Chechyk, Valentyna

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Valentyna Chechyk

Abstract

The article is devoted to developing Alexandra Exter's system of decorations on the stages of Ukrainian theatres. The principles of stage design, discovered by Exter in the Moscow productions of *Famira Kifared* (1916), *Salome* (1917), and others, were viewed and shared as a specific methodology among Kyiv and Odesa artists in the Ukrainian Soviet Republic. The article focuses on scenographic projects of the Ukrainian theatrical avant-garde paradigmatic figures – Vadym Meller, Anatol Petrytsky, and Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov. The early Isaac Rabinovich and Vadym Meller were in the circle of Ukrainian adherents, too. Mykhailo Andriienko-Nechytailo, Mykola Sokolov, and many others considered themselves students and followers of Exter in Kyiv. Their stage experience at the turn of the 1910s – 1920s marked the decisive transition of Ukrainian scenography to volumetric-plastic spatial structures that reflected, supported, and contributed to the development of stage action.

Key words

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Instead of an introduction: Alexandra Exter and Ukraine

Alexandra Exter's (b. 1882, the Russian Empire – d. 1949, France) name is widely known to theatre historians and visual arts specialists. Quite a few studies have been published about Exter (see e.g., KOVALENKO 1992, 1993, 2000, 2010a, b; RAILING et al. 2011). Her art has been comprehensively studied, important dates and events of her creative biography have been restored (see NAKOV 1972; BOWLT 1981; HOR-BACHOV 1996; TOBIN 2015; KOVALENKO 2000, 2019, etc.). Exter's contemporaries – friends, colleagues, students, art critics such as Nikolai Kulbin,[1] Benedikt Lifshits, Iakov Tugendhold, Abram Efros, Alexander Tairov, Alisa Koonen, and others – also left their unaffected impressions of her art. They highly appreciated 'the seriousness of her performances and the thoughtfulness of her pursuit'[2] (TUGENDHOLD 1922: 130), her deep knowledge of European art culture, a subtle understanding of modern Western, especially French, artistic tendencies and that freedom of their interpretation, which made it possible for her to achieve a special deeply individual recognition in the professional community.

Exter travelled extensively in Europe, studied and exhibited in Paris, was personally acquainted with Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Guillaume Apollinaire, became friends with Fernand Léger, Robert and Sonia Delaunay. 'The French to the core in her art' is how Lifshits characterises her (LIFSHITS 1989: 312). Exter seriously studied Ukrainian visual culture, folklore, arts and crafts (TURCHAK 2021). She became the initiator of the first exhibitions in the Russian Empire of the Ukrainian villages' decorative arts near Kyiv in 1913. Gifted, 'complex, and versatile' (TUGENDHOLD 1922: 130), according to her contemporaries, Exter worked 'at the extreme edge of aesthetics' (EFROS 1934: 24). A similar statement is true of both her painting and her scenography. According to Kovalenko (2010a: 74), Exter immediately adopted the aesthetics and spirit of French Cubism and legitimised her process in a Kyiv article 'New in French Painting (Cubism. From Roger Allard's Article)' in 1912 (EXTER 1912). And after a couple of years, she moved on to abstraction – the absolute absence of objects. The formative tendencies of her theatre were within these aesthetic systems. For example, in Tairov's performances *Famira Kifared* (1916) and *Salome* (1917) Exter embodied the main discoveries of her 'pictorial dynamism' (TUGENDHOLD 1922: 136): the ideas of space and depth, balance and movement, form and colour. Her methodology for stage design was based on these ideas. Exter generously shared this methodology in masterclasses and lectures for the Free Painting and Sculpture Workshop of Yuliy Bershadsky (1919, Odesa), at the School of Movement by Bronislava Nijinska (1919–1921, Kyiv), and the Elsa Kruger Ballet School (1918–1919, Odesa). Finally, this method's basic provisions were demonstrated in her art workshops' classrooms in Kyiv (1917–1921)

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1   The transliteration of Cyrillic names and titles is done according to the Library of Congress romanisation standards or internationally accepted versions of names. For the artists, whose names exist in more than one transliteration version, Ukrainian transliteration was preferred. Index in (MAKARYK and TKACZ 2010: 593–626) was also used for reference.

2   Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of Russian and Ukrainian sources are mine.

and Odesa (1919–1920). According to Kovalenko (2010b: 10), the foremost researcher of Exter's creativity, these studios immediately became the centre of attraction, a pilgrimage for everyone who was passionately in love with art and longed for change.

Filipp Gosiason, the Odesa artist, recorded and published Exter's lecture 'The Artist in the Theatre' (GOSIASON 1919). There is no doubt that Exter proceeded from the fundamental conflict of the modern theatrical scene – the dissonance between the backdrop pictorial plane and the moving three-dimensional figure of an actor. This basic plastic problem of the theatre was first posed by Craig and Appia. According to Exter's deep conviction (GOSIASON 1919: 4), both Craig and Appia came closest to solving this problem in their architectural constructions. Alexandra Exter also began to build combinations of artistic forms, securing the theatrical artist's right to a plastic organisation of the stage space, devoid of any naturalistic conventions. The artist also voiced a new and obligatory function of decoration creativity – the organisation of the stage movement itself, the movement harmonised with the inner rhythm of the drama. Exter wrote that the movement required according to the inner rhythm of the drama should develop freely along the main guiding lines of these combinations. 'Free movement is the main element of dramatic action,' concluded Exter (quoted in GOSIASON 1919: 4).

