CHAPTER 8
SOCRATES, LUNIN AND SENECAS AS POSITIVE HEROES

It was mentioned earlier that for many Soviet theatre critics, Radzinskii’s departure from contemporary themes in favour of the so-called historical ones was both amazing and puzzling. However, for Radzinskii this was a transition which was forced on him. It was also noted that after the success of his play One Hundred and Four Pages about Love [104 Страниц про любовь ...], which ‘made him a celebrity’, all his subsequent plays on contemporary themes were severely criticised by the establishment because they lacked ‘positive heroes’. Radzinskii has himself explained this transition by noting ‘that in the seventies, when it became impossible for him to write on contemporary themes, he, like an expert innovator, decided to write about history, and to dress his protagonists in historical costumes’. Thus as far as Radzinskii was concerned, he was not writing ‘historical’ plays which portrayed real historical time and people, but was only dressing his contemporary protagonists in historical costumes. The idea was to see and show through the prism of historical time and space the contemporary political and cultural situation in the Soviet Union. In doing so Radzinskii was following an established tradition of masking the immediate reality behind historical costumes, make-up and texts. He believed that his readers and spectators were competent to see through the mask and to read the subtext. Radzinskii’s faith in the understanding of his readers and spectators was not misplaced, as evidenced by numerous reviews of his plays published in theatre journals and national and regional newspapers. This chapter will present a summary of these reviews, and through them it will attempt to characterise the contemporary Soviet readings of these plays.

In the preceding chapters attention was focused on the following two aspects: the forms of narrative time in the trilogy, and the forms and the functioning of dominant chronotopes in it. It was argued that the three plays can be read as biographies of the main protagonists. It was demonstrated that narrative time in these plays takes the form of biographical time, which because of the impending execution of the main protagonists, is transformed into crisis time. In the play Dialogues with Socrates, the chronotope of the Athenian acropolis and the prison function as the main plot-constitutive devices. These two chronotopes combine with biographical and crisis times to create a visual portrayal of Socrates’ life and of Socrates’ Athens. In the play Lunin ... biographical and crisis times are associated with the chronotope of the prison. However, the space of the prison is transformed temporarily and partially into the space
of a masked-ball and begins to operate like a theatrical stage on which Lunin’s life-drama is staged. Thus the chronotopes of the prison and the masked-ball provide the sites in which Lunin’s own life and the world around Lunin, the nineteenth-century Tsarist Russia, are able to be adequately re-presented. In the play *Theatre of the Times of Nero and Seneca*, the same functions are fulfilled by the chronotope of the circus-theatre. In this circus-theatre, Nero acts like a whip-lashing ring master who metamorphoses every other protagonist and forces them to play roles designed by him. The circus-theatre serves as the site of multiple signification by metamorphosing partially and temporarily into a number of places, the most important amongst which is the setting in which the ‘show-trial’ of Seneca takes place. The circus-theatre thus provides an appropriate site for an adequate re-presentation of the time and the world of Nero and Seneca.

The literary chronotopes of these plays were discussed in the context of real chronotopes, such as the chronotopes of the theatre and the circus in Nero’s Rome, the chronotopes of the prison in Socrates’ Athens and in nineteenth-century Russia, and the chronotope of the masked-ball in nineteenth-century Russia. This analysis aimed to show that the main literary chronotopes of these plays provide effective spaces for narrating the life-stories of the main protagonists and for adequately re-presenting their real historical time and space. For instance, the story about Mikhail Lunin, the Decembrist, could have been told by using a number of different time-spaces, but the chronotopes of the prison and the masked-ball seem to be more suitable in presenting an adequate portrayal of Lunin’s time and world. Similarly, the play-biography of Nero and Seneca could also have been structured around a number of other spaces such as the senate, bath-houses, and theatre, but the space of the circus-theatre seems to provide a more effective site for re-presenting Nero’s Rome.

However, the use of Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope in reading these plays is not intended to show that the three plays can be read meaningfully only from within the time-space of their protagonists. Such a conclusion would simplify these plays, and impoverish the multiple layers of meaning that can be extracted and created from them. It would also isolate these texts from the immediate time-space in which they were written, read, and performed. It would, and this is equally important, also represent a partial, limited and ‘monologic’ use of Bakhtin’s powerful concept of the chronotope.

