when the arts are borne in mind, takes a place no other country of Europe can claim justly today" (19). The critics adopted this point of view in their response to production: some indignant, others overjoyed.

Of course, as noted earlier, all of the critics weren't impressed with the performances or the program that freely mixed high art and low entertainment. While some critics argued that such a mixture could elevate its audience, others lingered on the incompatibility of opposites. Nevertheless, for the "less worldly" critics and audience members who hadn't seen Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris, Hoffmann's "La Saison Russe" offered brilliance, decadence, and exotic enchantment in the fashion of its Russian inspiration. Though it was widely reviewed, for Gest always attracted the press, Hoffmann and Gest both lost large amounts of money on the Broadway production as well as the tour, partially because the costs of the production were so high. Other complications such as delayed performances, hot theatres, and generally high priced tickets, in addition to the effectiveness of the 'pirate' campaign, affected the sale of tickets. At times, the performance attracted less than twenty people (Mullett 163).
Gest's mingling of high brow artistry with popular entertainment continued to be a feature of some of the musical extravaganzas he produced. In 1918, Gest achieved financial success by producing enormous musical spectacles such as *Chu Chin Chow* and *The Wanderer* set in exotic, oriental locations at the Century Theatre. With these productions Gest commenced his relationship with Kahn, who lent hundreds of thousands of dollars to these shows (Anderson 126). With each production of this type during the next few years, Gest tried to add more color, more glamour, and more extravagance. With *Chu Chin Chow*, Gest attempted to "outdo not only the British production but also anything of the kind in the history of the American stage" (Pyros 80). The response of the critics and the popularity of the production, which had 208 performances in New York, attest to his relative success, although the British production ran much longer than the New York production. Even critics who couldn't stomach such spectacle agreed that the scenic magnitude and lavishness of the performance kept the crowded houses amazed and thoroughly entertained. One reviewer confirmed Gest's success by writing that the show was "on a scale of such magnificence that it sets a new standard for gargantuan spectacles" (qtd. in Pyros 82).

In an effort to make these shows increasingly more artistic (and thereby respectable) or at least to give them the stamp of artistry, and also to go one step farther in making the grand scale of production even more grand, Gest hired two well-known Russian artists for his next production, *Aphrodite* based on the novel by Pierre Louys. In 1919, after two years of negotiations, he signed Michel
Fokine, of Ballets Russes fame, to choreograph the ballets for the musical extravaganza. He also hired Leon Bakst to design some of the costumes and sets for the production. As expected, the association with these two artists brought the production instant attention and some notoriety, and the work of these two artists became the focal point of responses to the production.

By 1919 Bakst’s work had been seen numerous times in the United States, so it held less intrigue than it had years earlier. Coupled with Fokine’s choreography and some music by Mussorgsky, however, Bakst’s designs gave the stamp of Russian artistry as well as exoticism to the American production of *Aphrodite*, previously produced in Paris. Most amazing and indicative of Gest’s personality was his ability to sign Fokine, who had been courted for years by other American and European producers, including Otto H. Kahn. Gest agreed to pay Fokine the highest rate given to any choreographer, up to $1000/ day, to get him to choreograph *Aphrodite* and the next show *Mecca* (Horwitz 41). As this achievement suggests, Gest often paid high profile artists more than other producers were willing to pay, and while this enabled him to attract these artists to the United States, it often left him profitless and eventually led to his bankruptcy. Seemingly trying to meet the expectations of his own advertising, he was perpetually drawn to “the biggest, the greatest, and the most famous,” so he took tremendous risks as he tried to attain these qualities in the shows he produced. After making huge profits on a costly production, such as *Chu Chin Chow*, Gest compulsively re-invested the money in a more costly, more risky
project, such as *Aphrodite*. Chu Chin Chow's success enabled him to up the ante and pay Fokine whatever amount he asked.

A quick outline of the plot of the spectacle reveals the degree of pageantry, exoticism, revelry, and violence the script called for. *Aphrodite* re-creates a mythical romance centered on the Greek sculptor Demetrios. Although he is beloved by the queen of Egypt, Demetrios rebukes the queen because he loves only his statue of the Greek goddess, Aphrodite. Later he falls in love with the courtesan Chrysis, who challenges him to prove his love by committing three acts of theft: steal the mirror which once belonged to Sappho, steal the comb worn by the high priestess of the temple, and steal the pearls adorning the Aphrodite statue. After performing these acts, which required one murder, Demetrios dreams about the purity represented by the statue, and later regrets these actions. In his rage, he forces Chrysis to wear the three stolen items publicly for which she is accused of the crimes and crucified on stage.

The plot hardly remained the focal point of the production. As one critic noted, "an onrush of camels and chorus girls and red cloaks and what-not quite hid the story" (quoted in Pyros 86). Several critics located the height of the show's intensity and excitement in Fokine's Bacchanale ballet at the middle of the production. Because Fokine was known worldwide for his spirited and erotic bacchanale ballets, it is hardly surprising that Gest brought Fokine here primarily for this ballet. In it, over one hundred, scarcely clad performers portrayed the hedonism and frenzy of the decadent Egyptians of the occidental imagination.
Long-haired females wearing vibrant and bejeweled two piece costumes, covered by rose petals, leapt from stillness into life, filling the stage with the floating petals. Following a sensuous orgy, the exhausted participants collapsed on the stage (Horwitz 40-44).

Once again, Gest found himself defending his production against "being offensive to the public taste" (Horwitz 44). And again, Belasco came to his rescue. In court, Russian artists again were appalled by American close-mindedness, and again the public grew more interested in the work because of the scandal. Objections of indecency also met with racist hostilities. Alan Dale of the New York American expressed horror at the "unclad Negroes mingling with the white characters" which he later calls a "horrid mixture of flesh" (qtd. in Pyros 87). The charges of pornography and indecency only seemed to stimulate interest in the production which, though not as financially successful as Chu Chin Chow, remained a steady success at the box office.

Alexander Woollcott excused the frivolity of the production and found pleasure in the mixture of beauty and entertainment. But Kenneth MacGowan cried out against the senseless display of wealth and color. MacGowan, of course, found unquestionable "genius" displayed in Fokine's choreography, but he proclaimed that the American stage hardly ever went to such an expense to produce "so little of true art" (qtd. in Horwitz 45). A writer for Theatre Magazine echoed the sentiment. He complained about the high prices of the tickets ($11/each), the lavishness and expense of the production, and the lack of a clear
narrative. He noted, "Aphrodite’ is sure to be a box office attraction. But it is certainly not an addition to our dramatic literature. Were it not for the wonderful costumes and the dances arranged by Fokine it would be a boresome spectacle" (Jan. 1920 61).

As indicated by the way Fokine’s work was consistently glorified in the reviews, his name alone often elevated a project from the low brow to the high brow. In regard to Fokine’s next project with Gest, Dawn Horwitz writes:

(The) belief in the artistic validity of Fokine’s work countered thoughts that there was anything indecent about the half-naked men and women who moved about the stage. The beauty of the bacchanale struck all who witnessed it, and they especially noted the passion, which was evoked with much discretion and without vulgarity. (50)

Thanks to Pavlova, the Ballets Russes, and several revered Russian writers and painters, the mark of seriousness attached to Russian artists upgraded the work of simple entertainers and profit-makers.

Fokine’s work on Aphrodite marked the beginning of his extended career in the American theatre and ballet. Next, he choreographed Gest’s production of Mecca by Oscar Asche, a lavish fantasy which offered much of the same glamour and sensuality of Aphrodite, only more of it. Gest also presented Fokine and his wife Vera Fokina as performers in 1919, which initiated the American public’s view of Fokine as a dancer as well as a choreographer. Fokine worked as both a choreographer and a dancer in the American popular theatre for a many years,
creating pieces for, among others, the Shuberts, Charles Dillingham, and Flo Ziegfield. Under the management of Sol Hurok, the Fokines also organized a ballet company which toured the United States. In addition to these activities, he taught ballet and movement classes for many theatre companies and schools in his twenty years in the United States. His biographer, Dawn Horwitz argued that Fokine's greatest contribution in the United States was bringing classical ballet to the masses (112). As the initial impetus behind Fokine’s work in America, Gest heralded this contribution and others which soon followed.

Perhaps the most risky of all of Gest's collaborations with Russians came when he, backed by Otto H. Kahn, brought Nikita Balieff and the Chauve-Souris to the United States for the first time in 1922. Unlike Pavlova, the Ballets Russes, Fokine and later the Moscow Art Theatre, the Chauve-Souris could not boast a reputation in the United States before its arrival. Gest claimed that he was $450,000 in debt when he saw the Chauve-Souris perform in Paris in 1921, but with the support of Otto H. Kahn, who had also seen the company perform in Paris, and a few others, Gest raised the necessary funds to bring it to the United States. Gest faced numerous challenges in producing the company. Various factors such as the company’s obscurity in America, its previous failure in London, and its unfamiliar approach to popular entertainment indicated the difficulties of generating public interest. The company’s comedic style also contradicted American perceptions of Russians as solemn and serious. Additionally, in contrast to the Russian dancers who came to the states
previously, Balieff's company faced a language barrier. And finally, recent red
scare incidents had raised American suspicions that Russians in the United States
were spreading communist propaganda and trying to overthrow the U.S.
government. Despite these seemingly insurmountable odds, this venture proved
to be the most successful and profitable project of Gest's career. In a telegram to
Otto H. Kahn, Gest declared, "Chauve-Souris is the talk of New York. Never in
my experience has there been anything so successful artistically and financially . .
. I am so happy for your kindness and belief in me and all the great financial
assistance you give to me" (qtd. in Anderson 128). For a large enough sector of
the New York City public, the allure of novelty and genuine entertainment
apparently outweighed political fears and high brow posturing.

Nikita Balieff's Chauve-Souris, initially the Bat Theatre, originated from
cabaret-style impromptu performances by Moscow Art Theatre company
members. In My Life in Art, Stanislavsky wrote about the tradition of satirical
and whimsical amusements given by professional actors which began as "cabbage
parties," or gala performances initiating seven weeks of an Orthodox fasting
period. During the fast, all theatres were closed and Russian actors were unable
to work. In preparation for the holiday, actors performed their shows twice a day
in order to make enough money to cover the losses of the holiday, and the
cabbage party allowed actors to create freely and playfully after the stressful
period of work (Stanislavsky 450-452). The spirited nature of these cabbage
party performances influenced the evenings of impromptu entertainment given at
the Moscow Art Theatre on various occasions. In 1903, for example, the theatre
held a cabbage party for Chekhov. Puppet shows, mock wrestling matches,
Russian songs, and various comic sketches intermingled throughout the evening.
The Bat Theatre began in 1908 as a distinct entity under the leadership of Nikita
Balieff, who had played small roles in Moscow Art Theatre performances after
aiding the company financially when they were on tour in Berlin. According to
Stanislavsky,

The satires, burlesques, and grotesques of the establishment were very new
to Moscow. People tried to come to the cellar all the more because it was
hard to be admitted. At the beginning only actors and artists could come
in . . . . There was a cascade of wit, of unusual jests, of talentful numbers,
and the unexpected discovery of some talented men and women. (457)

After the Russian revolution, Balieff and other members of his company and other
Russian companies emigrated to Europe and reorganized a company as the
Chauve-Souris in Paris in 1920, where it became quite successful at the Theatre
Femino.

Once Balieff signed an agreement with Gest, a massive press campaign in
the United States began to stimulate interest in the company among the American
public. Oliver Sayler boastfully exaggerated that "every magazine and newspaper
in the United States" carried stories of the company's triumphs ("Chauve-Souris"
14). The publicity hailed the Chauve-Souris as a sensation in Paris and London
(though it had not been a success in London). Publicizing the company's origins
in the Moscow Art Theatre, the press agents aroused high brow interest in a project otherwise more connected to vaudeville, a pejorative term in the 1920s. While maintaining an idealized version of Russian artistry, the publicists exploded the stereotype of Russians as overly serious and depressingly passionate and challenged notions that art and entertainment are mutually exclusive. The souvenir program stated that the company came to America “to dispel the mistaken notion that Russians never laugh.” It continued:

The tradition of Russian Muscovite solemnity was firmly grounded with us. Until Balieff came we knew the land of the samovar, the muzhik and the ruble through the introspective neurasthenia of Dostoievsky, the self-righteousness of Tolstoy, the sad and pompous dirges of Tchaikovsky and the strange mysticism of Roerich’s paintings. Russia to us meant despondency and torment of the soul, with an occasional gleam of beauty like that of the Ballets Russes to lighten prevailing gloom. (3)

The program credits the Chauve-Souris for revealing the unsuspected charm and gaiety of the Russian temperament while declaring Balieff a “genius in the art of the theatre” (4).

The repertory included popular Russian songs and dances of various eras, a couple of short pieces by Chekhov, one dramatic poem by Pushkin, a few popular French songs, an exotic Japanese dance, and various satiric, sentimental sketches and tableau vivants. The colorful, exaggerated costume and set designs of Sergei Sudeikin and Nikolai Remisov generated the contrasting moods and
styles of the pieces and suggested each historical moment. “The Parade of the Wooden Soldiers,” previously staged by Evgeny Vakhtangov in 1911, became, according to Alma Law, the signature piece of the company (21). In this satirical sketch, the dancers moved as marionettes with precision and technical efficiency. The programs included a range of this and other types of stylized movement and speech which intrigued many American artists and delighted the audience. As master of ceremonies, Balieff joked with and provoked the audience between each piece to promote the effect of spontaneity and intimacy throughout the evening.