No doubt in her approach to theatre Exter primarily thought in categories of fine art. What is more, the artist seemed to have an absolute feeling for the theatrical stage. According to Tairov (1970: 163), she demonstrated a perfect sense of the theatre's effectual elemental force.

Costume as a 'relievo in motion'[3]

The theatrical art of Alexandra Exter incited a rigorous response. Vadym Meller (b. 1884, St. Petersburg – d. 1962, Kyiv) was among the first to weigh in on her work. He had a lot in common with Exter: he was a contemporary, a Kyivite, a cosmopolitan, and an intellectual with sharp artistic thinking. Like Exter, he was known as an expert and a connoisseur of the latest art amongst his friends. Exter and Meller met in pre-war Paris (1912–1914), where Meller moved after graduating from the Munich Academy of Fine Arts (1909–1912). Their next meeting was in Moscow in autumn of 1917. Exter's name did not leave Moscow periodical's pages then. Her triumphant success was ensured by the retrospective presentation of her works at the Jack of Diamonds Exhibition and, of course, the epic *Famira Kifared* (1916), a production of *Salome* at the Moscow Chamber Theatre in 1917. The painter impressed the artistic world of the Russian capital with the explosive energy of her forms and colours. Critics appreciated the efficient nature of her decorations (this 'aggregate of coloured surfaces, moving and changing in psychological accordance with the drama' (TUGENDHOLD 1917: 119)). Efros wrote that Exter was an artist who replaced Cubism for art that was 'even more abstract, but full of the huge temperament of a true painter' (EFROS 1917: 110).

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3   Quoted in (TUGENDHOLD 1922: 139).

Alexandra Exter's painting and theatre influenced and changed a lot of Vadym Meller's art. For instance, after his long break from artistic practice (1914–1917), Meller had become fond of sheer non-objectiveness which defined his art for years to come. Though his friendship with Exter started in the early 1910s, his early abstract composition only dates back to 1917. In 1918, he returned from Moscow to his home city Kyiv to link his fate with a life in the theatre. It was Bronislava Nijinska, the sister of famous Vaclav Nijinsky, a talented dancer, choreographer, and teacher, who provided the experimental platform for Meller. In 1917 she opened a private ballet studio, and in 1919 renamed it to École de Mouvement (VOLKHONOVYCH 1997) which continued to function in Kyiv until 1921. Meller made costume and movement sketches for Nijinska's studio and many of them decorated the walls of her ballet classes (GARAFOLA 2011). Probably among them, there were sketches for the ballets to music *Mephisto Waltz* and *12th Rhapsody* by Liszt, *Masks* by Chopin, and *Assyrian Dances* (choreographic miniature for the ballet *Egyptian Nights* by Arensky), as well as the sketch of a dancer's costume, entitled in some sources *Fear* (or *Fire)* (see VOLKHONOVYCH 1997).

'Approaching the picture, I want to see only a symphony of colour,' Nijinska wrote in her diary (Nijinska quoted in GARAFOLA 2011: 135). Meller's gouache drawings for her ballets are evidence of her enthusiasm for this pictorial energy. The key to perusal of them is in the 'symphony of colour', in the movement of plastic form. Indeed, they are filled with associative impressions energy. In the sketches of the costumes for the *Assyrian Dances* (1919)*,* the winged deity of the Assyrians is unmistakably identified (Fig. 1). Teslenko (2012: 168) assumes that Meller, in his search of intonational-rhythmic and plastic constructions in the sketch for *Fear (Fire)*, has turned to the traditional Japanese art images of guard deities (*Fudo-Myoo*). In the ecstatic movement of lilac, malachite, and amber arcs, segments, semicircles, pointed triangles, and trapeziums, the elements of the Japanese samurai's costume are traced: a wide bandage in smoothly combed hair, rough geta on the legs, an open fan like a shield covering a warrior. At the same time, the sketches are convincing in experiencing the dancer's expressive plasticity, meaningful in reproducing the character of the dance, its rhythmoplastic phrase, and plastic counterpoint. It is no coincidence that critics called this gouache series, the remaining part of which the artist presented at an exhibition in 1927, 'the fission of movement' (KATALOH 1927: 37). This logic for construction of plastic forms through the combination of multicolored planes in Meller's ballet sketches is rooted in Exter's ideas.

