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# Technicism in the Ukrainian Avant-garde Theatre: A Clash of Meanings and Forms

Hanna Veselovska

## Abstract

The article examines the impact of technicism on the Ukrainian avant-garde theatre and how the subject of industrialisation was treated on stage as a result. Based on performances directed by Boris Glagolin (Ukraine), Les Kurbas (Ukraine), Erwin Piscator (Germany), Alexander Tairov (Russia), Igor Terentiev (Ukraine) and stage designed by Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov (Ukraine), Vadym Meller (Ukraine), Anatol Petrytsky (Ukraine), and others, the author analyses the two varied trends on stages, both of which were a product of the evolving ideological tasks facing the European and Ukrainian theatres in the 1920s–1930s. A tendency that arose at some point among the aforementioned avant-garde directors to make a parody out of technicism-related ideas is also discussed.

## Key words

avant-garde theatre, technicism, urbanism, industrialisation

One notable feature of the early twentieth century was society's fascination with technicism in literally all spheres of life. It is no coincidence, therefore, that avant-garde art was actively engaged in the propaganda of technicism as a platform for creating a new reality. For an avant-garde theatre, technicism also became one of the key trends evolving both at the level of new meanings and in stage technology as well as in the organisation of theatrical space.

A number of studies into the practical manifestation of technicism in European theatre have described and analysed innovative stage solutions that made the avant-garde theatre a truly unique aesthetic phenomenon (POGGIOLI 1968; KIRBY 1971; INNES 1993). At the same time, technicism served as the basis for creating a constructivist and documentary scenic design (PATTERSON 1981). Technicism also had a significant impact on acting technique and, according to some researchers (see LEACH 1993; DIXON 2007), even prompted the introduction of Meyerhold's biomechanics into the theatre's practice.

Based on the aforementioned views, I aim to study in detail the multi-functionality of technicism in the Ukrainian avant-garde theatre, its manifestations in the productions of various avant-garde directors and stage designers, as well as its influence on trends in the world of stage art. This will allow me to consider theatrical technicism both at the level of revolutionary changes in the visual-spatial forms of theatre, avant-garde aesthetics in general, and in the context of broadcasting certain meanings to society.

Among such renowned avant-garde performances as *The Wedding Party on the Eiffel Tower* (dir. Cocteau, 1921, Paris), *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (dir. Meyerhold, 1922, Moscow), *The Man Who Was Thursday* (dir. Tairov, 1923, Moscow), *The Breasts of Tiresias* (dir. Honzl, 1926, Prague), *The Good Soldier Schweik* (dir. Piscator, 1928, Berlin), *The Dictatorship* (dir. Kurbas, 1930, Kharkiv), one can distinguish those where the pressure of technicism on humanity was denounced and ridiculed and those where urbanism and industrialisation were proclaimed as lifesaving. In a way, technicism nearly became a kind of special tool with which the theatre was approaching the subject of urbanism and industrialisation in its stage productions.

That said, most of the reviewers who were writing about these productions paid little attention to how the technical achievements in the theatre contributed to or, on the contrary, contravened the propaganda of urbanism and industrialisation. In this regard, it is important to clarify that the semantic connotations of technicism in theatrical practice were quite broad and at first were distinguished by a positive character, since they referred to new opportunities in human life (quick communication and movement, improvement of production) and people's comfort.

Yet, of all the aforementioned iconic avant-garde performances such a message – and especially that with an ironic connotation – appears perhaps only in *The Wedding Party on the Eiffel Tower* (KNAPP 1985). For the most part, the notion of technicism in the avant-garde theatre referred mainly to the ideas of industrialisation and urbanism, the fascination with which soon changed to a message about their threat to human civilisation.

## Anti-industrialism

As a precursor to the times when technicism would make its full-scale entry into the art world and loom large in the evolution of the avant-garde theatre, there was the so-called ‘anti-industrial’ stage which became saturated with the ideology of expressionism. As is known, many authors of early expressionistic plays would often rebel against the industrial boom and the active mechanisation of various spheres of human life. So did avant-garde directors who would at first recreate, with the help of stage designers, the atmosphere of doom and oppression that was supposedly characteristic of the industrial society. The required effect was achieved mainly through the use of bodily movements, and some separate architectural fragments (ramps, cubes, pyramids) meant to indicate the collapse (PATTERSON 1981).