This chapter will attempt to enlarge the readings already presented in the preceding chapters by readings undertaken from within the time-space in which they were written, read and performed. This will be achieved by presenting a discussion on the major performances of these plays in the Soviet Union and by analysing numerous reviews of these performances which were published in theatre journals, magazines and
newspapers. The aim will be to show that the Soviet readers and spectators negotiated the main literary chronotopes of these plays from within their own time-space, from within their own cultural tradition. For instance, a Soviet reader would have interacted with the literary chronotope of the circus-theatre, the main chronotope of the play *Theatre of the Times of Nero and Seneca*, from within the information about the real Roman chronotope of the circus and the theatre and through his or her experience of the chronotopes of the Soviet circus and theatre. It should be stressed that not all readers and spectators necessarily knew about the Roman circus and theatre, and whatever information they would possibly have had would have reached them as part of general, historical and cultural discourses which were being circulated in the Soviet Union.

**Chronotopes of the ‘Creating’ and the ‘Created’ Worlds**

According to Bakhtin, the relation between a literary work and the real world is refracted through literary chronotopes used in it. Literary chronotopes of the world represented in a work are derived from the real chronotopes of the world which creates that re-presentation:

Из реальных хронотопов этого изображающего мира и выходят отраженные и созданные хронотопы изображенного в произведении (в тексте) мира.¹

The creating world or the world that creates the world re-presented in a literary narrative is the time-space:

... где звучит произведение, где находится рукопись или книга, находится и реальный человек создавший звучащую речь, рукопись или книгу, находятся и реальные люди, слушающие и читающие текст.²

Thus, the creating world is constituted by the time-space in which the work, the author and real readers are located. Often, in Bakhtin’s view, the author and the reader are located in different time-spaces, separated by significant distance and periods of time. But in spite of this, they are located in ‘a unitary real and unfinalised historical world which is separated from the world represented in the text by a sharp and fundamental boundary.’³

In this creating world, which is constituted by the work and the author, readers and performers play an equally important role of creating because they recreate and rejuvenate the text, and like authors, participate in the creation of the world portrayed in

¹ Bakhtin, FTCN, p. 285.
² Bakhtin, FTCN, p. 285.
³ Bakhtin, FTCN, p. 285. It was discussed in the second chapter that Bakhtin does not consider this boundary absolute and impenetrable.
the text. Thus, the world portrayed in the play Lunin ... is created not only by Radzinskii but also by readers, performers and spectators who through their own interaction participate in the creation of the portrayed world.

According to Bakhtin, literary texts are the sites of a continuous interaction between the creating world and the world created in the text, and this interaction includes ‘the chronotopes of the world created in the text and the chronotopes of readers and creators of the text.’ Every literary narrative, and the events represented in it, for instance, have beginnings and endings but these are located in different time-spaces:

перед нами два события — событие, о котором рассказано в произведении, и событие самого рассказывания (в этом последнем мы и сами участвуем как слушатели-читатели); события эти происходят в разные времена (различные и по длительности) и на разных местах, и в то же время они неразрывно объединены в едином, но сложном событии, которое мы можем обозначить как преведение в его события полноте, включая сюда и его внешнюю материальную данность, и его текст, и изображенный в нем мир, и автора-творца, и слушателя-читателя.

According to Bakhtin, a literary work in its ‘eventful completeness’ [событияя полнота] represents that unitary and complex event in which two moments, the event itself and the act of its re-presentation, locate their inseparable unity. For instance, the execution of Mikhail Lunin and the act of its narration in the play Lunin ..., in which every reader and spectator also participates, are two events which are separated in time and space but find their unity in the play, when it is written by the author and also when it is read, performed and watched by other people.

Defining the time-space within which an author is located with respect to the work and the world portrayed in that work, Bakhtin notes that the author ‘looks at the world portrayed in the work from his own unfinalised contemporariness’:

... он смотрит из своей незавершенной современности во всю ее сложности и полноте .... Та современность, из которой смотрит автор, включает в себя прежде всего область литературы, притом не только современную в узком смысле слова, но и прошлую, продолжающую жить и обновляться в современности. Область литературы и — шире — культуры (от которой нельзя оторвать литературу) составляет необходимый контекст литературного произведения и авторской позиции в нем, вне которого нельзя понять ни произведения ни отраженных в нем авторских интенции.