The same approach to the creation of the stage persona is clearly traced in the sketches to the production of *Salome* (prem. 1919) made by another of Exter's followers, Rabinovich (b. 1894, Kyiv – d. 1961, Moscow). However, the 'gravity-free' flight of the *Blue Dancer*, piercing like a samurai sword, the dance of *Fire*, and the ritual spiral beat of *Assyrian* by Meller are dynamic abstract compositions, while Isaak Rabinovich's stage images for *Salome* emphasised the density, weight and volume of the human figure, endowing them with grotesque make-up masks and accentuating certain components of theatrical dress and accessories. At the same time, none of the Ukrainian artists came into contact with the creative plans of Exter as closely and as directly as Rabinovich.

He was one of the first to start attending classes in the Kyiv Workshop of Painting and Decorative Art, the leadership of which he soon shared with Exter (after Exter's departure to Odesa, he took it over). Exter also invited Rabinovich to create costumes for Yakov Protazanov's innovative film *Aelita* (1924), a free interpretation of Alexei Tolstoy's fantastic novel. It is not surprising that this artist's first independent projects on the Kyiv stages (1918–1920) had a distinct Exter's trace.

It was not only about toying with certain plot or plastic motifs, though one cannot but notice them. It was mainly about Rabinovich's testing and embracing Exter's decorative ideas. For instance, in *Salome* a step terrace at the forefront, which occupied the full width of the stage, was flanked by the golden columns and green cypress cones, while the stage space was covered with black velvet (KUZMIN 1919: 40–41). This provided emphasis on the colour and plastic combinations of the characters' costumes: compounds of yellow and red, blue and green were highlighted with silver paint. This fancy suit by Rabinovich enhanced the monumentality and solemnity of the show. Interestingly, the costumes of Rabinovich in *Salome*, as well as the costumes of Exter in Moscow productions, turned out to be independent artistic objects endowed with their plastic logic, and, at the same time, they were critical structural elements of the decoration system, its 'living relievo in motion' (TUGENDHOLD 1922: 139).

This principle, so significant in Exter's theatrical methodology, was adopted by Ukrainian scenographers, such as Petrytsky, Andriienko-Nechytailo, and others discussed below. In search of visual symphonism of stage design, many included the decoration plastic in the sketches of theatrical costumes, as if testing their scenography ideas. This technique is close to Meller's art in the mid-1920s and even more so to Anatol Petrytsky (b. 1895, Kyiv – d. 1964, Kyiv). For instance, the background of Petrytsky's theatrical sheets was always active towards the character and connected with them by texture, colour, and pictorial motive. Petrytsky was among the first in the Ukrainian art culture to turn to collage. Collage insets (fabric, wallpaper, newspaper) and painted trapezoidal and pointed planes were folded into the skirts and bodices of dancers in sketches for the ballet *Nur and Anitra* (1923, dir. by M. Mordkin) (Fig. 2). The background, dissected by picturesque planes, was also interpreted very notionally. Its power was in how it revealed plastic expression or statics and the harmony and dissonance of tense coloristic phrases ('now bright and shimmering laughing compounds, now brought to a familiar, but deeper and powerful coloristic accord' (KUZMIN 1930–1931: 19). The sketch for the costume acquired the desired relief and three-dimensionality, 'lived' in the sheet's proposed plastic and coloristic palette.

In Ukrainian scenography, Petrytsky somehow stood apart. He possessed a spontaneous talent and valued freedom most of all. Petrytsky began to work in the theatre while still a student in 1915. He painted backdrops, stylising the aesthetics of Art Nouveau and Ukrainian art culture tradition. His first experience in stage avant-garde is also a stylisation of the artist's touch, to some extent. In the sketches of the costumes, the cubised silhouette still reveals the statics of the Ukrainian parsuna, a portrait genre (e.g., *In the Catacombs*, 1920) (Fig. 3). Dimensional constructions (*Northern Bogatyrs (The*

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Fig. 1: Vadym Meller. Costume design for the *Assyrian Dances*, 1919. Museum of Theatre, Music, and Cinematic Art of Ukraine, Kyiv.

Fig. 2: Anatol Petrytsky. Costume design for the *Nur and Anitra* performance, 1923. National Culture, Arts, and Museum Complex 'Mystetskyi Arsenal', Kyiv, Ukraine.

Vikings at Helgeland), 1921; *Elga*, 1922) are only touched by Cubism with its geometrisation of form and conventionality of texture. However, in *Nur and Anitra* (1923) and even more so in *Corsair* (1925), the space which is extremely saturated and at the same time extremely structured with colour and light, clearly declares itself.

Another artist, in whose work the continuation of the plastic ideas of Alexandra Exter can be unmistakably recognised, is Mykhailo Andriienko-Nechytailo (b. 1894, Odesa – d. 1982, Paris). Born in Odesa, he graduated from high school in Kherson, where he became interested in painting and, like Vadym Meller, he chose painting over law. Simultaneously with entering St. Petersburg University, he enrolled in the School of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts. Just like Petrytsky, he became interested in theatre very early. As a high school student, he took part in amateur performances of the local theatrical circle (POPOVICH 1969: 10). He developed his talent as a decorator at the St. Petersburg Suvorin Theatre (1915–1918). The artist's first biographer Sichynskyj (1934) believes that before 1916, the influence of his teachers, representatives of St. Petersburg Art Nouveau Nicholas Roerich and Ivan Bilibin, was still noticeable in Andriienko-Nechytailo's works. At the same time, the link to the Parisian avant-garde artists is traced already in his works of 1917 (SICHYNSKYJ 1934: 6).