Gest generated public anticipation for the company and gave it the stamp of importance by making the premiere an all-star event. A cartoon of a select opening night audience appears in the souvenir program (See Figure 2.4). Among the guests that Gest stirred to attend the premiere were Al Jolson, Charlie Chaplin, Flo Ziegfield, Maude Adams, George S. Kaufman, John Barrymore, Joseph Urban, Kenneth MacGowan, and Eugene O’Neill. Teddy Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover stood out among politicians, and the audience was sprinkled with Morgans and Vanderbilts and Hearsts. Additionally, numerous Russians of American fame sat in the premiere audience including Pavlova, the Fokines, Chaliapin, Boris Anisfeld, and Jacob Ben Ami. The publicity efforts combined with the quality and delight of Balieff’s show brought great financial success to the producers and the entertainers. The initial plan for a one month New York run was extended to six months to meet the demand. The show ran for 544 consecutive performances in its first season (Law 24).
The Chauve-Souris, which performed regularly in the United States for the next ten years, confounded some critics at first, but eventually most of them, guided by the publicity, celebrated the technical proficiency of the performers, the colorful and creative energy of the designs, the cohesion and consistency of the entire program, and Balieff's playful interaction with the audience. Some critics even commended the company for its "sheer delight" and called an evening at the theatre "great fun" (qtd. in Pyros 106 and Woolcott 2-14-22). In an early review of the Chauve-Souris in 1922, Alexander Woolcott struggled to describe and label the style of theatre. He wrote:

The Chauve-Souris in New York is a little baffling. It is difficult to describe because the satisfactions it gives are so varied and so impalpable. It is Russian vaudeville, but to say so is to apply a discolored word to it. The second wit of his times suggests as an appropriate variant that we call it vodkaville. It is hard to sum up... (2-12-1922)

Unsatisfied with any label, Woolcott described the relationship between Balieff and the audience and compared the craftsmanship of the performance of "The Wooden Soldiers" to the "exquisite" technical expertise of Nijinsky and Lopokova in "Le Spectre de la Rose." Other reviewers, maintaining a bridge between the popular and the artistic, added accolades for the designers Nicholai Remisoff and Sergei Soudekine, in particular for their designs which accompanied a Russian song or skit, which seemed to be the favorite moments of the audience.
The critics also continually praised Balieff, but for varying reasons. Some enjoyed his direct and enthusiastic interaction with and control of the audience, while others found him to be a brilliant comedian or brilliant director. Always appreciative of theatrical unity, Kenneth MacGowan lauded the consistency of the performance and urged America’s “spasmodic” directors to learn from Balieff’s conscious control of the production (qtd. in Pyros 106). Above all, the direct interaction with the audience and the Russian folk character of the performances grabbed the attention and captured the imagination of American theatre-goers and artists. Woollcott wrote about his enjoyment of a Tuesday afternoon show because of the number of theatre performers in the audience with whom Balieff joked and teased. In his broken English, for example, between acts Balieff urged Al Jolson to act as his interpreter. Such interaction between their own star comedian and the Russian star comedian delighted an American audience. Throughout performances Balieff engaged the audience directly, sometimes getting them to sing along with the performers or cheer and chant.

Excited by the possibilities of the type of audience interaction stimulated by Balieff, Oliver Sayler considered, in his article for Century Magazine entitled “The Theatre of Let’s Pretend,” how it might work for a more serious theatrical project. Contrasting the theatre of illusion with Balieff’s theatre, Sayler examined the audiences of each type of theatre. In the illusionistic theatre, Sayler complained, the audience sits passively with no impact on the representation, and
the audience goes unnoticed by "our esthetic aristocracy" (277). By contrast, Balieff's audience, Sayler noted, remains active and alert. He continued,

We had heard of the experiments of Meyerhold in Petrograd and Reinhardt in Berlin with a theatre in which the audience participated, though it all seemed rather difficult in theory. We needed and lacked a concrete example until Balieff came. (277)

Sayler argued that Balieff's theatre could teach Americans how to become active participants in theatre. Citing Arthur Hopkins' complaint that American audiences "go to theatre with icicles in (their) pockets" and have little creative spirit or active interest in the possibilities of the theatre, Sayler turns to Balieff's relationship with the audience as a model for awakening audiences (281).

Sayler and Woollcott also both pondered the possibilities of an American company that could rival the Chauve-Souris. Woollcott concluded his first review by imagining an American version of the Chauve-Souris consisting of popular comedians, old-time cloggers, and American folk singers. The distinctly Russian folk characteristic in the songs, dances, and attitudes raised the question of a distinctly American theatre, celebrating its own folk heritage for several critics. Speculating on America's potential to develop a theatre in the manner of Chauve-Souris, Sayler cast Americans in the Russian roles. He cited the vaudeville stars Ruth Page, Margeret Severn, and Rosiland Fuller as potential performers if they underwent rigorous training. For the writers of the American version, he recommended George Jean Nathan, Heywood Broun, George S.
Kaufman and others. Several commentators proposed African-American spiritual songs in comparison to the ballads of Glinka and the Gypsy folk songs in the Chauve-Souris repertoire. Sayler argued that Robert Edmund Jones, Norman Bel Geddes, Lee Simonson and Herman Rosse already rivaled the Russian designers Nikolai Remisov and Sergei Sudeikin. Finally, Sayler advocated Al Jolson, Will Rogers or Raymond Hitchcock in place of Balieff ("Let's Pretend" 282). Indeed, several American theatres, including the Neighborhood Playhouse, attempted to create an American version in the years following the Chauve-Souris' initial popularity. The Russian company served as a source of inspiration for numerous artists and performers.

In addition to providing tutorial inspiration for American theatre artists and critics, the Chauve-Souris' contributed to the theatre in the United States by serving as a bridge for Americans and the Moscow Art Theatre. Nikita Balieff convinced Morris Gest to bring the Moscow Art Theatre to the United States. Apparently, Gest had never seen them perform and accepted Balieff's opinion of the Art Theatre's potential for profitability (Sayler "Chauve-Souris" 22). Balieff, with aid from Chaliapin, also convinced Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko of Gest's ability to produce them in the United States. Once the negotiations concluded, publicity for the Chauve-Souris continually pointed toward its inspiration, The Moscow Art Theatre. The most advantageous use of the popularity of Balieff's company for the benefit of the Moscow Art Theatre occurred prior to the premiere of the Art Theatre in the United States. Arranged
as another star-studded event during a Chauve-Souris' performance, Balieff welcomed the new arrivals of the Moscow Art Theatre. The event, as John Corbin described it, was “unusually vivid and gay” (1.5.23 NY Times). He continued:

Balieff gave Stanislavsky a bouquet and Stanislavsky spoke briefly in Russian. As rendered by an interpreter, what he said was a graceful and touching tribute from sorrowing Russia toward beneficient America. According to Balieff, the interpreter missed the chief point, which was that the women of America are the most beautiful in the world, especially those who were present.

This ceremonious and comical introduction of Stanislavsky and his performers to Americans no doubt attracted some audience members to the Moscow Art Theatre performances, who might have otherwise felt uninvited to, or simply uninterested in, such high brow affairs. As its Moscow Art Theatre parentage elevated the reputation and aesthetic values of Balieff’s company, the Chauve-Souris lent its popularity to propel the commercial success of the Moscow Art Theatre.

Both companies required careful publicity and public relations management because apart from their artistic and entertainment values, the performers in both companies were Russian, and, therefore, their intentions were suspect. Russian performers in the United States in the early 1920s faced an angry, fearful mob if Red Scare suspicion was allowed to fester. Because Balieff and his performers had emigrated to France, they were less frightening to some
Americans than the company coming directly from Soviet Russia. Gest and Kahn applied several strategies for reducing mistrust of the company. In one instance, Otto H. Kahn helped to alleviate fear of the Moscow Art Theatre in his address to the American Defense Society, which had tried to stop the importation of the company. Kahn argued,

Americanism is not so frail a growth that it needs to be protected from contact with the Moscow Art Theatre. The visit cannot by any remote stretch of the imagination be connected with Soviet propaganda. . . . It is an event of distinct significance . . . wholly of an artistic character.

(Anderson 130)

An arrangement for a meeting between President Calvin Coolidge and Stanislavsky also eased American suspicions, though, as Carnicke noted, the Soviet Union, still unrecognized by the U.S. had no ambassador through whom Stanislavsky could speak to the President (13). Nevertheless, the seeming interaction of the two mattered more for the success of the company than any real interaction, and Gest mastered the art of “seeming.” Gest understood how to work the American press and knew how to generate the necessary images for success. Stanislavsky must appear as a kind of family man rather than a dangerous anarchist or Bolshevik (which explains why the bewildered Stanislavsky was forced to pose with a wife and child that were not his own). This well-documented publicity stunt also safe-guarded Stanislavsky against the fate of Gorky in the U.S. The focus of press materials had to be on the company’s
artistry, Gest knew, and any relationship to politics would be vehemently denied. Stanislavsky was labelled a “White Russian” in the American press; therefore, he could not be thought to be working as an agent of Bolshevism (Carnicke 15).

Among the publicity efforts, some poorly conceived and ill-timed, were many effective Gestian tactics. Months in advance, the public gained increasing information on the Moscow Art Theatre. Members of Gest’s staff followed the Moscow Art Theatre on their European tour, sending highlights and building expectations in the U.S. (Benedetti 262). Oliver Sayler published the book *The Russian Theatre* in 1922 and raised academic America’s interest in the two Russian troupes sponsored by Gest. Additionally, the plays which the company would perform in Russian were made available in English translation for the more academic audiences. Eight days after the premiere of the Art Theatre, with Gest’s sponsorship and Stanislavsky’s approval, Boleslavksy held his famous lectures on Stanislavsky’s approach to acting. Perhaps the most effective single publicity event, though, was the meeting between the very popular Chauve-Souris and the Art Theatre, which garnered a great deal of press. Certainly, the event helped to raise enthusiasm for the Moscow Art Theatre, and along with other publicity efforts, positioned the Moscow Art Theatre to make its long-lasting impact on the American theatre.

Over a period of thirteen years, the projects of Russian cultural exchange sponsored by Otto H. Kahn and Morris Gest prepared the way for the success of a theatre company which could perform realistic plays completely in Russian with
financial success for an American public. Presumably, in 1910, an effort to bring a Russian company of sixty people, their sets, costumes, and props across Europe to America where they would perform serious dramas in their native tongue would have proven artistically and financially disastrous. However, after years of preparation, Americans began to consider Russian performance with increasing respect. Beginning with performances by Pavlova and continuing through to the Moscow Art Theatre, American audiences came to value the visual elements and intensity of the emotion of Russian performance. By the time the Art Theatre reached the United States, many American artists were prepared to examine the technical proficiency, passion, and unity of the productions they saw rather than focusing solely on the plot or politics of the dramas. Aided by the efforts of Gest and Kahn, who depoliticized Russian art and helped to train audiences to look rather than to hear in the theatre, Russian performance increasingly became a desired commodity for American theatrical consumers.

1 Kahn brought Anna Pavlova and Mikhail Mordkin to the United States in 1910, after seeing them dance with the Ballets Russes in Paris in 1909. He also worked to bring Max Reinhardt's The Miracle and Jacques Copeau's Le Theatre du Colombier after seeing their productions in Europe.

2 Sources conflict on the amount, but Matz suggests it was $1,250,000 (91).

3 Beginning in 1901, Kahn and his staff clipped all articles from major newspapers in which he was mentioned and neatly collected them in scrapbooks marked O.H.K. These scrapbooks are housed in The Kahn Collection at Princeton University.

4 See Hurok's S. Hurok Presents (18-19) and MacDonald (129) for details on Gatti-Casazza's resistance to dance.

5 When, in 1924, Kahn again approached Diaghilev for another Ballets Russes season in the United States, he had the impresario Morris Gest at his side. Kahn must have thought that Gest could manage Diaghilev better than others had done, for Gest had managed numerous projects without bothering Kahn with the details (Anderson 49 and 135).
The Wanderer, written by Maurice V. Samuels, was based on Wilhelm Schmidtbonn's Der Verlorene Sohn. David Belasco directed the production which starred James O'Neill. The producers were Gest, F. Ray Comstock, and William Elliott, Gest's brother-in-law.

Chu Chin Chow, book by Oscar Asche, was staged by E. Lyall Swete. The scene designers were Joseph and Phil Harker of London, and the costume designer was Percy Anderson. Mecca, book by Oscar Asche and music by Percy Fletcher, was staged by E. Lyall Swete, choreographed by Michel Fokine, scenery by Joseph and Phil Harker of London, costumes by Leon Bakst.

See Bel Geddes, Miracle in the Evening, pg. 272. He claims that Gest offered him $5,000 to design for The Miracle, though the press inflated the figure to $50,000 in the next day's paper.

A letter from Gest's father, Moischa Gershonovitch, to the American district attorney William G. Thompson reveals the financial comfort of the family. Gershonovitch writes, "As to my financial situation, I have no reason to complain." And he reported: "Supposing that a responsible person would be willing to look out for Morris and help him get a good education, I would be willing to assist him up to R:10 equal to $5 per month." (qtd. in Pyros 5).

Sayler and Barkentin assert that Gest cried, "But you're ruining the integrity of Russian art!" in objection to Hoffmann's decision to add the revue (25).

His responses in an interview in the American Magazine in 1926 indicate a gambler's compulsion for the game of show business.
Figure 2.1: Morris Gest
WARNING
AGAINST PIRATES

The Tremendous Triumph of

PAVLOWA AND MORDKIN

last season, has brought forth the usual horde of free-booters who follow in the wake of legitimate successes and seek to plunder the public by foisting upon it something so similar in name [but not in character] as to DECEIVE.

A band of these hoydenesses is now preparing to sweep the United States with several cheap, shoddy organizations to be styled "Russian Dancers." They plan to visit each city with an advance flourish of trumpets and glittering advertising matter closely resembling that of Pavlova and Mordkin, attract crowded houses one night by means of the FRAUD and move on to pastures new.

These companies are being given such names as "Imperial Russian Dancers," "Royal Court Dancers," "Royal Russian Dancers," etc. in fact they have gathered up old pictures of Pavlova and Mordkin and have made use of them in their advertising.

Legal proceedings will follow, but meanwhile the FRAUD will go on and Russian artistry will be brought into disrepute.

Local Impeachment, Theatre Managers and Editors: YOU are the only bulwark between the purse of the public and the plunderers—hence this warning.

Only Two Legitimate Troops of Imperial Russian Dancers are Coming to America

The PAVLOWA AND MORDKIN Company
Under the management of the enterprises of Max Rabinoff, Inc., and

DE DIAGHILEFF'S Stupendous STAR BALLET
of St. Petersburg
Under the direction of the Metropolitan Opera Company, of New York
Both will start their tours LATE in the season

Meanwhile several companies of disingued song and dance "artists" from the ten, twenty and thirty cent vaudeville circuit, and supporting casts from cloak, clothing, boot and shoe, and suspender factories are in process of organization to sweep over the land NOW, making use of these illustrious names to deceive.

Beware
of the Pirates

Figure 2.2: "Warning of Pirates" Flier
Figure 2.3: Section of Balieff’s Chauve-Souris 1922 Souvenir Program Cover
Figure 2.4: Ralph Barton cartoon of Audience in Balieff’s Chauve-Souris 1922 Souvenir Program
CHAPTER 3

REVOLUTIONARY ART/ REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS

“Today we are witnessing a remarkable extension of the bolshevist cultural programme in America, Western Europe and England. It is being effected by exceptional and to some extent unexpected, methods and means.”


“The living elements in the theatre all over the world must be galvanized and reshaped by the actual organization and procedure of the Soviet Theatre.” Harold Clurman, *The Daily Worker*, 1933

Theatre in Russia, from the turn of the century until the era of Stalinist censorship beginning around 1927, was characterized by sporadic and varied experimentation often uniting political and social ideals with modernist artistic innovations. Even as Stanislavsky struggled to develop and articulate a practical approach to realistic acting, other Russian theatre artists were adamantly attacking naturalistic illusionism in the theatre. Throughout this period artists explored the
possibilities of Symbolism, Futurism, Expressionism, Theatricalism, Constructivism, and Suprematism. They sought inspiration from medieval mysteries, folklore, commedia dell'arte, classical dramas, and the circus as well as from political doctrines and contemporary headlines. Inspired by pre-revolutionary avant-garde impulses, artists of the theatre after the revolution searched for a theatre which could represent the New Russia. Following the October Revolution in 1917 until the early 1930s, many Russian artists produced massive spectacles, circus-theatres, living newspapers, and agitprop dramas, employing both realistic techniques and explicit theatricality in order to engage a new proletarian audience, while others staged new adaptations of classical and traditional texts. Not surprisingly, debates raged over the purposes and possibilities of theatre in Russia, and the positions among theatre people varied radically, resulting in a wide diversity of form, content, production style, and venue.