One should note that in the early 1920s there was no shortage of performances where a socially significant theatrical space tended to be organised by rhythmic movements of bodies, beams of light and steps serving the central element of scenic design, and such performances would appear in various European countries. For example, such directorial works, including *Man and the Masses* based on the play of German expressionist Ernst Toller, were created in Bulgaria by the talented poet and director Geo Milev (NIKOLOVA 2018: 138). Or, for instance, in Ukraine, such an anti-industrial – and, taking into account the adjusted finale, even anti-capitalist – clout went to the play *Gas*, originally written by Georg Kaiser and directed by Les Kurbas<sup>1</sup> in 1923 in Kyiv. The backdrop for the stage events here was the open brickwork on the rear wall of the theatre building, and the explosion at the factory was reproduced by a pyramid of human bodies that would collapse in front of the audience and eventually spread out on the stage (VESELOVSKA 2018: 170–171).

However, after a short while – not least in connection with the tasks of reconstructing the national economy as they were formulated by the ruling circles – the attitude towards industrialisation in the Ukrainian theatre begins to change.<sup>2</sup> Quite indicative in this respect is a total flop on the Ukrainian stage of the performance *R.U.R.* based on the eponymous play by Karel Čapek. This drama by Čapek – one of the best dystopian works of twentieth-century theatre, thanks to which the word ‘robot’ became a threatening symbol of the urban life – was daringly staged in 1926 at the Maria Zankovetska Theatre in Dnipropetrovsk by director Oleksandr Zagarov.

The creative plans of this director, who had just returned to Ukraine, his homeland, from Czechoslovakia, were closely linked with the mastery of the new foreign dramaturgy and expressive writings. Being oriented towards the modern theatrical reality of Europe, Zagarov could not miss a chance to engage with this new type of drama cross-

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 *Gas* was an example of an anti-industrialist play. Yet, that trend would soon change – into glorifying industrialism for the sake of socialist development.

ing his professional path. Such to him were the Czech works of the Čapek brothers as well as of Jiří Wolker and František Langer – so much so that Zagarov personally translated and promoted these works in Ukraine in every possible way.

That is why it is hardly accidental that for his first post-emigration premiere Zagarov, being so carried away by the Czech avant-garde, offered a one-act play *The Highest Sacrifice* by a Devětsil member, poet Jiří Wolker. However, this avant-garde drama about revolutionary sacrifice was not perceived by the theatre leadership as sufficiently relevant, as the very question of a world communist revolution, as a practical outcome, seemed to have disappeared. Therefore, Zagarov turned to producing Čapek's *R.U.R.*, which he had already staged in the Ukrainian language back in Uzhgorod.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the Maria Zankovetska Theatre located somewhat far away from the capital in the city of Dnipropetrovsk (currently Dnipro), opened the new season of 1926–1927 with Čapek's *R.U.R.* To create the design for this production, Zagarov hired his brother, artist Pavel Pokhitonov, who made use of decorated clothing, construction pieces, and huge banners while filling in the set with a bright colourful gamma. In other words, the designer did everything for the performance to meet the requirements of the then stage aesthetics. However, whereas the initial show of *R.U.R.* in Zagarov's production, back in Uzhgorod, must have completely satisfied critics, including Czech ones, the second attempt, now in Soviet Ukraine, had no success, and the performance was soon removed from the repertoire.

One local journalist frankly stated that 'this does not click with or is relatable to today's spectator'<sup>4</sup> (M-S 1927: 39), which fully explains the flop. After all, Čapek's story of the 'riot of machines' could not be perceived as intended in a society where the process of industrialisation was just unfolding. To the Ukrainian public, the anti-utopia *R.U.R.* must have looked more like an overblown fable about the dream world of mechanisation rather than something that Europe was actually a part of already. Hence comes the impression that the performance was doomed to failure from the onset, with its fatalistic foretelling of the world being ruined by robots as they symbolically ousted humans from an industry-oriented society that was collectively building a bright socialist future. In fact, this was the last episode of what one might refer to as a theatrical anti-industrialism, since the local economy's course towards the so-called 'socialist industrialisation' had by then been proclaimed officially.

## Two faces of technicism

As noted above, through technicism the Ukrainian avant-garde theatre was most consistently transmitting two main messages: urbanism and industrialisation. In the former case, it was about depicting the life of the Western world: its noisy, overcrowded cities

3 From late 1923 till 1926, Oleksandr Zagarov worked on the territory of Czechoslovakia, in a theatre run by the local Ukrainian association Prosvita. There, in 1923 he staged Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* for the first time in the Ukrainian language.

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

being swamped with cars and surrounded by skyscrapers, all because of the greed of capitalism, absorption, or even enslavement of people by soulless mechanisms. In the latter case, the emphasis tended to be made on the supposedly positive effect industrialisation would have for the USSR, through scenes of large-scale construction of giant industrial objects and ever-more useful engagement of powerful machines. Correspondingly, the former case features technicism serving as a tool to demonstrate the horrors and calamities of capitalism, whereas the latter one works to propagate the kind of industrialisation that is undertaken, invariably for the people's benefit, in one socialist society.