In 1918 Andriienko-Nechytailo returned to Odesa as a convinced innovator. Here he became close to the theatre director, author of the book *Theatre of Italian Comedians*, Konstantin Miklashevsky (b. 1885, Kyiv – d. 1943, Paris). Under the supervision of Exter, the young artist designed a number of performances, including Plautus' *The Two Menaechmuses* (1919). The surviving sketch of the scenery and costumes for this production is found in (MARCADÉ and MARCADÉ 1978: 68). Obviously, Andriienko-Nechytailo followed the playful nature of Plautus' works. As a capable student, he was carried away by the idea of interweaving Attic comedy and crude Italian farce. The audience was deeply impressed by the combination of huge theatrical masks, togas, and tunics with modern coats, ties, red wigs, and gymnastic tights. The costumes were sewn from ordinary canvas or burlap, covered with paint in bright contrasting combinations (ocher with black, purple with orange), decorated with silver and gold, stripes, polka dot, and plaid patterns. Dressed actors looked more like costumed people from the Ukrainian nativity scene than palliata characters. The spirit of free improvisation prevailed over historical reconstruction and scenery setting. The buffoonery performance was played out against a bright red backdrop, flanked on both sides of the stage by cube-like structures with arches and pyramidal roofs. The architecture of the Roman theatre with its colonnades and porticos was reduced to the simplest plastic formula. The conditional space brought to the fore the grotesque of the acting and activated the associative impressions of the audience.

Fig. 3: Anatol Petrytsky. Costume design for *In the Catacombs* production based on the play by Lesia Ukraïnka, 1921. Museum of Theatre, Music, and Cinematic Art of Ukraine, Kyiv.

The spatial composition as a substratum of reality

As Exter insisted in her methodological recommendations, the main thing is to grasp the basic plastic idea of the play, its style, epoch and follow the principle of free construction of three-dimensional stylised scenery (GOSIASON 1919: 4). In Ukrainian scenography, it has been implemented in a wide range of plastic states and senses. Artists had been hassling to replace the architectural set, the natural landscape, or a specific interior with its 'plastic equivalent' (TUGENDHOLD 1922), a 'substrate of reality' (SICHYNSKYJ 1934). For example, Rabinovich in the play *Fuente Ovehuna* (prem. 1919, Kyiv) or Petrytsky in *The Northern Heroes* (prem. 1921, Kyiv), proposed these abstract ideas in relation to the Spanish village of the era of Lope de Vega and the coastal landscape of ancient Scandinavia. The Ukrainian architectural tradition of the time of Mazepa was generalised and modelled in Meller's laconic plastic design for *Mazepa* (prem. 1920, Kyiv), based on the play by Juliusz Słowacki.

The conventionality of architectonic constructions organically coexisted with the picturesque panels' avant-garde in Volodymyr Bobrytsky's design for the production of *Again on Earth* (prem. 1917, Kharkiv) and Sergei Yutkevich's for the play *Balaganchik* (prem. 1919, Kyiv). Compositional completeness and the use of active colour combinations distinguish the young Eduard Krimmer's theatrical sketches for *Dawns*, *The Tricks of Scapin*, and *Merry Death* (prem. 1921, Odesa). Being an ardent follower of Exter, he became interested in non-objective art and moved to St. Petersburg, where he joined the new Western painting group led by Kazimir Malevich in 1929.

Pyotr Zyabkin, an Odesa-based artist and stage designer of whom we know very little, had established himself as an architect of complex, multi-tiered plastic compositions (BARKOVSKAIA 2012: 132). The reconstruction of his creative biography is still awaiting its researchers. In 1916–1917 he participated in avant-garde exhibitions in Kyiv and Odesa. Then, in the early 1920s, he headed the Theatre Workshop at the Odesa Art College. He positioned himself as a 'synthetic' artist, freely fusing traditions and innovations, high and low art, painting, architecture, sculpture, and object design. All this was embodied and on display in the stage spatial organisation of *Candida*, *Ocean*, and *Storming of the Bastille* performances in Odesa in 1921.

Exter's plastic spatial development in the sketches for the production of *Salome* inspired Feliks Krassowski (b. 1895, Warsaw – d. 1967, Warsaw) to create a theory of a 'progressive' (incremental) scene (KRASSOWSKI 1926). Krassowski was one of the many Poles interned in the Russian Empire. Having reached Kyiv in 1916, the amateur artist continued his education in the painting classes of Konrad Krzyżanowski at the Kyiv Art School (1917–1918), yet, maintained creative ties with Vincent Drabik and Juliusz Osterwa, who headed the Polish Theatre (1916–1917). In the Studio of Stanisława Wysocka in Kyiv, he debuted as a stage artist (1917–1918). On the stage of Wysocka theatre, he made a turn towards theatrical cubism, albeit only in the painting of curtains (e.g., *Balandina*, 1917).