The experimental impulse in the Russian theatre drew interest from the west throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Many Americans and Western Europeans hurried to Russia to document the variety of theatrical activity, and their reports on what they saw stimulated greater interest among Western theatre artists. Among the authors writing about the theatres in Russia were Oliver Sayler, Huntly Carter, and Hallie Flanagan, who were attuned to modernist trends in theatre throughout Western Europe and the United States. Their books made Russian theatrical experimentation accessible to Westerners who were interested
in learning about new Russian aesthetics, political ideologies, and cultural policies following the revolution. In addition to the stimulation by Westerners who visited Russia, American artists gained insight into the experimentation in Russian theatre from Russian touring artists and Russian émigrés who brought with them a range of approaches to theatre. This chapter focuses on important post-revolutionary cultural exchanges between Americans and the Russian avant-garde, with an emphasis on the concept of “revolutionary” in both art and politics.

In section one I will provide a survey of the major avant-garde modernist developments in the Russian and Soviet theatre, focusing on the post-revolutionary work from 1917-1930. These developments, directly and indirectly, influenced the modernist movement in American theatre. Then in section two I will trace how these Russian theatrical innovations flowed into American consciousness through scholarship and literature and through the work of Russian avant-garde companies, especially the Habima. Finally, section three explores the impact Russian émigrés had on American theatre when they became significant participants in theatrical productions in the United States. Throughout this chapter, the work of the artists and intellectuals is examined within specific cultural contexts which enabled such artistic activities and cultural exchanges to occur.
Since the end of the nineteenth century, many Russian artists and theorists sought to modernize the Russian stage and to develop an art of theatre which would break with theatrical traditions. Although many early avant-garde artists upheld the banner of “Art-for-Art-Sake,” other artists believed the theatre had the capabilities of transforming both art and society, if properly managed. Artists vehemently debated as they struggled to determine the ideal purposes for the theatre and to chart paths toward those purposes. Many early Russian symbolists, such as Dmitri Merezhkovsky and Zinaida Gippius, sought a mystical-spiritual transformation of society through theatre, while some of the later symbolists, including Alexander Blok and Andrei Bely, began to see theatre as a site for social and political critique which could stimulate change. Another idealist, Nikolai Evreinov dreamed of a theatre which could enhance what he believed was an innate human desire for social and psychic transformation through creativity and play. His experiments in re-creating ancient and medieval theatre practices stimulated methods for pure theatricality and new audience-performer relationships. And in the spirit of transformation, the Russian Futurists, most commonly associated with Vladimir Mayakovsky, placed their hopes for change in the technology of the machine. They sought to overthrow traditions with their dynamic and fast-paced Futuristic dramas which abandoned logic as an organizing principle and freely mixed incongruous genres and performance styles.
All of these experimental artists rejected realism, challenged the traditional audience-performer relationship of illusionistic theatre, questioned the traditional primacy of language over gesture, turned to stage techniques from the past to engage the future, and searched for new artistic forms to resolve aesthetic and ideological dilemmas.

Avant-garde performance and staging techniques evolved out of active experimentation with theatrical forms, devices, genres, and styles in search of an ideal, and the new techniques were constantly reconfigured and employed to meet changing ideals. Vsevolod Meyerhold's career in the Russian theatre reveals a continual revaluation of the purpose of theatre, before and after the Revolution. From production to production, he employed recurring and evolving techniques to address new goals. Although it was short lived, the Moscow Art Theatre’s First Studio in 1905, under Meyerhold’s direction, fostered his spirit of laboratory experimentation in theatrical forms. The studio had been founded, according to Stanislavsky, to find means of expressing on the stage the spiritual side of life, captured in symbolist paintings. The studio enabled Meyerhold to experiment with new performance styles without the need to achieve financial success. He developed techniques for creating the theatrical and unrealistic world of dreams and visions. Unfortunately, Stanislavsky soon found that the studio had become too focused on the director’s art rather than on the performers’ art, and, facing economic constraints at the Moscow Art Theatre, he closed the studio before any public performances. Beginning in 1906, through Vera Kommissarzhevskaiia’s
theatre in St. Petersburg, Meyerhold continued his work in non-realistic approaches to theatre with a group of the Russian symbolists. There, primarily through his direction of Alexander Blok's *The Fairground Booth*, Meyerhold experimented with stylized movement and speech, *commedia dell'arte*, and reconfigurations of the performance space in relation to the audience space. Forced to leave Kommissarzhevskaia's theatre in 1908, he further developed and expanded his interest in theatricality and the grotesque, which is characterized by mixing incongruous and contradictory genres and ideas. While working for the Imperial Aleksandrinsky Theatre, in the 1910s, his experiments took place in various cabaret theatres and in his own experimental studios in St. Petersburg. In the 1910s, he began to formalize his physical system of actor training which required proficiency in gymnastics and acrobatics. Maintaining complete authority as the director-auteur, Meyerhold often exploited the talents of the other artists, while he continued to explore pantomime, plastic gesture, stage space and composition, and audience-performer interaction in addition to further developing his interest in non-representational stage design.

As political tensions mounted in Russia, Meyerhold grew increasingly committed to socialist ideology, and he eventually joined the Bolshevik party in 1918. Following the October Revolution in 1917, when the Bolsheviks seized power from the Provisional Government, Meyerhold assumed the position of Deputy Head in Petrograd of the Theatre Department (TEO) for the Commissariat of Enlightenment, and for a short time from 1920-1921, he served as head of the
TEO. Although his career in the Soviet Union shifted inexorably over time, he continued to experiment in his various theatres and schools with stylized actor movement, which he finalized in Biomechanics. And he continued to seek non-representational settings. This stimulated his use of Constructivist sets, which were suitable to the desired machine-like efficiency of his post-revolutionary productions. Meyerhold, like numerous other Soviet directors, sought to create a new aesthetic to mirror the new ideals of the Soviet Union. A system of laboratory workshops enabled Meyerhold throughout his career to practice his theoretical concepts of theatrical production and to modify his techniques to meet his ever-changing ideals.

Many emerging Russian artists benefited from the spirit of laboratory experimentation before and after the Revolution. Alexander Tairov and Alicia Koonen founded the Kamerny Theatre in Moscow in 1914 to develop theatrical production techniques which they believed contrasted with both Stanislavsky’s realism and Meyerhold’s auteurism. Tairov and Koonen tried to free the actor’s creativity by the actor’s eliminating his or her subjugation to the playwright or the director-auteur (Rudnitsky 15). Attempting to develop a theatre free of ideological affiliations, the Kamerny Theatre founders wanted to create art for the sake of art. They sought to stage purely abstract beauty through form and movement, placing the emphasis on rhythm and continuity. Although he opposed Meyerhold’s auteurism, Tairov, who had worked with Meyerhold in Kommissarzhevskaya’s theatre, was drawn to Meyerhold’s theatricalization of the
stage through the use of *commedia dell'arte*, pantomime, acrobatics, and nonrepresentational design. In contrast, however, to Meyerhold's interest in the grotesque, Tairov wished to create a consistent, stylized aesthetic structure by employing musical speech, plastic and harmonious movement, and rhythmically congruous sets and costumes that created a purity of form (Markov 100). With the aid of cubist-Expressionist designers, most notably Alexandra Exter, the Kamerny Theatre's productions, well into the 1920s, removed audiences from everyday realities and contemporary concerns, which markedly contrasted with the numerous Soviet theatre groups committed to educating the masses and celebrating the Revolution.

But a political theatre, guided by Soviet proclamations, proved to be a difficult, dangerous endeavor. In February 1917, Nicholas II reluctantly abdicated the throne, and a provisional government, elected by the Duma, was put in place. Immediately, the provisional government issued a set of guidelines which outlined freedoms of speech, press, and assembly; abolished all restrictions based on nationality, class, or religion; released all political prisoners; and established direct and universal suffrage. However, still at war with Germany, the Russians grew increasingly impoverished and remained unsure of their future. Except for one socialist delegate, the entire provisional government was made up of ministers of the previous imperial ministry. For eight months, ideologically conflicting organizations competed for public support until on October 25, 1917 (November 7, by the new Gregorian calendar), the Bolsheviks stormed the Winter
Palace, arrested the ministers of the provisional government, and placed Vladimir Lenin at the head of the new Soviet government. Many Russians viewed this as an illegal act, which sparked four years of civil war between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks. Although the Bolsheviks quickly established numerous administrative departments to govern culture, education, propaganda as well as economic and military affairs, they had little real, official control of policy until the early 1920s. Throughout the chaos brought on by war and famine, theatre artists continued to produce, and audiences continued to frequent the numerous academic, experimental, and amateur theatre companies which performed throughout the Soviet Union.

When the Provisional Government abolished censorship from the Russian stage in 1917, it increased the production of previously banned plays, and it enabled theatre professionals to experiment, if initially reluctantly, with new forms. Pre-revolutionary interests in popular forms, ritual, and theatricalization soon met post-revolutionary impulses to define a changing Russia through art. While realistic plays and the traditional Russian repertoire were mainstays of many theatre organizations, which were unsure of which way the winds would blow in the new Russia, satirical and propagandistic plays and sketches populated the cabarets, the streets, and the stages of minor theatres. Both revolutionary and counterrevolutionary artists also tried to garner support with political speeches, parodies, and ad-libs given during their regular theatre productions (Gorchakov
Theatre became a site for public debate, political campaigning, and rigorous propaganda.

Two months after usurping power, the Bolshevik government organized the Theatre Section (TEO) of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment. The goals for the TEO included guiding the theatrical work for the entire country, unify theatre ideology, and creating a new theatre connected to the rebuilding of society under socialism (Gorchakov 108). Olga Kameneva became head of the organization in Moscow, and Meyerhold accepted the position of deputy director in St. Petersburg. Other members of the TEO included non-Party members Alexander Blok as the repertory director, and Evgeny Vakhtangov as the head of the directorial subsection. Initially, it was not possible to streamline theatre policy, so the TEO primarily supported experimentation in its early years. Fairly liberal policies in the arts have been attributed to the Bolshevik's desire to try to gain the support of Mensheviks, anarchists, and Leftist Socialist Revolutionaries (Gorchakov 108). As early as 1908, Anatoly Lunarcharsky, who would become head of the Commissariat for Enlightenment, had envisioned a socialist theatre whose task was to "appeal to all young, fresh, and 'cultured' society to create a lofty socialist art" (qtd. Gorchakov 109). He predicted that the socialist theatre of Russia would be a:

- theatre of rapid action, major passions, rare contrast, whole characters,
- powerful sufferings, and lofty ecstasy. . . . It will thunder, glitter, be noisy, rapid-flying, and crude . . . . It's satire will strike one's cheeks
Artists of the new Soviet state echoed Lunacharsky's voice as they searched for the mechanisms to enliven and enrich the theatre of the new era.

Addressing similar problems confronted by the early Russian avant-garde, Soviet experiments in theatre raised questions about the moral, social, and educational responsibilities of theatre; audience-performer relationships; collective creation; stage space and theatrical design; dramaturgy and text selection; and acting styles and performer training. Although their methods and concerns broadly differed, many groups used theatre as a tool for educational or agitational purposes. The revolution spawned many new children's theatres, nationalist theatres, and trade union club drama circles dedicated to propaganda for the new Soviet state. At the height of the era of Soviet theatre, according the Huntly Carter, there were twenty-three "factory theatres" and 160 dramatic clubs in Petrograd (later Leningrad) alone (137). Many of these organizations existed primarily for educating workers and for building solidarity. As the impulse to support and to celebrate the revolution flourished, some theatre artists and organizations resisted traditional venues in support of street theatres, living rooms, or massive halls and lobbies. For example, the popular Blue Blouse agitprop groups, who sought out proletarian audiences in their own spaces, performed short, stylized 'living newspaper' sketches on street corners and in clubrooms and factory canteens (See Figure 3.1) (Leach 172). On a much larger
scale, artists and political leaders organized mass spectacles commemorating the revolution and celebrating the May Day holiday. Thousands of trained and untrained actors and dancers performed historical reenactments and processional pantomimes in large, festively decorated public squares. One of the most elaborate productions of this kind was *The Storming of the Winter Palace*, directed by Nikolai Evreinov. On November 7, 1920 the historical reenactment of the Bolshevik’s victory over the provisional government took place in front of the Winter Palace and involved 8000 performers, 500 musicians, and an estimated 100,000 spectators (Leach *Revolutionary* 46). The carefully orchestrated event, complete with machine-gun fire, soldiers on horseback and motorbikes, politicians in armored cars, and fireworks, concluded with performers and audience singing “The Internationale” (Leach *Revolutionary* 46-50.) Other avant-garde theatre artists and organizations remained within the confines of traditional theatre spaces, but many productions reconfigured those spaces to encourage new kinds of relationships between performers and audience members in order to reflect the national attitude of solidarity.

The lack of new Russian dramas after the Revolution sent theatre companies looking in many different directions for texts: the classics, newspapers, poetry collections, scenarios for improvisation, political speeches, montages of written material, and new adaptations. The search for texts appropriate for the new Russia also encouraged artists to create montages and to reassemble and reinterpret existing works. This nourished the growing
devaluation of written text in favor of pantomime and symbolic gesture, which, in
the most technically proficient theatres, required actor proficiency in mime,
acrobats, gymnastics, contortion, and Chaplinesque film acting. In contrast to the
natural, earthy dance-movement styles encouraged by Isadora Duncan in the early
part of the century in Russia, much of the experimentation with plastic movement
and rhythm became associated with a pseudo-scientific mix of Taylorism, studies
of motion efficiency, and Pavlov's studies of reflex stimulation in the post-
revolutionary era. Exemplified by Meyerhold's biomechanics, the scientific and
mechanical movement styles, made more rigorous with circus techniques, could
also be seen in the studios of the Experimental-Heroic Theatre, the Laboratory
Theatre of Expressionism, and Nikolai Foregger's MastFor dance company.

As with performance spaces, text selections, and acting styles, scenic and
costume designs greatly varied in the Russian theatres following the Revolution.
Minimalism, Pictorialism, and representational Illusionism fulfilled the needs of
many theatre companies, while Futurism, Cubism, and Constructivism
increasingly appeared on experimental stages. Avant-garde Russian design of this
era contrasted with the exotic, painted backdrops of the Ballet Russes, which
brought international recognition to Russian art and design prior to the revolution,
though the later artists were certainly influenced by the rhythmic, tonal, and
sculptural qualities of costumes by artists like Leon Bakst, Boris Anisfeld, and
Nicholas Roerich. Alexandra Exter's costume and set designs for the Kamerny
Theatre in the late 1910s exemplified the new attention on composition in stage
space and rhythmic scenery and the growing movement toward extreme
stylization in costumes. While maintaining the Ballet Russes artists’ lavish use of
color, Exter disrupted the continuity of the stage space with many levels using
steps, pillars, light, and shadow for her 1917 designs of Annensky’s *Famira*
*Kifared* and *Salome*. The designs also made use of fragmented and non-
representational geometrical shapes and harsh angular lines in the scenery and the
costumes. Her early work provoked interest in the application of modernist trends
in painting and sculpture for theatrical design. Cubism, Futurism, and
Expressionism in particular helped the Russian artists move further away from
realism.