At that, the manifestation of technicism directly in theatre featured, as a rule, in both cases innovative engineering solutions. These solutions became an almost obligatory trend for a good many contemporary performances in Europe, e.g., Piscator's ones, in a sense that they effectively relied on technical inventions and engineering thought that were already tested in real-life construction and design (see LODDER 1983).

Of particular importance to the theatrical process were engineering solutions employed in the 1920s, the period when Ukrainian theatres rarely had opportunities to function in technologically suitable buildings and premises – at least similar to what could have been found, for example, in the shape of the famous Volksbühne in Berlin, which is where Erwin Piscator was staging his performances at the time (PATTERSON 1981). Most theatrical directors who were active in the then USSR needed mobile constructive installations that would be installed on primitive stages – very much the way Meyerhold did when performing *The Magnanimous Cuckold* in the open air in a military field camp (LEACH 1993). There was definitely an issue of limited resources available to Soviet theatre in order to create necessary visual effects on stage – while respectively transforming the stage itself along with a given auditorium – and this issue proved quite sensitive to Meyerhold and others.<sup>5</sup>

It is no wonder then that a significant obstacle to the development of avant-garde theatre in the USSR was arising from a trivial lack of fully equipped stage venues that could allow for a creative implementation of technicism-related ideas. At that, the problem was squarely of the domestic origin: while the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw new theatre buildings being regularly built and old ones reconstructed across Europe, the Soviet Union did not have a single ambitious project for constructing new theatre venues realised or completed (including, most famously, those of the Meyerhold Theatre in Moscow, Russia, and the Opera House in Kharkiv, Ukraine).

In these circumstances, the use of stage construction, combined with film projection and photomontage, must have proved a helpful way out of the situation whereby the theatre was supposed to apply technicism without having sufficient technical capabilities to do so. After all, a mobile and multifunctional structure, enlivened by photomontage and film projection, made it possible to present the problems of industrialisation and urbanism – and more so by technical means rather than acting.

5 In 1922, Meyerhold made a trip to Germany to acquaint himself with the technical capacity and equipment of local theatres.

## Technicism as urbanism

The mobile constructivist installations that were mounted on theatrical stages across the USSR (predominantly in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Georgia) and equipped with moving parts became the primary means to display the frightening appearance of a monster-city and urbanism as such. In 1923, theatres across the country were already running at least several well-known spectacles where construction pieces served a key component to create the atmosphere of existential threats posed to the human being in a metropolis.

Most glaringly, such spectacles included *Lake Lyul* that was based on the play by the Soviet playwright Alexander Faiko and directed by Meyerhold with the set designed by Victor Shestakov; *The Man Who Was Thursday* based on Gilbert Keith Chesterton's eponymous novel and staged by Alexander Tairov, its set designed by Alexander Vesnin; as well as *Jimmy Higgins* that was based on the novel by Upton Sinclair and directed by Les Kurbas with the set designed by Vadym Meller in Kyiv.

Perhaps the best-known of the trio is Tairov's production of *The Man Who Was Thursday*, as it was not only shown in several European cities, but the layout of its design happened to be demonstrated more than once at various exhibitions. The artist and architect Alexander Vesnin built a stunning multi-tiered urban setting with moving elevators that created the image of a mad metropolis. One theatre critic described the performance in no uncertain terms:

There on the stage was a city of steel ribs and cages. Lifts were sliding up and down between them, and a web of stairs curling. People in plaid suits, raincoats, caps, and top hats were restlessly getting up, sneaking around, disappearing. Crime, greed, cruelty, poverty, exploitation, hopelessness looked through the net of twigs and the darkness of the gaps. The octopus city was staring into the auditorium. (EFROS 1934: 39–40)

At the same time, in the Kurbas-staged *Jimmy Higgins*, for which the artist Vadym Meller came up with a kind of fragmented, dismembered structure, there would emerge a profile of not only one city, New York (CHECHYK 2018: 73), but a host of cities from different continents, including Paris with the Eiffel tower, all connected with each other by bundles of telegraph wire. The stage was filled with seven square platforms looking like grandstands of varied height, all of which were fenced by special barriers placed in a circular manner as if in an amphitheatre. Seated on these platforms – which could only be reached by climbing attached stairs – and dressed in suits decorated with wide bands in colours of the sovereign ensigns were actors who played the role of such countries as the US, Great Britain, Germany, France, Serbia, Russia, and Belgium. The sovereign 'powers' were not just making their pronouncements aloud but also drumming them, almost in a Morse code fashion, on the machines they stood on, as if to imitate telegraph communication. This way, the director apparently intended to visually and emotionally enhance actors' speaking performance – an effect that several decades on would usually be achieved in theatre with the help of microphones. Overall, in the case

of *Jimmy Higgins* technicism as an approach contained a whole array of complex spatial combinations, as is especially evident in the episode of a factory explosion shown right there on the screen (see TKACZ 2002: 428), whereas a live actor playing the role of Jimmy would remain seated on the front stage.