Krassowski continued mastering the three-dimensional reality of the stage – this crucial principle of Exter's theatrical aesthetics – during his 'Warsaw' period after

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he returned to Poland in 1919. In his sketches for the production based on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1924), just as in Exter's drawings for the production of *Salome*, the stage space changed its 'length and volume' (EFROS 1934: 28) and depth and height, with the help of adding new plastic elements (the simplest architectural or geometric forms). These visual transformations did not ruin visual impressions, but structured them into associative images. In his theoretical considerations of the 1920s, the artist preached the utility principle. In fact, Exter's theatrical Cubism was filtered in the works of Krassowski through the lens of constructivism and functionalism. However, the principle of 'unbundling' and the subsequent synthesis of plastic form, as well as the language of figurative plastic itself, in this Shakespearean production, were genetically related to Cubism.

Another stage designer, Mykhailo Andriienko-Nechytailo, made use of Cubistic plasticity to create volumetric spatial combinations, almost abstract in character. He made full use of the three-dimensional nature of scenic space in his theatrical practice.

The earliest of his works are dated 1923–1924, when after fleeing from Soviets by crossing the ice-bound Dniester and years of wandering around Europe, he settled forever in Paris. His new approach to the stage space included complex, bordering on whimsical, combinations of colour and their textural aspects (imitation of metals, concrete, glass, multicoloured gemstones). According to Sichynskyj (1934: 9) it was aimed to render the materialistic nature of the world around us. These monumental, almost sculptural constructions were 'set in motion by centripetal forces' (SICHYNSKYJ 1934: 9). Andriienko-Nechytailo persistently moved towards abstract arrangement. Complex, bizarre colour combinations, their textured and textural accents (imitation of metals, concrete, glass, multi-colored minerals) conveyed the undeniable materiality of the world (SICHYNSKYJ 1934: 9).

Meller also worked with spatial composition. For instance, his decorative plastic to Kaiser's *Gas* (prem. 1923, Kyiv) (Fig. 4) mirrors the theatrical works of Andriienko-Nechytailo in principle of formation and organising of the stage performance. Like Andriienko-Nechytailo, Meller designed a complex podium system with steps and platforms, slopes, and rises, out of monolithic masses and volumes, sculpted in plastic and monochromatic in colour. The choice of texture (metal chips) and fragments of metal trusses in the centre of the stage area, symbolised the industrial environment but did not define the scene (KUCHERENKO 1975: 44). The actor or the actor's mass was an essential structural element of spatial plasticity in the literal sense. Some historians note the scene of the plastic transformation of characters into a 'machine organism' as indicative in this performance (IERMAKOVA 2012: 162–163). The stage setup strictly regulated and controlled the actors' spatial and plastic movement. The well-coordinated work of the conveyor, levers, and screws led to an explosion on stage. Along with the actors falling down, curtains were dynamically lowered onto the platform on triangular cables becoming part of the finale, the tragic death scene of the factory workers (SYMASHKEVYCH 1962: 2).

Rejecting the decorations of a pictorial nature, the artist proposed a solution based on the expressiveness and dynamics of abstract forms. Asceticism, and, in a sense, the

Fig. 4: Scene from the play *Gas*, 1923. Scenography by Vadym Meller.
Museum of Theatre, Music, and Cinematic Art of Ukraine, Kyiv.

'nakedness' of structures and their subordination to functioning tasks, allowed Kovalenko (1992: 18) to define Vadym Meller's design for *Gas* as the first pro-constructivist project in Ukrainian scenography in the early 1920s.

The concept of moving scenery

When it comes to scenery, the name of Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov (b. 1895, Borysivka, Kharkiv province – d. 1968, Kyiv) was probably the most well-known among the avant-garde artists. He was especially attracted to the colourful stage world, subordinated to and filled with action, mesmerising in its movement (TUGENDHOLD 1922: 138). Being a descendant of the generations of Ukrainian icon painters and a student in Konstantin Korovin's workshop at the Bolshoi Theatre, he began his independent career in art with caricatures in magazines. He was engaged in satirical graphics and theatrical stage design in Moscow where he graduated from the School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture (1907–1917) having studied alongside Malevich and Exter, as well as in Kyiv, where he fled to from hunger and devastation in 1918. He joined Exter's studio in the same year and her art strengthened his passion for theatre. Exter turned Khvostenko-Khvostov, like many others, into an avant-garde artist and inventor of scenic 'pictorial symphonies' (GARAFOLA 2011: 135).