By the mid-1920s, the scarcity of building materials, the disdain for
lavishness and excess, and the idealization of industrialization in the U.S.S.R.
encouraged Russian avant-garde artists to move toward the use of the non-
representational, utilitarian structures exemplified by Constructivism.
Constructivists focused primarily on the dynamics of action and the efficiency of
the machine. Supposedly offering a parallel to the reconstruction of the Soviet
state, the Constructivist sets were sites for worker-actors to engage in their work.
Reduced to the bare essentials, Constructivist sets, epitomized by Liubov
Popova’s designs for Meyerhold’s production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*,
operated as large machines with movable, operable parts with many playing areas
for the actors. Alexandra Exter also experimented with Constructivism in scenic
design. In a 1924 plan for a revue which was never produced, Exter employed
huge swings, ladders of various height and angles, wheels, nets, and other naked structures for the athletic performances of the actors. Few productions in Russia could be designated as purely Constructivist, though, and a mixture of various styles often converged in avant-garde productions.

The most radical groups and artists wanted to achieve a completely new form of theatrical production without any remnants of bourgeois culture, and they often produced the most distinctly (early) Soviet theatre. Meyerhold’s many varied theatre studios and schools in the 1920s, for example, embodied the desire for an “October in the theatre” characterized by the desire to unite Soviet life and Soviet art in the pursuit of the creation of new, ideal human beings who were supposed to construct the new, industrialized, efficient, and modern Soviet utopia. The organization, the Proletkult (Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organization), established shortly before the October Revolution by Alexander Bogdanov, also freely mixed experimental techniques in an attempt to promote an entirely new culture, which, like Meyerhold’s “October in the theatre,” would free artists from the restraints of traditions. Bogdanov envisioned a theatre by and for the proletariat to promote proletarian revolutionary ideals. Characterized by the notion of a collective spirit, the organization was comprised entirely of workers who engaged primarily in the production of agitational propaganda (agit-prop) plays. Opposed to the TEO’s policies which fostered artistic leadership from intellectuals and bourgeois artists, the Proletkult’s independent ambitions were directed toward a campaign to create a new morality, a new economic structure,
and a new art driven strictly by the interests and desires of the proletariat.

Despite its high-minded ideals, the worker-actors, who continued working day jobs in factories, received less vigorous actor training than other experimental groups, and their early productions were criticized for "inventing nothing new" and for "not employing more revolutionary stage techniques" (Gorcharev 163 and Leach 69-70). In 1920, however, Meyerhold, then head of the TEO, turned over the Tonal-Plastic department to the Proletkult. The worker actors began to study speaking, singing, emotional recall, eurhythmics, gymnastics, cultural history, and mathematics (Leach 70). By 1921, Proletkut performed collective-poems and improvisational free movement pieces as well as elaborately detailed pantomimes and dramas. Their most successful production, in popular and artistic terms, was an adaptation in 1921 of Jack London's *The Mexican* about revolution in Central America. Directed by Valentin Smyshlyaev and designed by Sergei Eisenstein (who restaged it in 1923), the highly theatrical and grotesque production employed rapidly moving scenes of exaggerated circus clowning and stylized fantasy on cubist sets in sharp contrast to an "utterly realistic fight scene" in the middle of the play (Leach 73). The traditional audience-performer relationship was broken by placing spectators on stage, by having the actors emerge from amid the audience, and by reconfiguring the auditorium into an arena space. In the production the organization met its goals of producing educational and propagandistic work that used the new revolutionary styles. The Proletkult experiments continued with less artistic success in the 1920s, but due to repeated
conflicts with Party officials, members were dispersed under Lenin, and Stalin dissolved the organization entirely. Like so many theatre groups in the post-revolutionary era, the company persistently faced economic struggles, criticism from conservatives as well as radicals, and perpetual organizational restructuring.

A few Soviet experimental theatre companies received greater government sponsorship and remained more stable throughout the 1920s and some even endured the 1930s (with stylistic and content changes), due partially to their international fame; they had become important “show ponies” of Russian art and Soviet tolerance. Among these theatres were the Moscow Art Theatre and its studios, under the leadership of Evgeny Vakhtangov and Mikhail Chekhov, the Kamerny Theatre, and the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre (GOSET). Of these, only Goset had both a clear revolutionary agenda for life as well as theatre.

At the end of 1917, Lenin officially acknowledged the importance of Jewish support in the revolution, and established the Commissariat of Jewish Affairs (Evkom) as a subsection of the Commissariat of National Affairs. Unlike the parallel organizations for Muslims, Poles, Latvians, Armenians, and Belorussians, which were also created to carry out Bolshevik propaganda among nationals of each group, the Jewish community had not been recognized as a distinct nation within the Soviet Union (Veidlinger 20). Nevertheless, The Commissariat of Jewish Affairs and the Jewish Section of the Communist Party (initially intended to operate separately) oversaw the operation of party matters and directed the agitational propaganda within the Jewish Communities across the
Soviet Union. Under the watch of these organizations, Yiddish culture was encouraged like never before in Russia. Prompted by revolutionary allegiance and a desire to educate the Jewish masses in revolutionary ideals, Alexander Granovskiy founded the Yiddish Chamber Theatre in 1918 in Petrograd. Granovskiy, who had studied with Max Reinhardt in Germany and had adored Meyerhold’s early experiments, moved his theatre company to Moscow on the request of the drama critic Abram Efros, a firm believer in the revolutionary messianic mission of the theatre (Veidlinger 35). The two men envisioned that the company, eventually renamed The Moscow State Yiddish Theatre, would train worker-actors from across the Soviet Union in revolutionary aesthetics, and the actors would then return to their native lands and operate the theatres in their regions (Veidlinger 37). The company worked out its primary aesthetic, which was to merge Jewish and Russian folk culture with modernist artistic trends, in its first season. Marc Chagall, who had studied painting in Paris, designed Goset’s first production, which was an evening of adapted stories of Sholem Alechem, and he greatly influenced the company’s artistic approach. Though they usually selected texts from traditional Yiddish sources, the company leaders freely adapted those works to campaign against religion and shtetl life. The company adopted Meyerhold’s Biomechanics as the technique for actor training, the Kamerny Theatre’s use of exaggerated, mask-like make-up techniques to reduce individuals to social types on stage, and a free range of modernist design and staging techniques, leaning toward a preference for Expressionism and Futurism.
Goset’s style became internationally known, particularly among Jews, because Granovsky sent many press releases and photographs of his theatre company to European and American newspapers, although the group was sometimes confused with its Russian rival, the State Hebrew theatre, Habima (Veidlinger 90). Granovsky also tried to arrange a tour of the United States in 1924, according to Jeffrey Veidlinger, but the fees for performing ($16,000) and the pre-publicity support Granovsky demanded (including books in English and Yiddish) proved more than any Broadway manager wanted to or could afford to invest for a Jewish theatre company. Also, this was the same year that Morris Gest and Otto H. Kahn were supporting the second season of the Moscow Art Theatre and preparing for the Music Studio to perform in the U.S. (90). When Goset toured Europe in 1928, the company had planned to also tour the United States, but the Soviet Government forbade it to enter America, no doubt disturbed by the emigration of the entire Habima group one year earlier (Veidlinger 103). Goset gradually modified its style to meet increasing Soviet regulations with regard to the accessibility of art and the theatre’s responsibility to conduct propaganda, but the company’s early work inspired international imitation, notable in the work of the Vilna Troupe and Maurice Schwart’s Yiddish Art Theatre in the mid 1920s.
The Russian Revolution thrust Russia and its artists into the international spotlight, inspiring Western revolutionaries dedicated to overhauling political structures and/or artistic traditions to take action. As the world waited for the drama of the Revolution and the following civil war to unfold, artists and political activists in America, England, and Western Europe looked for guidance from their Russian counterparts. American enthusiasm for the Russian avant-garde sprung from interests both in Russian art and Russian political ideologies as it developed following the Revolution. New relationships formed between Russian and American artists, and this promoted a burst of experiments in forms of production in the American theatre.

At first, most of these artists and activists relied on written descriptions, including both publications and personal communications, for details of revolutionary activities, though a steady stream of Russian immigration provided a great number first-hand accounts. Western journalists, such as Lancelot Lawson in *The Russian Revolution*, covered Soviet theatrical activities as “news items,” thus placing them within the context of the political revolution (Carter 307). Though there were numerous accounts of Russian theatre in journals and magazines throughout the 1920s, Oliver M. Sayler wrote the first detailed account in English after 1917 of Russian theatre in a book entitled *Russian Theatre Under the Revolution*, published in 1920. This book, written before many important
artistic developments had occurred, focused primarily on the pre-revolutionary activities of the Moscow Art Theatre, Meyerhold, the Ballet Russes, the Kamerny Theatre, Evreinov, and Komisarjevsky. Sayler’s second edition of the book, published in 1922, also briefly explored the work of the Chauve-Souris, Goset, and the Habima theatres. Other works on the Russian theatre guided American artists and intellectuals in Russian developments in the theatre. Velona Pilcher’s article “The Theatre of the Revolution” appeared in Theatre Magazine in April, 1927. She primarily discussed Meyerhold’s “Theatrical October” and his production of Roar, China! As Pilcher described Meyerhold’s “theatre of revolution” as a “revolution in the theatre,” she was swept up in the communist fervor. At one point, she wrote, “And now, Comrade Reader, come . . . with me into the Meyerhold Theatre . . .” (266). In her article, Pilcher bemoaned the lack of Russian critical writings on theatre available to English readers, and pointed her readers to Alexander Bakshy’s The Path of the Modern Russian Theatre, though she called it, “a difficult book” (271). (Unfortunately for her reader, the book, published in 1916, dealt primarily with Russian symbolists). A more helpful guide for Americans, Huntly Carter’s The New Spirit in the European Theatre, 1914-1925 (1925) contained two brief, but instructive, chapters on Russian theatre. One chapter examined Russian theatre as an “educator of the masses,” and the other chapter discussed “the constructive power of the machine” in Meyerhold’s and Foregger’s experiments in mechanical movement and design. Carter’s follow-up book, New Spirit in the Russian Theatre, 1917-1928,
published in 1929, is a very detailed account of early Soviet theatre and included numerous production photographs. In this work, Carter discussed the social, economic, and political changes in the U.S.S.R., the new theatrical policies, and the ideologies and artistic strategies behind the revolutionary, nationalist, and academic theatres of the early Soviet Union.

Another important and influential account of the Russian theatre after the Revolution was Hallie Flanagan's *Shifting Scenes* (1928). Flanagan, who directed the Experimental Theatre at Vassar College and later the Federal Theatre Project, had received a Guggenheim grant to study the theatres in Europe in 1927, and her book records her impressions of European theatre from that trip. Besides offering brief discussions of theatre developments in England, Germany, Prague, Riga, Norway, Stockholm, Vienna, Budapest, Italy and France, Flanagan devoted over one third of the book to the Russian theatre. She made no attempt to mask her enthusiasm for the vitality of the Russian theatre. In her very personal account of Russia and its many theatre companies and clubs ten years after the revolution, Flanagan detailed her assumptions and expectations in contrast to her actual experiences in Russia. Her perspective uniquely reveals the excitement with which American and European artists were looking to Russia for inspiration, despite the fact that prejudices and fears were building in America and Western Europe toward the Soviet Union. Flanagan wrote:

*Before I entered Russia I had gained from newspapers and from conversations, chiefly with people who had never been there, a mass of*
misinformation only equaled by that which I have heard and read since I came out. I was told, among other things, that it was useless to go in at all because I would only see what "They" wished me to see; that I would be under espionage, day and night; that if I commented unfavorably upon anything I saw, although I might escape, the Russians to whom I spoke, or any Russians entertaining me, would be in danger; . . . that the only people one met in Russia today were ignorant and loutish peasants; . . . that it was useless to go to Russia to study the theatre since the drama together with all other art, was dead. (83)

Flanagan used several chapters of her book to dispute those claims. Revealing the diversity of theatre in Russia, she discussed distinctions between the Russian theatres focused on theories of art (Moscow Art Theatre, Kamerny), revolutionary theatres focused on theories of life (Blue Blouse groups), and theatres which most successfully combined the two (Meyerhold's theatre, Goset, Proletkult). Flanagan seemed most excited by the spirited debates on the purposes and future of theatre in Russia that engaged people from dissimilar backgrounds, performers and audiences alike. The energy and lively interaction of performers and audiences in the experimental theatres surprised and excited her. Her descriptions of such energy fiercely belied the reports she had been hearing before her trip to Russia:

The crowd pouring night after night into Meierhold's theatre is the most alive audience I have seen in any country. It is full blooded, vigorous, coarse, rough, careless in dress and manner, laughing and jostling, talking,
shouting approval or disapproval. Workers, students, artists, soldiers surge into the great, bare theatre, take possession of their seats, and pack the galleries, from which they proceed to hang precariously, eating caviar sandwiches, and exchanging pleasantries with the stage hands . . . (99)

Flanagan’s passionate account celebrates the vitality of the Russian life surrounding and intersecting with the theatre. Unlike Sayler’s accounts which separate the politics from the art of Russian theatre, Flanagan’s work focuses on art which springs from ideology and the debates surrounding that notion.

Such detailed accounts of Russian theatre had an important impact on American artists in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly on those who had little direct contact with Russian theatre artists. In a 1933 article on “Broadway and the Soviet Theatre” in the Daily Worker, Harold Clurman expressed appreciation for the prolific accounts and illustrations provided by those who had witnessed the Soviet theatre. He credited them with his ability to conceive of the seriousness and excitement with which Russians approached theatrical production and experimentation. In reference to the reports on Russian theatre available to Americans in books and journals, Clurman stated:

It is a sign of the enormous vitality of the Soviet Theatre that even an acquaintance with it through such indirect sources can be of real value to the American theatre worker, both as inspiration for a feeling about the theatre and as a guide in actual theatrical technique. (Collected Works 1020)
Americans artists who were searching for vitality in their own theatres turned to Russian theatres for instruction in craftsmanship, creativity, and ideology, and they were often guided by those who had looked upon Russian theatre with Western eyes.