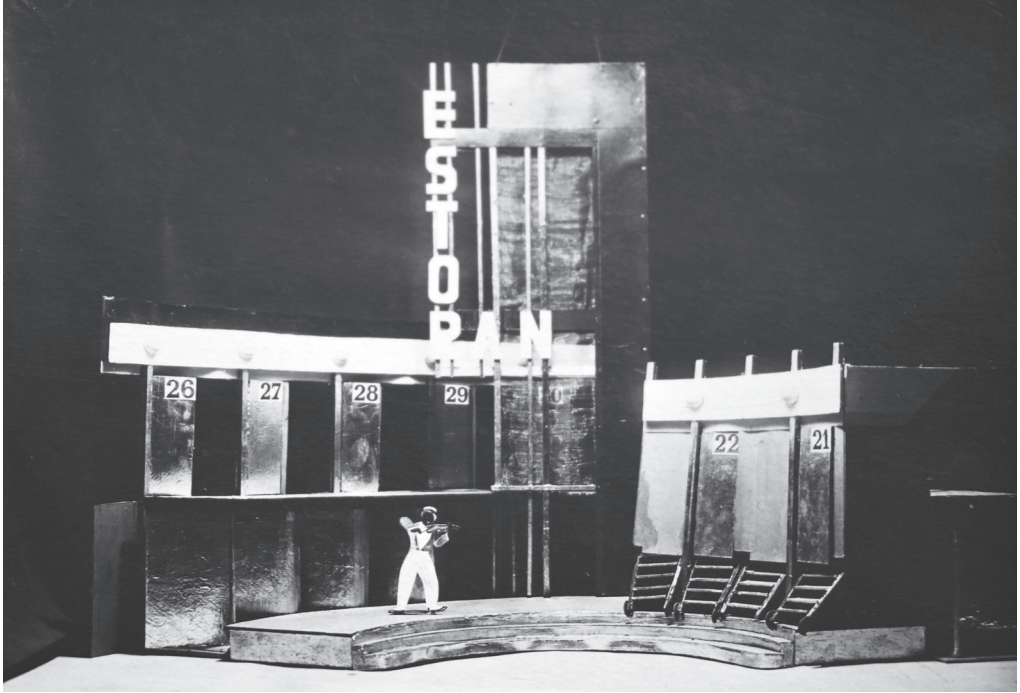
Yet, there were also two other productions, perhaps not so well-known but equally indicative in that respect – of plays *Hobo* and *Mob*, both staged by Boris Glagolin and scenic-designed by Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov (premiered in 1924 and 1925 respectively in Kharkiv). These two productions were dramatisations of novels by Upton Sinclair, an open critic of the bourgeois system. Remaining faithful to the American author's concept and directing the Ukrainian performances, Glagolin made every effort to demonstrate with the help of technicism the depressing effect of this system. To achieve this in *Hobo*, Khvostenko-Khvostov used photomontage to provide a scenic design. He made huge panels with photographs of skyscrapers and placed these panels on the edges of moving cubic machines so from time to time they would overlap with each other. The photographic images, which corresponded to different episodes, moved not only horizontally but also rose and fell, while inscriptions would simultaneously appear on the screen to indicate where the events were taking place.

For the performance of *Mob*, Khvostenko-Khvostov installed on stage a monumental engineering structure made of iron – in contrast, for example, to the one made of wood by Lyubov Popova for Meyerhold's production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. This installation in *Mob*, set very much in line with the then popular production facilities and at the same time with new constructivist trends in architecture, allowed for the plot to evolve at two levels, as it were – upper and lower, simultaneously or alternately. There were also analogies with scaffolding – and most importantly with American skyscrapers that were seen perhaps as one pure and straightforward symbol of urbanism – all of which would so aptly correspond to the semantic concept of the play, since events depicted in it took place in New York.

Besides being so expressive in terms of its engineered effects, the scenic design by Khvostenko-Khvostov was extraordinarily functional. Thanks to this design, thirty episodes were played in different places, which was demonstrated by having the structure constantly transformed and its parts rotated (sliding bridge truss), in addition to using various tricks and the play of light. According to the principle of editing and collage, there was a clear interaction in *Mob* between cinema, modern music, dance, and even circus, the latter rendering the action significantly more dynamic through its wire flights across the auditorium and some other eccentricities. In the auditorium itself, the audience would be drawn into interludes not connected with the plot but offering such scenes as foxtrot dancing, accordion playing, jazz band performing, and even some real boxing or French wrestling.