One of the first projects in this sense was the design for *Mystery-Buff* (prem. 1921, Kharkiv) production based on the play by Vladimir Mayakovsky. Khvostenko-Khvostov created a geometric collage of multi-coloured paper strips (mainly hot shades of red, yellow, orange) which he called 'a suprematist compositional explosion' (FEVRAL-SKIJ 1940: 241). And this was no coincidence. The artist used the technical capabilities of the portal curtain extraordinarily. The curtain flew up with the first sounds of the orchestra, and the 'geometry of colour' (in Efros' words) flew in all directions, as if from a 'powerful cosmogonic explosion' (FEVRALSKIJ 1940: 241). A moment later, a new pictorial image appeared in front of the spectator. It impressed the spectators with the image of the catastrophe and, at the same time, stunned them with colour and plot accompaniment. The artist covered the stage's backdrop and side curtains, as well as the grates and the first side boxes, with picturesque planes. Pieces of traditional Ukrainian plakhta, an ancient female patterned garment worn like a skirt over a traditional long full-sleeved shirt, were organically balanced in a planetary arrangement with fragments of the sun and moon, rainbows, celestial bodies, and other natural phenomena. All these stage elements seemed to be in an intense movement. Their visuality gravitated to abstraction and painting – to what I would call 'coloristic metamorphoses'.

Khvostenko-Khvostov similarly embodied the idea of movement and a plurality of scenery decoration plots in the scenography for the play *Hobo* (prem. 1924, Kharkiv), based on Upton Sinclair's *Samuel the Seeker*. The painting was implanted into the body of the construction. The artist painted the six movable panels: moving up and to the sides, they covered the facade of the two-tier structure simultaneously or in turn. The critics in the newspaper *Vechernee radio* [Evening Broadcast] called Khvostenko-Khvostov's stage set piece 'a theatrical device' (HOBO 1924). Two prominent pictorial motifs on the panels – enlarged details of the facades of houses and panoramic views of New York – were combined into catchy collage compositions and changed the pacing of the performance, accelerating or slowing down the stage action.

Other stage designers in Ukraine also used similar principles; however, the artists' enthusiasm for the idea of 'moving scenery' sometimes led to curious situations. For example, according to the reminiscences of Nikolai Danilov, who attended the performance, in the educational play *The Tricks of Scapin* (1921), Aurand Harris' adaptation of Molière's play, Eduard Krimmer (b. 1900, Mykolaïv – d. 1974, Leningrad), a student of the Theatre Studio of Vladimir Mueller in Odesa and an ardent follower of Exter's aesthetics, used moving picturesque curtains and the so-called 'revolving circle'. The circle, which conditionally depicted a lake with boats, was attached to the stage's backdrop and changed the rotation intensity according to the action's dynamics. Many spectators were forced to leave the theatre, exhausted by bouts of seasickness (DANILOV 1967: 74). Danilov, the theatrical artist who left this detailed commentary, nevertheless paid tribute to the talent of his fellow student. Despite this fiasco, many of Krimmer's other scenographic projects became outstanding artistic events, such as his stage design for the play by the Ukrainian director Igor Terentyev *Natalia Toropova* (prem. 1928, Petrograd).

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Most probably, the invention of movable decoration structures used by Kimmer in *The Tricks of Scapin* was one of the tasks given by the instructors of the Theatre Studio of Vladimir Mueller. Besides Krimmer, other students made attempts to dynamise the scenic action. One private archive holds the sketches for the 1921 stage design of Shakespeare's play *The Winter's Tale* made by Olga Ekselbirt (b. 1899 – d. 1970?) and (O?) Hefter[4]. The amateur artists followed practical recommendations of Exter for *Salome* (1917) and developed a system of dynamic-colored surfaces which transformed the visual image of the performance in front of the audience's eyes.

This Exter's system of 'moving spaces' was artfully interpreted by an Odesa artist, the above-mentioned Vladimir Mueller (b. 1887, Kherson – d. 1979, Moscow). Mueller was perhaps the only one of the cohort of Ukrainian avant-garde scenographers who had basic education as a decorator. He graduated from the Baron Stieglitz Central School of Technical Drawing (St. Petersburg) in 1915. He worked as a librarian for some time, served as an architect's assistant, and designed furniture. At the end of 1917, he returned to Odesa, where he worked as a scenographer on various theatre stages and taught theatrical painting at the Odesa Art College from 1921 to 1934 (BARKOVS-KAIA 2012: 159–160). In 1934 he moved his projects to Moscow. He could be credited for developing the ideas of 'a theatre on wheels': he invented a mobile stage-on-trailer, transformative theatrical costumes, and portable sets of decorations. In current catalogues, Mueller's sketches for the opera *Othello* (prem. 1929, Odesa) are signed as 'backdrops'. The artist de-materialised the material world and then reassembled it from the simplest forms, lines, and colours. The plastic solution of theatrical sheets provokes imagination. Stairs and arches are guessed in strokes and thin curves. The movement of weightless textures and drapes of light are in diagonal and vertical lines and planes of various colours. They were used as the predictors of the trajectories of the 'physical' development of the plot.