Of course, much of the passion Americans had for Soviet experimentation had been sparked by their direct experiences with Russian theatres who toured the United States and Europe. Hallie Flanagan confessed in her book that her visit to Russia had been provoked, in part, by the “incomparable art which we have seen in Stanislavsky’s theatre, in the Chauve-Souris, the Ballets Russes, the Habimah,” and she wanted to see for herself the role theatre played in the “new order” (82). Clurman acknowledged his first-hand experiences with Russian theatre, up to 1935, were limited to touring productions of the Moscow Art Theatre, the Kamerny Theatre, and the Hamiba Theatre, and he lamented that the works presented by the Moscow Art and Kamerny Theatres had come from their pre-revolutionary repertories (Collected Works 1020). For many American artists, including eventual members of the Group Theatre, Eva Le Gallienne’s Civic Rep Theatre, the Theatre Guild, the Worker’s Laboratory Theatre, and Artef (the Jewish Worker’s Theatre), direct interaction with Russian touring companies solidified for them ideas and techniques about which they had only read, and made them curious about other Russian theatres. Early in the 1920s, the influence on American artists had been primarily aesthetic, rather than political, as any political or ideological components of Russian touring groups had been rigorously
underplayed in order to allay the fears of anti-Bolsheviks. The groups who toured America were the Ballet Russes (1916-17), the Chauve-Souris (1922-1931), the Moscow Art Theatre (1923-24), the Moscow Art Theatre Music Studio (1925), and the Habima Theatre (1926-27). The Kamenny Theatre and Goset toured Western Europe in the 1920s, and many American artists saw them there. From these companies, American artists primarily valued the seriousness with which Russians seemed to approach theatre as an art, an emphasis on ensemble acting, the unity of style in all elements of production, and the consistency and high level of acting skill of even the minor performers. Additionally, the Symbolist designs of the Ballet Russes and Chauve-Souris and the Expressionist and Constructivist designs of the Music Studio and Habima Theatre as well as the stylized movement of these groups also greatly impressed American artists.

Of the companies who toured in the United States in the 1920s, only the Habima Theatre was an offspring of the Revolution, though its ideology was not tied purposefully to the Revolution. This Hebrew theatre company, which had long been a dream of its founder, Nachum Zemach, had been made possible when the provisional government ended censorship and eliminated discrimination based on nationality, enabling theatrical production in Hebrew. As with many Russian theatre companies founded in the early years following the revolution, the company's purpose was moral and educational, though its mission was not to promote the revolution. Rather, the company's mission was Zionist: through the use of the Hebrew language and biblical-historical dramas, the company hoped to
reawaken a Jewish national consciousness and establish a national theatre in Palestine (Levy 20-21). This theatre company, hardly representing revolutionary Russian ideals, would probably have gained little recognition as a Russian company had it not been for its desire to produce high-level art. This last goal motivated Zemach, a Hebrew teacher with little experience in theatre, to pursue assistance from Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre. When Stanislavsky agreed to work with the Habima Theatre as a sort of studio of the Moscow Art Theater and assigned Evgeny Vakhtangov to direct the company, in 1917, the theatre's Zionist ideals were swept away in a whirlwind of Russian theatrical idealism.

It is primarily through the Habima Theatre that the work of Vakhtangov, who died in 1922, became internationally known. As the company's first director and teacher, Vakhtangov largely determined the Habima's approach to actor training and sharply stylized brand of performance. Because most of the first members of the Habima were not professional actors, Vakhtangov required them to train with him for one year before allowing the company to perform a group of one-act plays in late 1918. Vakhtangov, who, despite his illness was working with three other M.A.T. studios, the Proletkult workshop, and the Popular Theatre, required absolute seriousness and commitment from the performers. In addition to teaching them to study the psychological motivations and emotional life of their characters, Vakhtangov emphasized the importance of physical training to his students. Vakhtangov wrote to a group of students in 1918:
I need to explain to you how to study the plasticity of movement and how important it is to know how to study it, to understand the nature of "plasticity," a very important ability for an actor. . . . It is impossible to acquire [the sculptural quality of a role] without the correct study of movement. (97)

One member of Habima, Alexander Karev, recalled how Vakhtangov taught the actors to externalize the inner life of the characters through the controlled and expressive use of their hands and bodies. "Hands are the body's eyes!" Karev recalled as he recounted a rehearsal in which Vakhtangov formed a broad gesture, using his hands, which "suggested the graphic style for The Dybbuk," the upcoming Habima production (226).

During his last few years, while he was working with the Habima, Vakhtangov grew increasingly interested in a revolutionary theatre along the lines of Meyerhold's "October in the theatre," which would build a new theatre "from scratch" (Vakhtangov 130). Although, unlike Meyerhold, Vakhtangov supported the cultural preservation of older theatres such as the Moscow Art Theatre and the Maly Theatre as museum-theatres, he believed that realism was lifeless and offered nothing new to the Russian people, for whom everything in life was new. In 1921, he wrote,

Stanislavsky's theatre is dead and will never be resurrected. I am happy at this. . . . All theatres in the near future will be built along the main lines that
Meyerhold foresaw long ago . . . May naturalism in the theatre die!

(141-142)

Vakhtangov also contemplated how a new theatre would serve post-revolutionary society, and he considered accepting a position in the Theater Department of the Commissariat of Enlightenment in 1919. He concluded that a theatre for the people should “reflect and nurture the people’s revolutionary spirit” through a variety of theatrical forms appropriate to the plays (140). His final work with the Habima Theatre, *The Dybbuk*, indicates that he was working in that direction.

*The Dybbuk*, which the company rehearsed with Vakhtangov for two years before it opened in 1922, became one of the most popular works of the Habima Theatre. S. Ansky’s play, a mystical drama rich in Chassidic Jewish folklore, tells of a forbidden love in a nineteenth century Russian-Jewish ghetto. Channan, a young, poor scholar, falls in love with Leah, without knowing that their fathers had arranged their marriage before the children were born. Leah’s father, Sender, who had become wealthy in the intervening years, ignores the agreement with Channan’s father, and instead promises his daughter to a wealthy man. Channan learns of Leah’s engagement, and he dies while trying to gain mystical powers from the Kabbalah to prevent Leah’s marriage. At the wedding, during the traditional Beggar’s Dance, Channan’s ghost (the dybbuk) overtakes Leah’s body and forestalls the wedding. The Zaddic, a religious leader and sage, places the dybbuk on trial and attempts to persuade the spirit to leave Leah’s body. Later, in a dream, the Zaddic learns of Sender’s broken pact and punishes him, requiring
him to give half of his wealth to the poor. The dybbuk, avenged, finally exits Leah’s body, but later he enters her soul, and she dies as she yields herself to him, affirming their eternal union. The action of the play is enveloped in Chassidic mysticism and Jewish folklore, and was a popular choice among Yiddish performers in the 1920s.

 Allegedly, the Habima leaders hesitated about performing the play which did not express Jewish nationalist ideals, but the lack of quality scripts with this theme and the urging of Stanislavsky and Vakhtangov convinced the company to perform it (Levy 32). Vakhtangov freely adapted the play into a revolutionary social drama which critiqued Jewish traditions and customs. In Vakhtangov’s interpretation, Channan and Leah’s struggle was represented as a revolution against an old order (Levy 33). Vakhtangov extended the beggars’ scene and made extreme contrasts between Sender, representing the wealthy, and the beggars, representing the poor and hungry. Vakhtangov used the drama to represent a universal story of the people’s revolutionary spirit, which had nothing in common with the Habima’s initial mission. In his recollection of Vakhtangov’s work on The Dybbuk, Alexander Karev inadvertently revealed Vakhtangov’s lack of interest in the Jewish folk aspects of the play as he searched for a universal theme. Karev remembers that in response to Lev Lashchilin’s choreography, which expressed “knowledge of folklore and included ordinary folk dances,” Vakhtangov allegedly cried out, “I don’t need Jewish dances, I need a beggars’ dance at a wedding feast given by a rich merchant” (Karev 227).
turned the beggars’ dance into a cry of protest, imparting to Ansky’s drama an unquestionably revolutionary theme. One reviewer wrote:

> What would you say, please, if you found the mythos of the Soviet Revolution revealed in ancient folk legend created by a genius of the people? Wouldn’t your heart be moved to see the spirit of the Revolution revealed in its internal, essential meaning as the victory of great love? On the surface of it, there is nothing common between the Russian Revolution and *The Dybbuk*. So . . . why is it that thanks to *The Dybbuk*, I recognize the great meaning of the mythos now being created. (qtd. in Levy 35)

In addition to expressing revolutionary ideals, Vakhtangov’s production of *The Dybbuk* also embodied his fervor for theatricality, the grotesque, and Expressionism, in particular. The mysticism of the play lent itself to Vakhtangov’s sharply stylized, expressive physicality, and the conflicts between heaven and earth, body and soul, and rich and poor enabled Vakhtangov to create vivid and striking contrasts. The production was Expressionistic in its creation of a nightmarish world through the rhythmic and rigid movements of some actors in contrast to complete stillness of others; the monstrous make-up which highlighted the unpleasant characteristics of each character; and the stark and angular sets casting large, horrifying shadows. One reviewer captured the vivid style in a helpful description:

> First of all, the make-up is extraordinary. Faces are painted with curious designs, in high colors, not unlike grotesque masks; mouths are pulled out
of shape by daubs of grease-paint; eyes are rendered almost uncanny by circles and arches; noses are pulled to a sharp point . . . the angular treatment of the property extends even to the unpretentious scenery. The actors move about the stage with grotesque motions, with absurd attitudes; the lines of the human figure are broken up by stooping or leaning heavily to one side. ("The Dybbuk in Hebrew" 24)

The exaggerated, unnatural gestures and the Expressionism in design and make-up of The Dybbuk became the signature style of the company, in Russia and abroad. According to Emanuel Levy, the Habima proudly bore Vakhtangov’s stamp on their production. The play remained in the company’s repertory for forty years, and the older actors insisted on performing the play “exactly” as they had done “in the original 1922 production” (Levy 73). Even taking into account the impossibility of such exactness, it is safe to assume that Vakhtangov’s style lingered in the Habima’s The Dybbuk, and his ideas shaped many of its performers’ personal aesthetics for many years. The length of an actors tenure with the Moscow troupe became a symbol of status within the company long after the company was established in Palestine (Levy 74).

The Habima company left for an international tour in 1926, and it never returned to Soviet Russia, where it had been under official pressure for years because of its professed Zionism and its use of Hebrew, a language alien to most Russian Jews. With the exception of a few artists and intellectuals, the Habima rarely attracted audiences. Russian Jews had Goset, which performed in the
familiar Yiddish language, the proletariat had many theatrical options closely linked to their needs and interests, and the artists and intellectuals also had many Russian-language experimental theatres from which to choose. The Habima, performing under the name The Moscow Habima Theatre, hoped to find a more receptive as well as a more Jewish audience abroad. They certainly found this in Western Europe, where Zionism was re-gaining popularity and where theatrical experimentation in the most extreme non-realistic styles had already appeared for a few decades.

In the United States, however, the company met with more resistance than the members had anticipated. While a small number of American artists and intellectuals interested in modernist European theatre celebrated the Habima, American audiences generally found the Habima’s style, coupled with its Hebrew language, too strange and insignificant. Additionally, the company’s most highly acclaimed production, *The Dybbuk*, was being produced simultaneously in English, and under the direction of a former Habima member. The group’s American manager, Sol Hurok, essentially abandoned the company when it went on tour, and although Otto H. Kahn had supported Hurok financially, he did not rescue the company as he had done others before it. After a disastrous tour of the United States, the Habima Theatre split into two factions: a small group led by Zemach who stayed in New York and a larger group moved to Palestine. Several attempts were made to revive a Habima Theatre in New York, but the constant financial battle forced members to take individual paths in America. The
significance, then, of the Habima tour in the United States was its presentation of
the highly stylized theatrical forms developing in the Soviet Union and its
initiation of a number of artists trained by Vakhtangov and Stanislavsky into the
American theatre.

Despite its financial struggles, the Habima achieved artistic success as it
exemplified the effective application of trends in Russian and European
modernism for American artists and critics. The group prompted American artists
and intellectuals to evaluate the possibilities of the “theatrical” style of
production. At the end of the company’s second week in New York, J. Brooks
Atkinson wrote a lengthy article for The New York Times, discussing the
attributes of the company. As usual, the critic compared the work of the foreign
company to the work of American companies to point out what American theatres
lacked. For Atkinson, the Habima epitomized the concept of “theatre,” which he
defined as an art form transcending dramatic literature through the artistic
combination of acting, design, and dramatic text. “What is the quality that
distinguished the Habima from any other organization to be seen in this country?
Again, it is ‘theatre!’” (Dec. 26, 1926: 1). Atkinson felt that the company had
generated a theatrical experience beyond the capabilities of merely staging
literature by welding together grotesque make-up and costumes, unnatural vocal
timbres, off-stage musical accompaniment, rhythmic exactness of movement, and
angularity in stage design to create a “ghastly, supernatural fantasy” (1). The
Habima performances prompted another theatre critic to explore the concept of
“style” in the theatre. In “The Gamut of Styles,” John Mason Brown investigated the stylistic differences between productions by the Habima, the Neighborhood Playhouse, the new Yiddish Art Theatre, and the Comedie Française in 1927. Brown decided that in the Habima’s “stylization, as well as in the temerity of their intention, they are more advanced than any other group of players New York has seen,” although he did not entirely discredit the stylized productions of the American companies as harshly as Atkinson had done. Brown noted the differences between social conditions in the two countries in his exploration of the Habima’s “flaming spirit of unrest” (86). For both Brown and Atkinson, the excellence of the Habima’s production of The Dybbuk lay in the bold and skillful direction of Vakhtangov. Brown celebrated Vakhtangov’s “unswerving mastery” of stylization, while the more antagonistic Atkinson argued that:

Until we find a director of force and vision, like M. Vakhtangov of the Habima troupe, and surrender entirely to his judgment, we shall never exploit the possibilities of 'theatre' completely. (1)

Although the company performed several other plays, The Dybbuk became the primary attraction for audiences of artists and intellectuals, probably because the play was widely known by these Americans; therefore, the language barrier, which existed for nearly every audience member, was less of an issue. One way audiences could overcome the barrier of the spoken word can be attributed to Vakhtangov’s aim to make the story and themes visually comprehensible. According to the actor, Alexander Karev, Vakhtangov, who did not speak
Hebrew, had often shouted to the actors during rehearsals, "I don’t understand what you’re saying. I don’t understand what you are doing," and he worked with each actor until the meaning was clear through the rhythms and intonations of the language, the broad gestures and dynamic movements, and the physical relationships of the characters (Karev 230). Few foreign companies on tour in the United States had been initially directed to perform for an audience who didn’t understand their language, but the Habima’s visual clarity demonstrated its need to surmount a language barrier in its country of origin. The language of the body created meaning for the American artists who went to the Habima performances for instruction in theatricalization.