Importantly, photographs and film elements in these performances were used not only to recreate the external appearance of megalopolises, landscapes, interiors, but also to project psychological characteristics of the heroes. Both in *Mob* and *Jimmy Higgins* large portraits of actors, one of whom was posing as Sinclair and the other was playing Jimmy, were to appear on the screen – in the form of specially filmed fragments





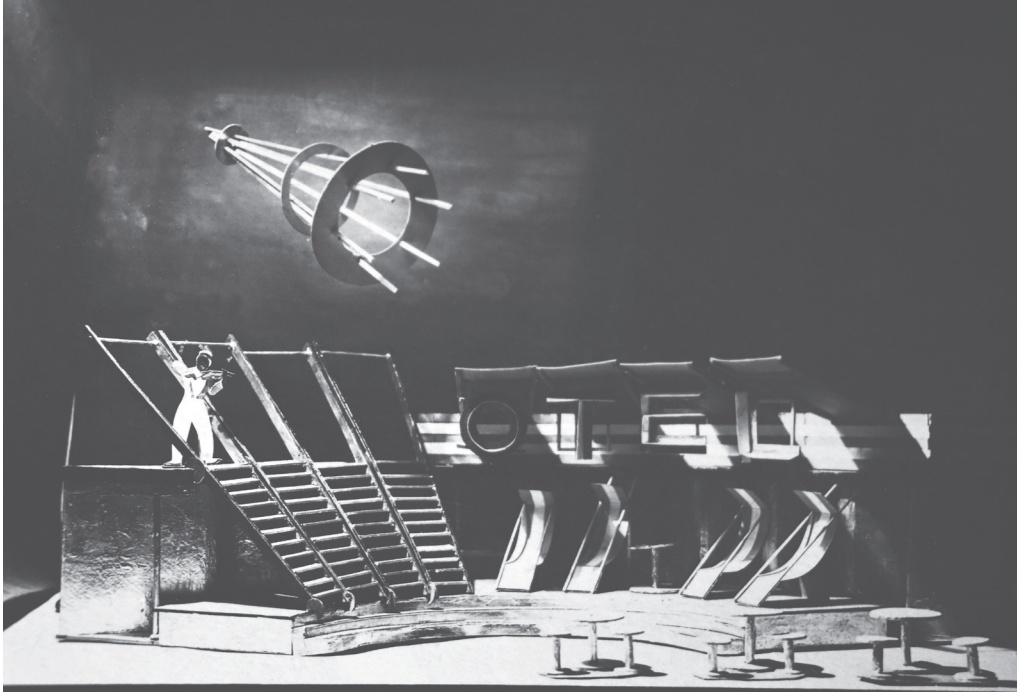
**Fig. 1:** Kyiv State Opera. Scene from *Johnny Strikes Up*, 1929. Museum of Theatre, Music, and Cinematic Art of Ukraine, Kyiv.

to be combined with the actors' performance on the stage (TKACZ 2002: 429). That way, the cinema's constructivist setting was meant to inject both the required authenticity and what Walter Benjamin referred to as replication of reality, on the one hand, and relay the characters' psychological portraits, on the other (BENJAMIN 1969).

The development of engineering and stage design technologies that represented urbanism in the Ukrainian Soviet theatre culminated in the production of Ernst Krenek's opera *Johnny Strikes Up* (see Fig. 1). Quite popular in Europe at the time, this opera was staged in Kyiv by Mikhail Dyskovsky in December 1929 (see VESELOVSKA 2015: 138). Prior to the premiere, a local reviewer was clearly looking forward to the event:

We are also interested in that specific material – radio, telephone, car, express train, station, street – something from which the urbanistic style of the new opera grows and which, we would like to think, M. Dyskovsky will be able to use with the desired effect in the constructive-realistic design by O. Khvostov. (VORONYJ 1929: 2)

Indeed, the stage interpretation of this opera was marked by unexpected scenographic decisions involving numerous stunts and a curious combination of methods borrowed from the circus and cinema. In order to create the image of an industrial



**Fig. 2:** Kyiv State Opera. Scene from *Johnny Strikes Up*, 1929. Museum of Theatre, Music, and Cinematic Art of Ukraine, Kyiv.

urban world on stage and conduct a momentary change of decorations, Khvostenko-Khvostov designed a movable electrified metal structure. The variedly-sized movable segments of the amphitheatre were folded on the stage into a high semi-circular ramp, from which metal steps, similar to those installed in the pool, led down to the inner stage formed in the middle. The dance scenes that were so omnipresent in the performance were performed on this stage (see Fig. 2).