A student of the Kyiv Art School, Sarah Shor (b. 1897, Volyn – d. 1981, Moscow) was another stage designer in Ukraine fascinated by the search for the expressiveness of abstract forms and colours in the space of the scene and their impact on the spectator's perception. In her Kyiv days, she participated in the first avant-garde exhibition, 'The Ring', organised by Exter and Bogomazov (1914, Kyiv). She also studied at the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts (1915–1917) but chose to return to Ukraine. The idea of creating modern Jewish art brought Shor closer to the artists of the Kultur-Lige, a socialist Jewish organisation founded in Kyiv at the beginning of 1918 and promoting Yiddish language and culture (KAZOVSKYJ 2007: 188). Her first stage experiments were associated with productions by Oleksij Smirnov's Studio and Nikolai Solovtsov's Theatre. Short-term, but very convincing in the scale and nature of the ideas was her work in the theatrical section of the Kultur-Lige. Sketches for one of her performances based on Sholom Asha's play *Bar-Kokhba* (1922, Kyiv)[5] are kept in the Israel Gur Theatre Archives and Museum (Jerusalem). The story of the uprising

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4   The name is unintelligible.

5   The play was never staged.

Fig. 5: Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov. Set design sketch for the production of *Mystery-Buff*, 1921. Central State Museum-Archive of Literature and Art of Ukraine, Kyiv.

of the Jews against the Romans, led by Bar Kokhba, responded to the mood of the 1920s in Kyiv. According to Shor, the idea of abstract forms' dynamic plasticity corresponded to the aesthetics of the theatre of symbolist expressionism to the utmost. A stepped podium with different-in-height platforms unfolded along the entire width of the stage which went down, dissolving in the darkness of the stage. Wedge-like, pointed forms, on the contrary, came out and advanced from the blackness of spatial gaps, appearing as threatening, crushing, almost destroying with their mass. Their asymmetry and monochrome colour, combined with spots of red and blue or red and gold, intensified the tragedy of the production.

My earlier account of the Ukrainian avant-garde on stage points to a clear trend among theatre artists and designers of focusing on creating dynamic abstract objects capable of not only visual transformations but also fostering emotional and psychological changes. It is in Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov's theatrical practice that the idea of dynamising form and colour demonstrated its ultimate potential. The artist moved steadily from dynamic painting of stage curtains in *Mystery-Buff* (Fig. 5) or picturesque panels in *Hobo* (see discussion above) to the architectonics of multi-coloured geometric
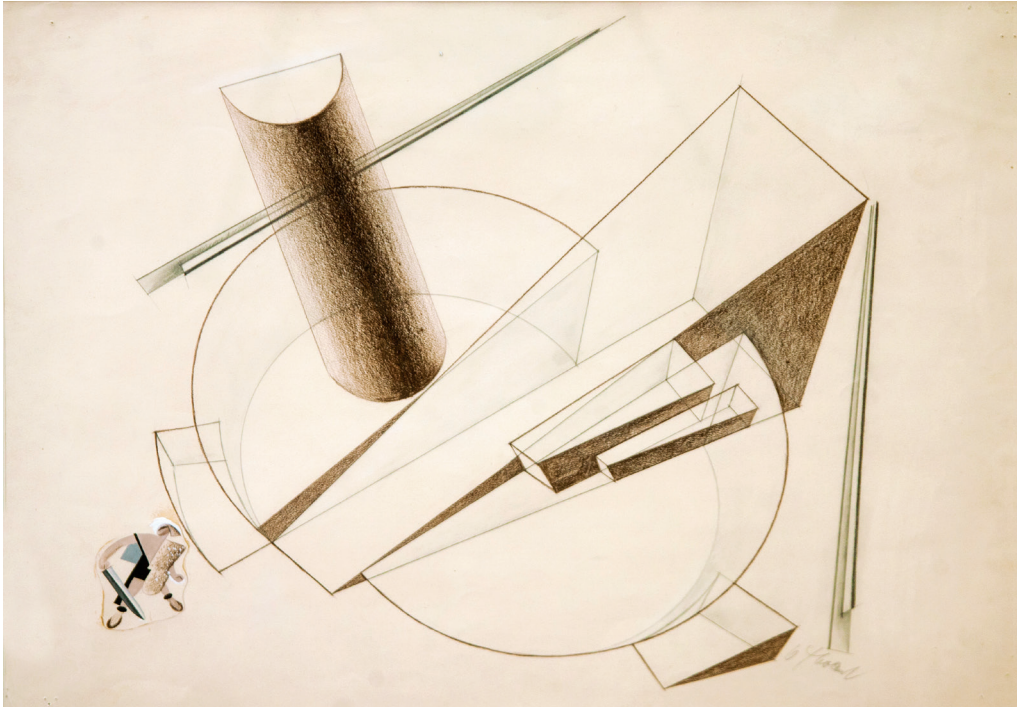
Fig. 6: Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov. Set design sketch for the production of *Valkyrie*, 1929. National Culture, Arts, and Museum Complex 'Mystetskyi Arsenal', Kyiv, Ukraine.