The Habima’s production of *The Dybbuk* brought on comparisons with the Neighborhood Playhouse’s English version of the play, which had been directed by a former Habima member, and was revived during the Habima tour. Only one year earlier, the Neighborhood Playhouse had presented their very popular version of the play, directed by the Russian émigré David Vardi (See Figure 3.2). Although the play had been performed in New York in 1922 by the Yiddish Art Theatre and in 1924 by the Vilna Troupe, a famous Yiddish art company, it had received little recognition outside of the Yiddish-speaking community, where the stylization of the productions certainly made an impact. The Vilna Troupe, influenced by German and Russian modernism, had been the first company to perform Ansky’s drama in 1920, and their Expressionist style greatly influenced later productions. *The New York Times* reviewer for the Vilna production,
however, expressed little enthusiasm, and he simply retold the plot of what he called “the strangest Yiddish novelty” offered in New York City. Surprisingly, he made no mention of the troupe’s production style, nor of its potential for instructing American theatre artists, as reviewers of foreign productions almost always did. This company hadn’t been publicized outside of the Yiddish community in America, and though the Vilna name was famous there, it apparently garnered little attention outside that realm.

The Neighborhood Playhouse’s English version, presented two years later, became so popular that a Broadway manager asked the company to move it to his Broadway house (Crowley 217). Personnel constraints and promises to subscribers inhibited the Broadway venture, but *The Dybbuk* remained an unparalleled artistic and financial success for the company. The Neighborhood Playhouse, founded by Alice and Irene Lewisohn, had been greatly influenced by Russian culture and artists throughout its history. In 1912, the first production of the Neighborhood performers, when they were only organized as an amateur club at the Henry Street Settlement, was Olive Tilford Dargan’s *The Shepherd*, a play about the revolutionary movement in Russia. Most of the audience members as well as performers who came from the Settlement were Eastern-European Jews, so there was a constant awareness of trends in Russian drama and theatre. Jacob Ben-Ami, the famous Russian-born Yiddish theatre artist, directed three one-act plays with the troupe The Yiddish Progressive Dramatic Club (of which Lee Strasberg and his brother were members) at the Neighborhood Playhouse in 1915.
The Neighborhood Playhouse produced Russian folk scenes and dances, including the ballet *Petrochka* (*Petrushka*) in 1916, and they presented some of the first American productions of dramas by Leonid Andreev, Zinaida Gippius, and Anton Chekhov. Following the success of Balieff’s *Chauve-Souris* in 1922, the Neighborhood began their annual Grand Street Follies, which echoed the “whimsical naïve character” of the Russian troupe (Crowley 117). In 1923, Richard Boleslavsky gave instructions to the Neighborhood’s performers and directed several productions. The playhouse performers, then, were not alien to various Russian approaches to theatre when they met with David Vardi to begin work on *The Dybbuk*. Because of their work with Boleslavsky, the performers were quite familiar with many of the rehearsal techniques which had emerged from the Moscow Art Theatre’s First Studio, of which both Boleslavsky and Vakhtangov had been part. The performers had also been trained in movement and dance, some of them had even worked with Michel Fokine (Horwitz 65), so they were more prepared than most American performers at that time to work on a stylized presentation with a Russian director.

In only ten weeks, Vardi tried to create a rhythmic and expressive mystery using many techniques he had learned from Vakhtangov. Alice Lewisohn Crowley, a founding member of the playhouse and assistant to Vardi, described the rehearsal process (without associating it with Vakhtangov) at length. The following excerpt reveals Vakhtangov’s influence on Vardi’s directing practices:
From realistic studies of their types through improvisation of the background and home life of the characters, the actors had to undergo a process of gradual transformation until they could realize their supernatural prototypes. Day after day in rehearsal the beggars fought among themselves, grumbled, growled, suffered, and gobbled food, at first politely and decorously, then with growing abandon, until at last their beggarhood seemed to take itself supernatural attributes and ultimately the grotesque stature of fiends let loose by the disembodied Channon to capture his promised bride. (Crowley 213)

Vardi borrowed much of the staging and musical scores freely from the Habima interpretation and production, though ultimately the productions were very dissimilar. Vardi’s collaborators, the actors and artists of the Neighborhood Playhouse, who were far removed from Soviet experimentation and life, created a less rigid and grotesque presentation. The Jewish folk characteristics, romanticized by the Americans, came through in the songs, dances, costumes, and set pieces, which were less distorted or exaggerated than they had been in Vakhtangov’s staged critique of folk traditions. The absence of harsh, geometrical make-up and sharp angularity in design removed the Neighborhood Playhouse production from the nightmarish Expressionism of the Habima’s The Dybbuk. One reviewer described the Neighborhood’s revival production as a “somber and eerie beauty” in which “the racial, religious, and folk emotions are given eloquent and impressive expression” (“The Dybbuk’ Revived” 27). After
seeing the Habima’s *The Dybbuk*, J. Brooks Atkinson made the necessary comparisons between its bold and grotesque stylization and the Neighborhood Playhouse’s more subtle and natural stylization, yet he concluded that the “Neighborhood performance is a very good one indeed, and the legitimate offspring of the Habima” ("*The Dybbuk* in Hebrew" 24). Critics attributed the artistic success of both of these productions to the visionary directors responsible for unity. The points of interest in both productions were the highly stylized ensemble acting and the musical accompaniment that aided in creating the mystical atmosphere. However, the Habima production received more attention for the design elements, which were so foreign in their abstractions, and the Neighborhood produced more interest in the actual play, which had not been subverted to achieve any greater political significance.

The popular success of the Neighborhood Playhouse’s *The Dybbuk* in addition to the Habima tour, the Vilna Troupe’s popularity, and Goset’s international publicity prompted an explosion of experimentation in non-realistic production in the American Yiddish art theatres. Yiddish art theatres developed in America in much the same way that had they developed throughout Europe. With immigrant membership of German and Eastern-European Jews, the Yiddish art theatres emerged primarily under the influences of both German and Russian art theatres in addition to developing out of unique Yiddish folk culture. The Moscow Art Theatre, in particular, served as a model for the Yiddish art theatres in Europe such as the Perez Hirshbein Troupe, based in Odessa, and the Vilna
Troupe, and many members of these two theatres, in particular, emigrated to the United States in the 1910s and 1920s. One of the leading figures in the development of Yiddish art theatres in America, Jacob Ben-Ami, had been a member of the Hirshbein Troup, and when he emigrated to the United States in 1912, he brought with him a conviction to produce quality literary plays with talented, professional actors. When he signed a contract to perform with Maurice Schwartz, who founded the Yiddish Irving Place Theatre (later the Yiddish Art Theatre), Ben-Ami required a commitment from Schwartz to produce a play of literary merit, chosen by Ben-Ami, at least once during each season. Ben-Ami performed with Schwartz's company for only one year before he established his first company, the Jewish Art Theatre. Even after Ben-Ami drifted away from Schwartz to found his own art theatres (and eventually performing with the Civic Repertory Theatre), Schwartz' theatre tried to maintain a high level of artistic performance. Both Schwartz and Ben-Ami worked primarily in naturalism, where they were most successful, although both of them explored a variety of styles throughout their careers. From 1926-1929, in particular, both men worked with the bold stylization represented in the work of the Habima and Goset (and other Russian and German experimental theatres).

Raiken Ben-Ari, a member of Habima, believed that his company had brought about a profound effect on Schwartz, "for shortly after its departure, [Schwartz] presented several plays in which its influences were strongly felt" (qtd. in Levy 377). However, Schwartz's interest in theatricality and stylization
did not derive only from the Habima; he had been exposed to various European and Russian experiments before Habima had arrived. He had toured Europe in 1924, had aided the Vilna Troup in the United States tour that same year, and had been working with Russian artists who had arrived from the Soviet Union in the 1920s. His most bold attempts at stylization did, however, occur during and after the Habima troupe’s tour. For his 1926-27 season, Schwartz hired Russian artists, who were familiar with Soviet experimentation to work on his adaptation of a Goldfadn play retitled, *The Tenth Commandment*, which opened in November 1926. Moscow’s Goset had produced the adaptation only ten months earlier.

Schwartz’s decision to produce this play reveals how aware he was of developments in Soviet theatre as well as his knowledge that his Jewish audiences, who were also attuned to cultural activities in Soviet Russia. The Russian artists involved in the production included Boris Aronson, the set designer who had studied with Alexandra Exter at the Kamerny Theatre; Joseph Akron, the composer who had worked with Goset; Mikhail Mordkin, who taught plastic movement to Schwartz’s actors; and Michel Fokine, who choreographed the ballet (Nahshon 24).

The production of *The Tenth Commandment* received the greatest acclaim of the season for Schwartz, who was otherwise criticized for a hodge-podge approach to stylization and mere opportunism. The play, dealing with the temptations of good and evil and ranging in location from earth to heaven and hell, easily allowed for elements of Theatricalism. Demons and angels rushed
about the “ever-changing series of Constructivist sets,” designed by Aronson to allow rapid and varied movement on many levels. Vivid green lighting and grotesque masks complimented the set, thereby creating highly stylized production. Ben-Ari applauded *The Tenth Commandment* for consistency of form, the harmony of the play, Schwartz’s interpretation, and Boris Aronson’s unifying designs (Levy 377). J. Brooks Atkinson of *The New York Times* seemed somewhat bored by the lengthy production that he called “unfinished,” but he praised the use of Constructivist sets, fantastic make-up and costumes, eerie masks, and the stylized movements. “None of the rigidity of the Anglo-Saxon theatre cramps Mr. Schwartz’ style as a director,” he wrote, and added that audiences of the English-speaking stage could discover the “magic of life on the Yiddish stage” (27). John Mason Brown seemed most impressed by Aronson’s multiple Constructivist sets, which he called “the bravest experiments in scenic design” of the season, and he greatly admired the energetic use of them (89). He also enjoyed the production’s “vivid, deep-dyed theatricality, for the sheer joy of theatricality” (89).

Of course, not everyone appreciated Schwartz’s exploration of non-realistic trends in production. For example, Celia Adler, one of the performers, disliked experimentation with new forms and claimed that Schwartz was simply avoiding realistic production in order to “demonstrate his sophisticated awareness of the new stylized methods of production” (Levy 357). In the productions of this period, Adler believed that Schwartz had allowed himself and the actors to be
swallowed by the spectacle of the scenery. Another critic of Schwartz's experimental phase argued that the director had to "bend over backwards" to try to stay in touch with the trends, for Schwartz worked best in realistic productions, and never truly seemed suited to the new forms (Nahshon 24). Schwartz was not the only director accused of inartistic motives in theatrical experimentation. Ben-Ami and the Vilna Troupe were also criticized as opportunists when they employed anti-realistic techniques in performance in the late 1920s. The excitement with which many Jewish audiences in the East-Side watched Soviet Russia take shape and the continuous arrival of Russian artists in the United States promoted this experimentation, which was, ultimately, driven by commercial as well as artistic and political incentives. After a few financially disastrous seasons, many of the Yiddish art theatres returned to their earlier, realistic approaches to interpretation and production (Nahshon 25).

As demonstrated in Vardi's work with the Neighborhood Playhouse and Aronson's designs the Yiddish Art Theatres, Russian émigré artists largely influenced non-realistic theatrical production in the United States in the late 1910s and 1920s. Many Russian émigrés came with entire touring organizations such as Habima or the Moscow Art Theatre, while others came individually to direct, design, exhibit their art, or to simply start a new life. As designers,
directors, and actors, innumerable Russian artists established themselves in Yiddish theatres, little theatres, commercial theatres, amateur clubs, and universities throughout the United States. Among the most visible influences were the Russian designers, who brought attention to Russian pre-revolutionary scene painting, on one end of the spectrum, and post-revolutionary Constructivist design, on the other. So many Russian artists emigrated to America, exhibited their work, designed for the theatre, and taught in studios and universities that is impossible here to track them all, but among the most prominent were Boris Anisfeld, Nicholas Roerich (Rerikh), Erte (Romain de Tirtov), Sergei Sudeikin, Nikolai Remisov, Boris Aronson, Mordecai Gorelik, and Marc Chagall. In 1921, The Russian Arts and Crafts Studio, a New York organization led by Irving and Nathanial Eastman, listed thirteen Russian artists in their organization. In an advertisement which appeared in *Theatre Arts Monthly*, the company boasted that its expertise in scenic and costume construction and “lighting arrangement” had been seen on the stages of the Chicago Opera Co., the Hippodrome, Ziegfield’s Theatre, and the Winter Garden, among others. The fame of the Ballets Russes artists assured a reputation for Russian artists in the United States, and numerous artists and entrepreneurs capitalized on that reputation, and they also (knowingly or unknowingly) encouraged continual cultural contact between Soviet and the United States throughout the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, as Russian performers and companies came to the U.S. and Americans traveled to the Soviet Union.
An important mediator in the long-time cultural exchange between the Soviet Union and the United States was Nikolai Roerich. Roerich, who had been a member of Diaghilev's World of Art group, gained international recognition as the scenic designer for Stravinsky's controversial *Rites of Spring*, presented by the Ballets Russes in Paris in 1913. Like most of the early Ballets Russes artists, Roerich worked primarily as a scene painter, and while simplified, plastic settings developed throughout Europe, he continued to paint sensuous and atmospheric backdrops and curtain-fronts for ballets and operas. Roerich, known as much for his theosophical mysticism as for his art, painted the mysterious and spiritual aspects of ancient and mythic landscapes into his backdrops, blending his intuitive and archeological knowledge of ancient rites and pagan rituals. Many of Roerich's easel paintings and theatrical designs use bold and vivid colors, tending toward primitivism, in order to capture ancient Slavic folk life and ritual and a pantheistic view of nature. His design for the Chicago Opera House, Mussorgsky's *The Snow Maiden* (1920, employed his characteristic combination of a mystical and historical interpretation of Slavic folk culture.

Roerich's art and scenic designs were exhibited periodically in the United States. For example, many of his paintings appeared at the St. Louis Tradefair of 1904, his work was presented in his own show under the auspices of Christian Brinton in 1921, and many of his works were part of a national exhibit of Russian artists in 1922-23, also arranged by Brinton. However, painted backdrops, even Russian ones, rapidly lost favor among theatrical modernists in the early 1920s,
and Roerich became less interested in design for the theatre. More important, perhaps, than Roerich's occasional designs in the U.S., beginning after his emigration in 1920, were some his other activities. For instance, in 1921, he founded the Master Institute for United Arts, which provided lessons in painting, sculpture, writing, and music for students in Chicago. By 1923, this institute became attached to the Roerich Museum and the Corona Mundi Art Museum which exhibited and sold international works of art. Through these institutions, Roerich aided the cultural exchange of art between the Soviet Union and the United States, even though the two countries had no official trade or diplomatic relations until 1933, when Franklin Roosevelt officially recognized the U.S.S.R.

In contrast to Nicholas Roerich, the Russian designer Boris Aronson became and remained a fixture in the American theatre. His career spanned over five decades, during which time he worked with some of the most prominent Russian, European, and American artists. His achievements had a major impact on American theatre during his career, and this work has continued to influence subsequent generations. Aronson acquired his aesthetic sensibility in a tumultuous, revolutionary era in Russia. He studied with Alexandra Exter in the late 1910s and assisted her in a production of Romeo and Juliet at the Kamerny Theatre in 1920. In 1922, Aronson left the Soviet Union to travel with an exhibit of Russian art to Berlin, and he never returned. After a year in Germany, Aronson emigrated to the United States, where he almost immediately embarked upon his influential career in the American theatre. Aronson's work in the United States
can be viewed in three phases, for after a brief period with the Yiddish art theatres, he greatly modified his Russian avant-garde approach to design in order to better suit the demands of the American stage (the Group Theatre in particular). However, he periodically returned to his interest in theatricality and stylized settings from the 1950s-1970s for works such as *Orpheus Descending* (1957) and *Company* (1970).