Undoubtedly, Dyskovsky did not avoid being influenced by propagandistic tasks in his display of the capitalist West either (see Fig. 3). To provide a more or less proper picture of the degrading bourgeois society, he conceived and added to the spectacle a choreographic interlude that took place in the corridor of a restaurant. An eyewitness talked about the interlude with undisguised admiration:

This is almost the brightest place in the entire performance: the characteristic dances of military and civilian rakes filled with satire on bourgeois society, harmonious, confident shouts of workers, policemen who are frightened by the workers, and behind their backs are a threatening crowd of hungry, crippled people, whom the bourgeoisie 'feeds' with a degenerative clown dance instead of bread – all this is presented in expressive contours, lines, movements (IURMAS 1930: 2).

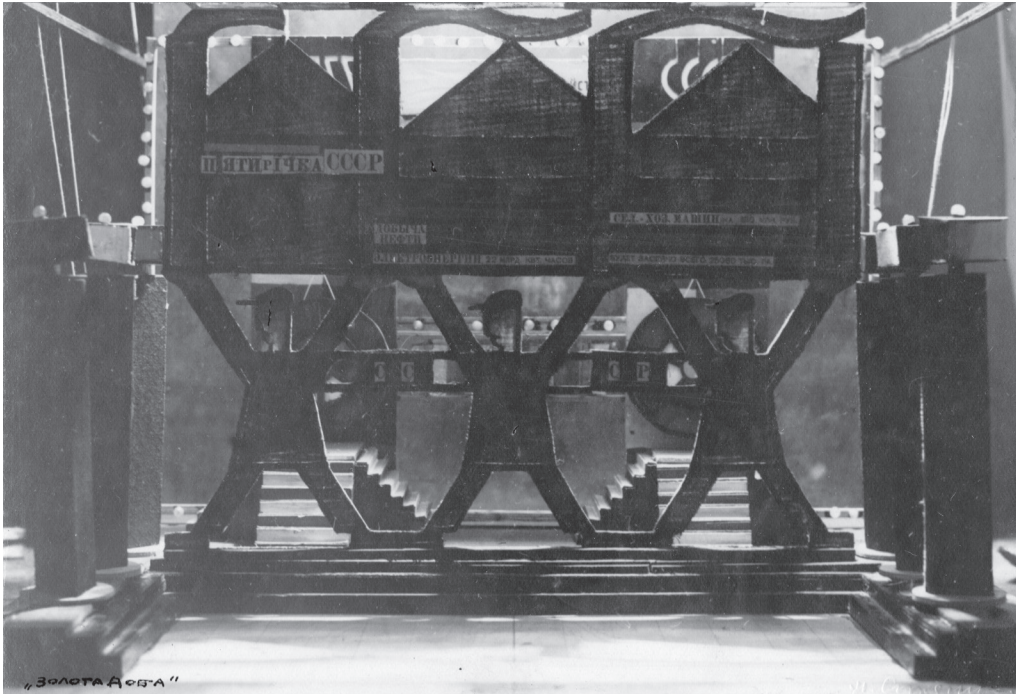


**Fig. 3:** Kyiv State Opera. Scene from *Johnny Strikes Up*, 1929. Museum of Theatre, Music, and Cinematic Art of Ukraine, Kyiv.

Engineering solutions have become one of the most popular and acceptable ways to implement the ideas of technicism in performances about urbanisation of the bourgeois society, on the one hand, and socialist industrialisation, on the other. This is not something you would see in local drama and opera, or even in ballet.

In the latter case, for example, most interesting to note are the engineering solutions used by artist Anatol Petrytsky in 1930 when he was working on the scenic design for two new Soviet ballets almost simultaneously, *Golden Age* by Dmitri Shostakovich at the Kyiv State Opera and *Footballer* by Viktor Oransky at the Kharkiv State Opera. Both ballets were dedicated to sports themes and in both the key characters were football players. The main difference between them was that in Shostakovich's ballet the action took place abroad, apparently in fascist Italy, whereas the one by Oransky was all about the events unfolding in the USSR.

To create the oppressive atmosphere of the bourgeois society in *Golden Age*, Petrytsky came up with the idea to build a space that would be ominous, closed and resemble a bunker. He deliberately left the centre stage vacant for the dancers to move, while along the wings there were walls covered with huge intertwined pipes. From movable grilles similar to those used in ventilation systems, he built a frame ceiling that was supposed to serve something of a second floor above the stage. Texture-wise, the design was probably imitating metal, which created an additional frightening effect and heightened a sense of impending threat (see Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4:** Kyiv State Opera. Sketch for *Golden Age*, 1930. Museum of Theatre, Music, and Cinematic Art of Ukraine, Kyiv.