planes in *Valkyrie* (1929, Kharkiv), which replaced the stage painting and architecture (Fig. 6). Unfortunately, the performance was not staged, but its surviving sketches and the Explanatory Note of the opera production creators Lopatinsky and Khvostenko-Khvostov indicated the fantastic performance in terms of visual plasticity and dynamism (KHVOSTENKO 1929: 40). The installation was supposed to be a compound engineering construction, whose function was to set in motion the system of colourful canvases. The composition of the 'score' of plastic and coloristic transformations was based on the principle of contrasts. Khvostenko-Khvostov contrasted straight lines with curves, matched colour extensions and the texture of materials. For example, in Hunding's scenes, rounded rectangle-shaped planes were used. The artist made the texture heavier, using flannel and velvet in six shades of brown in addition to satin and tulle. Sieglinde's theme was revealed through the light, flowing, transparent fabrics, carved in the shape of circles and painted in warm and cold shades of red of various hues. In fact, in *Valkyrie*, Khvostenko-Khvostov came to abstract volumetric-spatial constructions and, from this, to even greater abstraction of the scenographic plot. Moreover, that plot was freed from objectivity and signs of the real venue. Multi-coloured planes formed the spatial environment. They structured and divided the space, limited it, narrowed, then expanded, both vertically and horizontally, and towards the depth. At the

same time, plastic colour combinations revealed the opera's psychological moments, triggered associative processes, and appealed to the spectator's fantasy.

Conclusion

The avant-gardist scenography of the late 1920s is a unique phenomenon in theatre and fine art culture of Ukraine. Its key figure had been and would always be Alexandra Exter. The majority of artists, students of various artistic schools in Kyiv and Odesa and professionals alike, drifted to theatre under the influence of her art. Different in their age and origin, they mastered the art of stage design through the lens of plastic cognition that their fellow country woman known all over Europe preached and practiced.

Exter's methodological recommendations, innovative in their core, excited and inspired her followers with their universal nature and space for self-development. This exceptionality was revealed through the interpretations within the contemporary director practices since this approach allowed the reveal of scenic action, in general, and the actor's scenic plasticity, in particular. The energy of movement determined the architectonic and colour expressiveness of the costumes as expressive elements of some general decoration solution as well as structural plasticity of scenic compositions as the embodiment of some generic image of a certain historical epoque or style. The scenic constructions, multi-dimensional agglomerates of various depths and heights allowed for the plurality and multiplicity of spatial metamorphoses. Light and, no doubt, colour were the forming elements of the stage. This powerful energy of colour did not surrender to the conceptual provisions of constructivism in the Ukrainian theatre avant-garde. Quite the contrary, it inspired new experiments with kinetic, movable compositions through the structural motion of colourful forms. In fact, the principle of movable abstract planes applied in the Ukrainian scenography of the 1920s became an important development of Exter's plastic ideas. Exter's aesthetic findings were also referred to in the pedagogic practice of her Ukrainian followers.

At the same time, the turbulent period of 1917–1922 in Soviet Ukraine, changed the sociopolitical context in the country and incited a huge wave of migration of artists. Some of them moved to the Russian capitals (such as Rabinovitch, Krimmer, Shor), others, such as Andriienko-Nechytailo, Zyabkin and Bobrytsky moved West. Meanwhile those who chose to stay, moved the sphere of practical possibilities forward and promoted the professionalisation of the art of scenography through their creative activity. In 1921, Meller, Mueller, and Khvostenko-Khvostov became the heads of the first professional studios in the history of Ukrainian theatrical and decoration art, acting under the auspices of the art institutions in Kyiv, Odesa, and Kharkiv (powerful cultural centres of Ukraine both during the Russian Empire and Soviet occupation times). Those were Exter's adepts who formed the new generation of theatre professionals as universal artists and inventors. Their cumulative mastery laid the foundation of the school of scenography which carefully preserved the theatrical experience of the late

1910s – 1920s from ideological and physical destruction in the decades to come as well as promoted the spread of scenography principles based on action in post-WWII times. The research into the representation of Exter's artistic principles in the Ukrainian scenographic avant-garde continues.

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Note from the editors

When the author was still working on the manuscript, the Russian Army invaded Ukraine, and the author had to flee from her home with only essential things in hand. The manuscript was left in Kharkiv, the author's hometown. With the help of the editorial team, Prof. Chechyk continued to improve the manuscript, but the access to personal and state archives, as well as libraries was lost. The editors nevertheless decided to go ahead and publish the article despite some missing or imprecise information to support the author's commitment and courage.

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Valentyna Chechyk, PhD

Kharkiv State Academy of Arts and Design
Department of Theory and History of Arts
Darvin Str., 15–6, 61002 Kharkiv, Ukraine
valentyna.chechyk@yahoo.com
ORCID: 0000–0003–1083–9590

Valentyna Chechyk is Associate Professor at the History and Theory of Arts Department of the Kharkiv State Academy of Arts and Design (since 2005). Her area of research is art history of the first half of the 20th century, with special focus on various avant-garde issues. Chechyk has extensively published on Ukrainian scenography of the 1900s–1930s.