Aronson's earliest design work in the American theatre reflected the dynamic traits of the Russian avant-garde which had such an influence on his aesthetic. However, only his early relationships with Yiddish theatres had allowed him to design freely in his bold, theatrical style. His first job came with the Unser Theatre, a Yiddish theatre in the Bronx, in 1923. There, he designed bright and abstract constructions for S. Ansky’s *Day and Night* and David Pinski’s *The Final Balance*, before economic hardships forced the theatre company to fold. Next, he worked for Rudolf Schildkraut, a famous German and Yiddish actor, whose experimental productions (at the Unser Theatre) captured the attention of English-speaking modernists. In a review of *The Bronx Express* at the Schildkraut Theatre in 1925, Kenneth MacGowan likened the show to something he had seen at the Kamerny Theatre in 1914 and said that “in America it remained for the Bronx to demonstrate the foreground and background and costumes all shaped and distorted into a visual dramatization of Futurist theory” (qtd. in Rich 10). MacGowan pointed out that the extraordinary sets had been
designed by "an artist from Moscow, B. Aronson" (10). Additionally, a caption accompanying one of Aronson’s set designs in 1926 states:

‘Constructivism’ has seemed to be a sort of monopoly of the revolutionary Russian theatre; and it is therefore something of a surprise to learn that in New York City - somewhere out where the Bronx subway ends - a little experimental theatre, Unser Theatre, has been mounting plays in the most modernistic fashion. The designs are by a Russian artist who modestly signs himself B. Aronson, who aims to abolish the ‘illusory, the explanatory’ in scenery [...] (131) (See Figure 3.3).

Because of the amount of attention Aronson was receiving from Yiddish and English-speaking audiences, Maurice Schwarts quickly hired him, and Aronson then helped to define the stylization of the Yiddish Art Theatre from 1925-1929. Aronson’s biographers, Frank Rich and Lisa Aronson, noted that the Yiddish Art Theatre’s production of The Tenth Commandment “contained some of Aronson’s most elaborate flights into Constructivism, symbolism, and whimsical fantasy” (10).

The Tenth Commandment received a great deal of attention from artists and intellectuals throughout New York, and soon Aronson’s work was exhibited at the Anderson Galleries on Park Avenue at 57th Street. The exhibition in 1927, sponsored by many leading American theatre artists and theorists, brought Aronson’s work into the modernist American mainstream. That same year Aronson’s designed his first sets for the English-speaking stage when his
application to design Gustav Weid’s $2 \times 2 = 5$ for the Civic Repertory Theatre was accepted. The play, contrasting the lifestyles of a modernist woman and her traditionalist husband called for a stylized rather than a conventional, set which would depict through exaggeration the contradictory ways these two individuals viewed the world. Aronson’s work bore the mark of bold and vivid theatricality that the director, Eva Le Gallienne, sought for the play, and he created designs which were labeled “surrealist” for the production. Aronson said that if the play had been called $2 \times 2 = 4$, he would not have gotten the job because at that time, he had only created abstract settings in various modernist European and Russian styles (Rich 12). As Exter had taught him, Aronson allowed the play to determine the style of each design. Rather than sticking to any formula, in his work for $2 \times 2 = 5$, he revealed his ability to work in various abstract styles, not only the Futurist-cubist and Constructivist styles for which he became known in the Yiddish theatres. In the 1930s, Aronson moved out of the Yiddish theatres and into the Broadway theatres, primarily through his work with the Group Theatre, though his work grew increasingly less stylized. Because the Group Theatre tended to produce social dramas of a realistic nature, Aronson’s penchant for the fantastical and highly theatrical was curtailed in the late 1930s and didn’t return until the late 1950s.

Unfortunately, Aronson’s biographers completely ignore Aronson’s work with the Artef, the Yiddish Worker’s Theatre Alliance. Of course, Communist-baiting and McCarthyism in the 1940s and 1950s encouraged artists like Aronson
and some members of the Group Theatre to sever ties to any political ideologies or affiliations which might have endangered their careers. Well into the 1980s, artists and their biographers gloss over or minimize connections to leftist political thought and Soviet dogma in particular, even though numerous artists and intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s openly celebrated communism or looked to Soviet Russia for aesthetic instruction. In Boris Aronson, Frank Rich and Lisa Aronson indicate that Aronson’s work was entirely apolitical. For example, they point out several times that Aronson admired the work of Meyerhold, but they stressed that he despised Meyerhold’s politics. Certainly, Aronson’s early career development in the Kamerny Theatre could suggest his inclination toward an aesthetic that had less to do with politics than with art, but his work as a designer and a board member for Artef, an organization supported by the Communist Party in America (one of two communist parties at that time) and other ultra left-wing organizations, did not allow him to be entirely apolitical. The Artef is just one of many leftist organizations that looked to Russian leadership for developing an artistic as well as a political theatre in the United States. Not all members of Artef were radical, as Edna Nahshon points out, but they could not have been oblivious to the political nature of the organization (21). On several occasions, Aronson’s designs for Artef enabled the theatre to achieve its goal to be revolutionary both artistically and politically.

The early work of Artef represents, perhaps, the height of Russian revolutionary, avant-garde influence on the American theatre. The Artef
combined revolutionary ideology with a search for experimental new forms of expression to be performed by workers for workers. Guided by the policies of the Proletkult and Goset, the Artef continuously adapted its beliefs about the role and appropriate forms of culture in society to conform with the Communist Party’s cultural programs. Like the Proletkult, the Artef began through workshops to develop a high level of non-realistic performance with the intent of creating an entirely proletarian form of theatre which would promote revolutionary ideals while developing a “profoundly cultured public” (Nahshon 13). Though hundreds of Soviet-influenced workers theatres sprung up throughout the United States in the 1930s, the Artef, one of the earliest such organizations, had the strongest link to early Soviet experimentation because of its connection to Russian artists who guided the theatre artistically while Soviet ideology guided the theatre politically.

The leaders of the Jewish Labor Movement, which was comprised of socialists, communists, and labor union activists who shared a leftist ideology but disagreed among themselves on many issues, had long debated the possibilities of a worker’s theatre before Artef was created in 1925. In 1915, the Educational Committee of the Workmen’s Circle, an immigrant workers’ society, began support for the Yiddish Folksbine, an amateur people’s theatre aimed at presenting high quality social dramas for Yiddish audiences. The Folksbine presented plays, often directed by Russians, every season at the Neighborhood Playhouse well into the 1930s, but it was not an organ of the Labor Movement. From 1923, the Folks Farband far Kunst Theatre (People’s Association for Art
Theatre), supported Maurice Schwarz's Yiddish Art Theatre and in return held debates and social events at his theatre, where leaders and artists discussed the possibilities for a workers' theatre to serve the revolutionary Jewish left (Nahshon 20). In 1925, The Freiheit, the official publication of the Communist Party, supported a group of young Russian-Jewish workers who founded Artef initially as the Freiheit Drama Studio. Most of the seven founders of the group, according to Edna Nahshon, had emigrated to the United States around 1922:

All had been greatly influenced by the Bolshevik Revolution. They were mainly shopworkers employed in the garment industry.... All were members of industrial unions affiliated with the Communist Party, and some of them were card-holding members. (30)

The young founders soon came under the leadership of Jacob Mestel, a former member of a Viennese Yiddish company and great admirer of Max Reinhardt. Mestel largely directed the aesthetic path of the Artef, which always aimed at promoting high culture. In 1926, the group came under the direction of the Folks Farband, which elected a board of artists and intellectuals to oversee the Artef studio and theatre. Among members of the board were Mestel, Boris Aronson, Nathaniel Buchwald, who was the drama critic for Freiheit, other Freiheit members, and several students of the studio (Nahshon 35).

Of the organization, Buchwald later said, "The Artef insisted from the very outset on high standards in every department of the theatrical art, believing that to be effective revolutionary art it must be art first, and all the time" (qtd. in
In a training program designed to last three years, the Artef studio initially had nineteen students (though it soon added twelve more) who studied acting, voice and diction, plastic movement and dance, standard Yiddish dialect, dramaturgy, theatre history, dramatic literature, and make-up. Among the teachers were Mestel, Michel Fokine, Benno Schneider (of Habima), and Buchwald. The training emphasized an exaggerated and theatrical style of performance based on techniques developed by Vakhtangov, Meyerhold, and Foregger. Such techniques complied with the group’s desire to overthrow bourgeois forms of expression. Mestel and Schneider taught uniform and mechanical techniques for acting which emphasized the unity of the group and avoided individualizing characters, and their earliest productions reflected this style (Nahshon 92). Indeed, after a highly criticized performance of the realistic play, *In the Whirl of Machines*, in 1931, Buchwald pointed out that the actors lacked the training for psychologically-complex, realistic characters (Nahshon 82).

Because the organization desired high standards of art, it did not present any work publicly until 1927, when students were considered ready for performances. Their earliest presentations were part of large Party-sponsored mass spectacles and celebrations. That year, for example, they presented the play *Strike*, an agitprop piece consisting of pantomime, song and dance, at the dedication of a cooperative housing project in New York City (Nahshon 33). Artef also participated in two remarkable mass spectacles, obviously influenced
by Soviet mass spectacle, celebrating revolutionary ideals. The first one, *A Mass Play and Ballet of the Russian Revolution*, a panorama commemorating Lenin, presented four important moments in Soviet history. According to Edna Nahshon, several hundred participants from many communist organizations staged various short scenes, including ones that depicted life under Nicholas II, a workers' revolt, Lenin's death, and life in Soviet Russia (44). This little known massive spectacle took place in Madison Square Garden on January 21, 1928 before twenty thousand spectators. A similar event involved the Artef performers in May 1928. Again in Madison Square Garden a mass spectacle was presented before large crowds. This event celebrated the sixth anniversary of the Freiheit, and this time the spectacle depicted scenes from the American Jewish Labor Movement. The production, called *Red, Yellow, and Black*, opened with scenes from the Lower East Side that showed people celebrating the Russian Revolution in 1917, followed by a dance enacting the struggles for power of various socialist organizations in the U.S. The next scene presented a strike and the clash between the workers, the bosses, and the strikebreakers, and the final part of the spectacle brought actual party organizers and Freiheit workers onto the stage and culminated in "The Internationale," sung by performers and spectators. Jacob Mestel directed the entire spectacle, Boris Aronson designed the sets, and Edith Segal choreographed the dances (Nahshon 45-47). Organizers of this event adopted strategies from the early mass spectacles in Soviet Russia. By staging reenactments of historic events and using some of the actual participants, Mestel
blended the “real” with high theatricality in movement and design. Another strategy Mestel adopted from mass spectacles in Soviet Russia was having performers join audience members in celebration of communism and solidarity through song.

In 1929, Benno Schneider became the artistic director for Artef. He quickly helped to build the company’s artistic reputation. Schneider, who came to the United States with Habima, first became associated with the company as the studio’s make-up teacher in 1927. In 1929, Schneider directed one of Artef’s most popular productions, an adaptation of Sholom Aleichem’s comedy, The Aristocrats. The Artef used a Soviet adaptation of the play which highlighted the class struggles depicted in the play, centering on a wealthy Russian-Jewish family and their servants. The Russian designer, Moi Solotarov, who had worked for the Neighborhood Playhouse, designed the Artef production. Through exaggeration and distortion, the humble servants and their bright domestic sphere highly contrasted with the disingenuous Gold family in their gaudy environment. The sharply stylized acting style, set designs, costumes, lighting and make-up all combined to remove the play from the mundane to the fantastical as it highlighted differences between the classes. Schneider was praised both inside and outside of the Yiddish community for his visionary and harmonious directing style. Schneider’s approach to directing was similar to Vakhtangov’s, and he was often accused later of reducing the actors to submissive robots in his pursuit of a unified and stylized production. Artef’s early productions all bore the mark of
Schneider and Mestel's interest in theatricality, though not all of his productions were presented in the grotesque fashion of The Aristocrats. Rather, the productions ranged from Symbolism to Expressionism to the machine-age combination of Biomechanics and Constructivism. Soon, however, new Communist Party policies toward art and the growth of the Workers' Theatre Movement in American required Artef to amend its style to appeal to a growing number of left-wing audiences.

In late 1929, the Commintern (the Russian controlled organization for International Communism) issued a cultural policy which stipulated that all works of art should agitate for international working class unity and revolutionary action among proletarian audiences. This marked the beginning of the Third Period of Communism, so-called by Joseph Stalin, following the first period of revolution and the second period of reconstruction. International communists developed systems for judging an artwork's value to the proletariat, and they dictated the forms that drama should take. For example, the guidelines stipulated that the protagonist had to be from among the masses; the theme should present the necessity of communism and revolutionary action. The play must present clear divisions of good and evil, and the good should always prevail (Levine 88). To meet the requirements of agitation for Communism in line with the Party, workers' theatre collectives throughout the Western world adopted agitprop style performances, which were being popularized by the Soviet Proletkult and the
Blue Blouse troupes. Agitprop, as described by Daniel Friedman, was characterized by the following:

- Radical political content; simplicity and mobility of set, costume, and make-up; the integration of dialogue with chanting, choral reading, singing, music, dance, and circus techniques; the consequent use of an extremely physical, presentational acting style; and the use of archetypal characters and symbolic imagery, which, tied together by political association in the form of montage, became the basic dramatic structure.

(113)

The worldwide Great Depression sparked a massive shift toward class consciousness which had already been triggered by the Russian Revolution and other international revolutionary activities. In the United States, the economic boom of the twenties and anti-Soviet campaigns had tempered revolutionary activities, but the conditions in the early 1930s enabled revolutionary fervor to rebuild into what Harvey Khler has called “the Heyday of American communism.” During this time of great social awareness, workers’ theatres popped up everywhere: in schools, factories, shops, universities, unions, and social clubs, and they presented plays for workers in every conceivable space where workers could be reached. After a conference for Workers’ Theatre in 1931, Hallie Flanagan accurately predicted:

> When we see, as we probably shall during the next year, their street plays and pageants, their performances on trucks and street corners, we shall
probably find them crude, violent, childish, and repetitious. Yet we must admit that here is a theatre which can afford to be supremely unconcerned with what we think of it. ("A Theatre is Born" 915)

At the height of the Workers' Theatre Movement in the U.S. in 1934, according to Friedman, there were 400 workers' theatres, both foreign-language and English-speaking, across the United States that were affiliated with the national organization, the League of Workers Theatres (112). The organizations ranged in quality, but they were united by the same "herculean aim," as Flanagan called it, which was the "reorganization of our social order" ("A Theatre" 915). At the 1931 meeting, the affiliation of the Workers Theatre Movement with the U.S.S.R was unabashedly presented through the free and open display of Soviet banners and messages from the Soviet Union. But, although they were clearly inspired by Soviet agitprop theatres, such as the Blue Blouse groups and the Proletkult in particular, the American workers' theatres eventually found forms and content which were more appropriate to the problems and struggles of workers in the United States.