In the case of *Footballer*, by contrast, the plot ends, totally in the spirit of the time, with a festive ‘industrial carnival’, as it was called in the ballet itself. To accentuate elements of industrialism in his approach, Petrytsky built on stage a kind of huge metal bridge, also leaving the floor underneath vacant of things. The bridge, reminiscent by its riveted railings of a battleship’s shell, was propped up by two spiral structures that looked like swirling metal shavings, and from the rear side, it was possible to get on to the bridge by climbing up the ship’s ladders.

As one can see, the main elements of stage design in each case included an inventive huge structure, metal texture, and vertical filling of the space. With the help of all these elements, Petrytsky sought to underline the existence of two faces of the world – the hostile urban world of capitalism and the industrially-developing socialist world. The irony about his approach, however, is that while the two-faced notion required two respective solutions in terms of scenic design, such supposedly different solutions were constructed on the basis of similar architectural and technical methods. Moreover, both solutions were to work as a definite propagandistic sign inviting the audience to take a clear – but opposite in meaning – ideological stand.

## Technicism as industrialism

Still, for all the external similarity of design methods in the presentation of urbanism and industrialisation on stage, the message about the diverging nature of industrialism in the capitalist world, on one hand, and in the socialist world, on the other, was the exclusive prerogative of Soviet theatre. We can even contend that in the second half of the 1920s the key task for the local avant-garde theatre was reformulated away from a narrative 'against' the bourgeois world of skyscrapers and in favour of the one 'for' the new socialist construction.

In these circumstances, the leading Ukrainian avant-garde director Les Kurbas could not help but join in the new process as well. As a result, the period of 1929–1931 witnessed his Berezil Theatre offer performances where the content was firmly subordinated to the propaganda of industrialisation and scenic design required complex engineering solutions (RUDENKO 2015: 65).

The performances in question were *Dictatorship* (1930) and *The Birth of a Giant* (1931). *Dictatorship* was the eponymous play written by Ivan Mykytenko that would soon become perhaps the most popular repertoire item in the then Ukraine. The action took place first at a factory, where a group of those who would go on to 'collectivise' peasants was formed, then in a village, and finally at the same factory again. Accordingly, piled up on the stage in the first and last sequences, against the silhouette of an industrial landscape on the background wall, there were powerful metal structures, on which workers were running back and forth.

While such an epic picture of local factories cannot be called unique, for the rural scenes the set designer, Vadym Meller, proposed a truly unusual engineering solution. As one reviewer wrote:

As the best aspect of Meller's design, its complete innovation, it is worth noting that for the first time on our stage he uses the system of movable tablets. This may serve as an example for stage rearrangement in all our theatres that are not suited to fulfil the tasks set to artists by the modern theatre. (TOKAR 1930: 8)

On top of the scaffold, Meller put an additional tablet, which in turn consisted of movable pads fixed on special holders. From time to time, these parts began to move: their right and left ends would rise up in an unsynchronised order as those rich rural dwellers who were standing on the tablet saw 'the earth disappear from under their feet' (BAHRIJ PIKULYK 1972: 331). 'Between the pads were cracks through which different objects could get onto the machine and moved back and forth' (VESELOVSKA 2018: 178). With the help of mechanical devices, there was also an imitation of a chase in carriages, which swayed dashingly, as if being driven at a particularly fast speed. Thus, the moving parts of the tablet were creating a complete kinetic effect.

The second performance, *The Birth of a Giant*, staged by a Kurbas-led team of directors was based on a documentary that marked the launch of the Kharkiv Tractor Plant and used the principle of the so-called 'fact literature'. It was a story about

the construction of an industrial giant, unfolding in as many as 84 episodes and depicting such characters as ordinary Kharkiv proletarians and none other than Henry Ford, the owner of the American automobile plant, who ostensibly arrived in Ukraine to see the plant for himself. In the course of the performance, wooden and metal structures were covered with brickwork and a new factory wall was gradually being erected, out of decorative copies of the real one taken from the play *Jimmy Higgins*.

However, the creation of a performance timed to coincide with the construction of an industrial facility was not something exceptional. In that same year of 1931, the city of Zaporizhzhia in Soviet Ukraine, which was rapidly turning into the industrial centre thanks to the construction of the Dnieper hydroelectric power station, hosted the Maria Zankovetska Theatre release of a play called *Dniprelstan*. The author, a young director by the name of Iurij Ivanenko, worked according to the same cliché as the directors in Berezil: a group of youth delivered a multi-episode script based on real-life stories about builders of a giant dam on the Dnieper River. Against this background, the director's solution to the theme of industrialisation that was recreated by a famous avant-garde artist Igor Terentiev can be considered quite unique. He had worked actively in Ukraine since 1928, and two years later came to head the Taras Shevchenko Theatre in Dnipropetrovsk. For his debut in this capacity, Terentiev chose to stage the satirical comedy *Shot* by Aleksandr Bezymensky (himself a Moscow-based poet actively propagating ideas of the young Communist league). Almost synchronically with the premiere in April 1930, this entirely propagandistic play about a communist collective, the Komsomol (Young Communist League) brigade of workers operating within a tram fleet, was being shown on at least a dozen stages across the USSR. Even then, however, Terentiev's piece of work did not go unnoticed among other one-day political pamphlet-like performances. Somehow, the stage design in *Shot* provided by Illia Shlepyanov and Olga Ekselbirt proved utterly scandalous, causing a shock and even indignation among the spectator public and critics as well as the performers themselves (who later acknowledge this in their memoirs) (MARYNYCH n.d.: 30).

In his production, the stage was filled with structures in the form of cubes with transverse slots indicating what should have been trenches of the tram fleet. Under the author's plan, it was in these trenches, e.g., the slots, that the events took place reminding someone of front-line actions. After all, in the opinion of contemporaries, the whole story was about the 'class struggle during the period of socialist reconstruction' – hence the steady association with battles (KRYTSEVYJ 1930: 3).

By and large, the triumph of technicism in *Shot* was not manifested in the designs alone, especially since Terentiev was not the first to use movable cubes in a performance. A huge electrified board was also installed on the stage and three thousand electric lamps were mounted into this board. At certain points in the action, the lamps would light up and glitter, as if sending out sunny 'bunnies'. Apparently, such a large-scale electric show was to symbolise the 'electrification of the whole country' made possible by the launch of the Dnieper Hydroelectric Power Station. This in itself was

a definite novelty so the show can arguably be regarded as a forerunner of the experiments with light that would become so popular in theatrical space around the world during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## An eternal passion for technicism?

If one attempts to draw parallels between the various distant-in-time periods, e.g., between the 1920s and the 1960–1970s, of the theatre’s fascination with technicism, it is easy to see that at certain moments, as if in keeping pace with the whole of humanity, the stage art sort of falls victim to the impact that technicism emanates as a social trend. At the height of art vanguard in the 1920s, technicism comes to help shape both stage production plans and world-view concepts. Consequently, there are even performances where human confidence in the power of technicism is presented in a highly ironic way – if not made an outright parody – by a set designer through the same method of engineering structures.

A good illustration of the trend is provided in the production of a play called *People’s Malakhij*, a tragical comedy written in 1927 by a Ukrainian dramatist Mykola Kulish, and staged by Les Kurbas at his Berezil Theatre for a 1928 premiere. In the course of this production, designer Vadym Meller installed on stage what would be called today a smart machine that was able to ‘process’ people. The machine represented a formidable structure three metres high and four wide, with swivel wheels and such elements as levers, gears and other iron-clad mechanisms, and was supposed to let people through its interior in order to produce those deemed ‘reformed’. As a result, there was to appear a new breed of people created with the help of scientific and technological progress.

In its core, though, technicism determined the ways to convey key conceptual messages on stage and influenced design solutions, some of which could often be used to promote opposite ideas. This in turn explains the importance in promoting the technicism of dozens of projects on new theatrical buildings that emerged in the 1920–1930s, all testifying to the avant-garde’s ongoing love affair with technical innovations.

Those projects would deliver, as a rule, practically fantastic drawings and blueprints on building halls and transformer stages that were to be equipped to the maximum with devices producing light, acoustic, visual, and other special effects. Most of such projects, as is the case, for example, with the 3,000-seat simulation theatre of Simon Sirkus and Andrzej Pronaszko in Warsaw, remained just on paper and thus unfulfilled. But the obvious commitment of avant-garde artists across some central European countries, as well as in Ukraine, to employing powerful multifunctional architectural and engineering structures does suggest that theatrical performance was conceived at the time primarily in a spatial-visual format.

Given all the grandeur of the theatre-building projects, the overarching goal of the 1920–1930s avant-garde seemed to lie in an animated display of the human environment as a highly aggressive civilisation ostensibly created by human beings only to be

eventually absorbed by it. In essence, everything that was available to the avant-garde directors, all the means they had at their disposal to produce performances whether in halls with large screens and pneumatic plungers or on primitive wooden-plank stages, they directed towards creating a vision of the world marked by ideology and social processes.

But this principle of showing space outside rather than inside a person was not only what served as a starting point for most projects of theatre buildings. At that time, Soviet theatres badly needed new premises and the government launched a special programme on construction of such premises. So perhaps more importantly, it became the main distinguishing mode of operation for the whole generation of avant-garde artists from the 1920s and the 1930s. After all, those were the artists who had access just to cinema and electric lights – not video and laser for that matter or, indeed, any other major technical achievements of a later day.

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