As more and more workers theatres emerged in the United States in the 1930s, the Artef came under heavy pressure from the Communist Party leaders who believed that the theatre company didn't reach enough proletarian audiences, didn't produce adequately revolutionary plays, and didn't operate as a collective. The level of sophistication of Artef productions seemed alienating to the working classes. Under such pressure, the Artef moved toward agitprop theatre, and they
softened their hard-edged style and produced many crudely written American and Soviet revolutionary plays for several years. Eventually, in the mid 1930s, they performed several very successful social dramas on Broadway ranging in styles from socialist realism to high Theatricalism. In 1934, the play, *Recruits* [Rekrutn], by the Soviet Yiddish Lipe Resnick became the company’s first Broadway success, and several plays including *200,000* by Sholem Aleichem and *Uriel Acosta* by Karl Gutskov were successful in the 1936-37 season. But for most of its existence, Artef struggled to find an audience, keep a permanent space, and avoid the harsh criticism of its communist supporters as ideology toward art zig-zagged throughout the late 1920s and 1930s.

Following an explosive period of experimentation in forms in the late 1920s and early 1930s, America’s theatre of social protest settled into less radical forms politically and artistically. The decline of the Workers’ Theatre Movement in the late 1930s helped bring to a close the interest in revolutionary ideas and revolutionary forms in the theatre, though social consciousness would remain a concern of various individuals and groups in the American theatre. Stalin’s popularity among left-wing intellectuals diminished, and interest in new Soviet theatrical forms waned along with it. When Revolutionary Marxism soon gave way to New Deal reform politics as the favored leftist ideology, theatres became more inclined to present works along the new line of liberalism, characterized by social problem plays in realistic or epic theatrical styles (Levine 133). One of the most influential American theatre companies, the Group Theatre, which began as
a theatre collective with revolutionary ideals, shaped their artistic aesthetic by continuously producing realistic social dramas, more suited to Stanislavsky's approaches to theatre than Vakhtangov's (though organizers claim allegiance to Vakhtangov also). Audiences for dramas with a social conscience grew, enabling groups like the Group Theatre and Artef to perform successfully on Broadway, but in a digestible, comprehensible, and coherent form. Another factor in the decline of worker's theatres and revolutionary politics in the theatre was the inception of The Federal Theatre Project in 1934, which not only gave paying jobs to many theatre workers who were not being paid in the workers' theatres, but also produced numerous plays of social consciousness throughout the United States (Friedman 117). The period for revolution soon passed, but the conscience remained, and as artists looked for less abstract theatrical models more appropriate to the new era, they turned more and more toward Stanislavsky, who enabled them to perform the new social dramas of Odets, Williams, and Miller. Without question, the popular success of groups like the Theatre Guild and the Group Theatre in this era of social consciousness contributed to the emergence of Stanislavsky, rather than Meyerhold or Vakhtangov, as the most influential Russian artist in the history of American theatre.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, many American artists and intellectuals looked to Russians for guidance in aesthetics and/or politics. As they searched for Russian models and guides, Americans adapted new techniques and ideas appropriate to their own milieu, distinct from their Russian counterparts'
experiences. As American theatre critics and authors watched Russian performances, they often noted the cultural gaps between Americans and Russians, even as they urged American artists to pay attention to the modernist advances in Soviet theatres. Russian émigré artists soon recognized the cultural differences and made necessary adjustments. As Boris Aronson’s biographers pointed out, Aronson viewed America and Russia as inversely related in art and technology. Awestruck by the skyscrapers revealing the modern industrialism of New York City, Aronson soon understood why its stages had little interest in the glorified machine of Constructivism and Biomechanics. The horse-drawn carriages of a Moscow desiring modernization through technology were a far cry from the numerous automobiles cramping the New York City streets (Rich 10). Yet what Moscow lacked in technology, it made up for in the dynamism of the theatre, which was for Aronson lacking in New York (Rich 10). Aronson, like other artists coming from the Russian stages, sought a balance between the two worlds. Even the workers’ theatre companies knew that they had to create a theatre for their own audiences in America, regardless of how much stimulation they got from Russia. Hallie Flanagan noted this mode of accommodation in her 1931 article on the workers’ theatre conference. Though the participants sang the “Internationale” and decorated their walls with banners of the U.S.S.R., they addressed the concerns of American workers and realized they had to find forms appropriate to them. When these theatre groups abandoned Soviet dramas, they produced agitprop pieces on such topics as coal miners, mid-Western farmers, and
inner-city industrial and shop workers. Certainly, even when the result was a hybrid of American and Russian cultures, Russian revolutionary theatre styles greatly influenced and promoted American theatrical experimentation, particularly in the realm of the political, in the late 1920s and 1930s.

1 While there are many excellent studies of Russian theatre, for further reading on Russian theatrical experimentation, I suggest Robert Leach’s Revolutionary Theatre (1994), Alma Law and Mel Gordon’s Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia (1996), Leach and Victor Borosky’s A History of the Russian Theatre (1999), Spencer Golub’s The Recurrence of Fate: Theatre and Memory in Twentieth Century Russia (1994), Robert Russell and Andrew Barrett’s Russian Theatre in the Age of Modernism (1988), and Konstantin Rudnitsky’s Russian and Soviet Theatre: Traditions in the Avant-Garde (1988). These sources were indispensable resources for the following overview of Russian and Soviet experimental theatre.


3 See Robert William’s Russian Art and American Money for a more detailed account of Christian Brinton’s role in the exhibition and sale of Russian art and for an in-depth account of Roerich’s own activities in the sale of Russian art in the U.S.

4 See The Secret World of American Communism edited by Harvey Khler, John Earl Haynes and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov and The Heyday of American Communism by Harvery Khler.

Audiences of Russian workers are quick to respond to the "Living Newspapers," enacted by the "Blue Blouses," amateur theatrical groups organized for purposes of communistic education throughout the Soviet Republic. Each week a central body sends out from Moscow leaflets and magazines containing ideas and suggestions, which the workers themselves develop into satirical sketches, pantomimes, and group dance-forms. These impromptu plays suggest the Guild plays of the Middle Ages and in their performance the technique of the commedia dell'arte, and have been acclaimed as training schools in acting and dramatic expression. From the aesthetic point of view, the greatest achievement of these groups has been the creation of a fine unity of spirit between actors and audience. The illustration here presented shows a group representing the working people of Russia grieving for the passing of their hero Lenin.

Figure 3.1: "Blue Blouses" photo with caption from Theatre Arts Monthly, January 1926
Produced at the Neighborhood Playhouse by David Vardi in association with Alice Lewisohn, *The Dybbuk* has been mounted and performed with the accurate authenticity this masterly picture of the Chassidic ghetto deserves. Ansky's play possesses the direct force of folklore; and in the first production of the play in English, one of the most arresting effects has been the fashion in which individual actors emerge from the moving groups and sink back into them.

Figure 3.2: Neighborhood Playhouse production of *The Dybbuk*. Photo with caption from *Theatre Arts Monthly*, February 1926
"Constructivism" has seemed to be a sort of monopoly of the revolutionary Russian theatre; and it is therefore something of a surprise to learn that in New York City—somewhere out where the Bronx subway ends—a little experimental theatre, Unser Theater, has been mounting plays in the most modernistic fashion. The designs are by a Russian artist who modestly signs himself B. Aronson, who aims to abolish the "illusory, the explanatory," in scenery, and to dispense with the convention of painted canvas for the purpose of creating illusion.

Figure 3.3: Boris Aronson design for Unser Theatre. Photo with caption from Theatre Arts Monthly, February 1926
CONCLUSION

Russian influence on American modernist theatre occurred within many complex and contradictory contexts, which helped to define the extent and shape of that influence. Some of the leading factors which encouraged the relationships between Russian artists and their American counterparts include the advent of modernism in the American theatre, the immigration of Eastern Europeans to the United States, the conditions of American consumerism and commercialism, and the Bolshevik revolution and all of its domestic and international ramifications. Within each of these vast and overlapping developments and historical realities, Russian culture became increasingly acknowledged and revered by American artists and thinkers, sometimes because of politics, sometimes because of artistry, and sometimes because of both. This study, in an effort to understand American artists' enthusiasm for Russian artists beyond Stanislavsky, has examined some of the most significant moments when Russian performance crossed American paths in the early decades of the twentieth century. In particular, this study has examined key figures whose part in the early history of Russian influence in American theatre largely has been ignored.
Certainly, Stanislavsky's influence on the modern American theatre has been great, but our attention to his influence has overshadowed the influence of other Russian artists and non-realistic approaches to theatre. For example, Robert Leach's survey "Russian theatre and Western theatres" (1999) explores the impact that Russian modernist theatre had on theatres in the West. After he examines the impact that the Proletkult, Blue Blouse troupes, Meyerhold and others had on political theatre in England and Germany, he shifts to the United States and discusses Stanislavsky's influence and summarizes Mikhail Chekhov's work here during World War II. Such a survey suggests that the Russian avant-garde had little or no impact on the American theatre until the 1940s. My study has broadened that perspective as it has examined the work of other Russians who greatly influenced the American theatre.

Yiddish theatre artists and audiences significantly aided the transportation and popularization of Russian theatre artists, practices, and theories to the American stage. The ability of many Jewish artists and thinkers to cross cultural and linguistic borders enabled them to adopt and to adapt Russian culture into Yiddish culture and eventually into American. Any number of artists were alternately identified as Russian, Jewish, and/or American because of their movement within various cultural spheres. Jacob Ben-Ami, Jacob Adler, Maurice Schwartz, Boris Aronson, and Benno Schneider are some of the key artists who traversed those spheres and had a great impact on American theatre.
The history of Russian theatre and culture in America becomes intimately tied to the history of Eastern European Jewish immigration in the United States, though this mass migration is certainly not the exclusive cause of the relationship. Throughout this study, the importance of Eastern European Jews in fostering cultural relationships between Russia and the United States becomes evident. For example, chapter one discusses Jacob Gordin and Jacob Adler's commitment to developing a Yiddish theatre as an art theatre in the fashion of the European art theatres popular in Russia. Chapter two examines the career of Morris Gest, an important impresario of Russian origin, whose early works came in the Yiddish theatres of Boston, and who helped to establish the performance arts of Russia as the greatest in the world for his American audience. And chapter three repeatedly turns to activities in New York's Lower East Side, where the theatre arts of Soviet Russia made a distinct and powerful impact.

Throughout the study, I have noted moments of intercultural collisions which either condemned Russian artists to failure or were carefully negotiated in order to avoid such failures. In addition to an ever-present language barrier, differing notions of aesthetics, morality, the function of the press, and political ideologies widened the gulf between Americans and Russians. Maxim Gorky's disastrous 1906 trip to the United States, for example, exemplified the lack of cultural understanding between Gorky and his mistress and his hosts and audience. Though American sympathy for Russian political dissidents was on the rise in the early part of the twentieth century, few Americans would publicly
defend an adulterer. American morality confronted Russian artists numerous
times, especially in regard to Russian ballets, but the promise of exoticism and
artistry often outweighed the moral outcries. Publicity continued to play an
important role in establishing the relationship between Russian artists and the
American public; press agents and journalists helped to determine the fate of
Russian performers in the United States by smoothing out cultural
misunderstandings or by exacerbating them. Aesthetic differences between the
cultural products of Russians and Americans, coupled with moral and political
differences, in the early twentieth century also required negotiation. This is clear,
for example, in the case of Chaliapin’s first disastrous American performances
and in the work of Boris Aronson as he shifted from the popular Russian stage to
the American Yiddish theatres, and then to American mainstream theatres. The
cultural and historical realities of Russians, Eastern European Jews, and
Americans determined their aesthetic needs and understanding and often made
transitions from one stage to the next extremely complicated.

Producers played a significant role in smoothing out the transitions from
the Russian stage to the American stage. Morris Gest, in his endeavors to bring
significant Russian companies to the United States, negotiated cultural barriers,
stirred interest in the foreign product, controlled the image of the organization
and its stars, elicited financial as well as political support, and defended his
choices against dominant cultural attitudes which threatened the success of the
performances. With the help of the powerful and influential Otto H. Kahn, Gest
managed to clear a path in America for Russian performance. Indeed, by depoliticizing Russian art, the two men helped to establish Russian performance practices as a true measure of theatrical artistry.

Along with producers, English-speaking theatre scholars and journalists played an important role in preparing American audiences and artists for Russian performance. As highlighted in Chapter Three, authors who visited Russian theatres before and after the Russian Revolution garnered American interest in exciting and new Russian avant-garde theatrical practices. Politically idealistic American artists and theorists, in particular, took note of the efforts of Russian theatre artists as they attempted to use theatre to help rebuild society following the Bolshevik Revolution. A continuous stream of émigré artists aided these American artists as they sampled the various Russian techniques in order to transform and restructure society. As others had done earlier in the century, these Russian émigrés enabled Russian aesthetics to filter into American culture by adapting them to meet the social needs in their new home.

This study lays a foundation for the seemingly unlimited possibilities of further research into the Russian influence on the American theatre. The limitations I imposed on this study in order to contain it necessarily excluded many significant contributing factors and individuals who fostered the relationships between American and Russian artists. Because this study focused on events which took place primarily in New York City in the first three decades of the twentieth century where there was so much activity that had not been
explored, the work of many of those individuals has been excluded. The careers of many Russian performers, designers, impresarios, and directors who worked in the United States might be explored in order to generate a more thorough understanding of the impact that the Russian theatre had on the American theatre.

For instance, though the career of Sol Hurok, the Russian-Jewish impresario who managed many significant Russian careers in America and fought to elevate the art of dance throughout his life, has been documented, his work in shaping American perceptions of Russians through their artwork might still be explored. From the 1920s into the early 1970s, Hurok became the single most important impresario of Russian performance in America. During that time, he handled the U. S. tours of Anna Pavlova, Feodor Chaliapin, Michel and Vera Fokine, the Monte Carlo Ballet Russe, the Moiseyev Dance Company, and numerous other performers and companies. Because my study was interested in examining the earliest Russian influences on American theatre, Hurok’s work could not be easily placed here. Further studies of important relationships between Russian and American artists could certainly examine Hurok’s important career.

Innumerable individuals with differing motives stood in the gaps between American and Russian cultures and served as cultural intermediaries. This study identified key artists, intellectuals, émigrés, and producers, often marginalized by both Russian and American dominant cultures, who enabled American artists to find inspiration in Russian theatrical techniques and ideas. From fringe positions,
they mediated both cultures. Many were Eastern European Jews of varying class and intellectual backgrounds, others were leftist intellectuals and radical activists, and some were modernist aesthetes. Together, these individuals helped to alter the course of the American theatre by clearing a path for Russian modernism on the American stage.


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