4 Bakhtin, FTCN, p. 287.
5 Bakhtin, FTCN, p. 287.
6 Bakhtin, FTCN, p. 287-288.
However, this contemporariness is not limited to the immediate contemporary situation but represents the whole literary and cultural situation. In Bakhtin’s opinion, a literary work can not be isolated from the total literary and cultural context.

Bakhtin notes that ‘the question of the chronotopic nature of a reader’s or a listener’s location with respect to a literary text is complex’ but he does not discuss this problem in detail in his essay on the forms of the chronotopes. However, it seems obvious that readers negotiate a text from within their own contemporariness, which, like the position of the author, is grounded within their contemporary cultural situation.

For instance, in the play Theatre of the Times of Nero and Seneca, Diogenes, the old man in the barrel, is executed while he is playing the role of Prometheus in Aeschylus’ play Prometheus Bound. Roman readers and spectators would not have found the execution unusual, because they were used to theatrical conventions, according to which the actors were often replaced by real convicts, who were executed on the stage. They were not required to suspend disbelief during a performance because for them it was very often the case that rapes and murders that were enacted on the stage were real rapes and murders.

Soviet readers and spectators, on the other hand, like any other twentieth-century reader or spectator elsewhere, are used to the practice of ‘suspending disbelief’ in the theatre. They know that after every scene of murder the actor playing the role of the murdered character will rise and accept applause from the audience. More importantly, they have learnt to negotiate a performance from within rhetorical and authenticating conventions of the illusionist and realist theatre. Because of this, the portrayal of a real execution on the stage will for them be both shocking and terrifying.

All three plays portray trials of the main protagonists. In Dialogues with Socrates the trial is set in an Athenian acropolis. In contrast Lunin’s trial is enacted in the confined space of a prison which, while remaining a prison, also signifies the setting of a masked ball as well as a cell in the Petropavlovsk castle in St. Petersburg. Seneca’s trial, like the trial of Socrates, is set in the circus-theatre. But this trial is not public because it is enacted at night in the presence of a few actors and spectators including Nero, Eros, Venus, the senator-horse, Diogenes and a crowd of gladiators and whores locked in the basement of the circus and awaiting the opening of Nero’s games the next morning. Thus, it can be argued that although these plays employ the same motif, it begins to function differently and acquires differing meanings because it is framed within a different chronotope.

Both in Dialogues with Socrates and Lunin ... the prison is one of the central chronotopes. In Dialogues with Socrates it is one of the three main chronotopes,
whereas in Lunin ... it is the main chronotope. In Theatre of the Times of Nero and Seneca the main chronotope is the circus-theatre which begins to resemble a prison when Nero starts enacting Seneca’s trial. Readers and spectators know that Seneca has been brought there as a prisoner and cannot escape.

In this way, the circus-theatre and prison are the main chronotopes of the world re-presented in these plays. The dominant motifs of trial and execution, metamorphosis and multiple role playing are framed within them. As was mentioned above, these literary chronotopes are inseparably linked with the real chronotopes of the world which created the world re-presented in these plays. The creating world in this play is the world in which Radzinskii as an author wrote them, and in which it was rewritten and recreated by Soviet readers, performers and spectators. Thus in order to understand the way Soviet readers, performers and spectators interacted with these plays it is important to understand the real chronotopes of their world.

**Arrests, Prisons, Concentration Camps and Show-Trials**

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that for a Soviet writer, reader or spectator prisons, concentration camps and show-trials were an essential aspect of their historical experience. They had directly or indirectly affected almost every Soviet family. Through informers, denunciations, confessions, queues of relatives waiting at prison windows, prisons and camps had become a part of Soviet reality. It is estimated that by the end of the 1940s ‘every other family in the country on average must have had one of its members in jail.’

Like arrests and camps, trials also form an essential feature of the historical experience of Soviet citizens. The trials of political ‘enemies’ seem to have begun soon after the October revolution. However, there were no major trials during and after the Second World War and after Stalin’s death in 1953, and in the whole Krushchev-period the practice of organising public trials seems to have stopped. Public show-trials reappeared during Brezhnev’s regime, which also saw the emergence of a strong dissident movement. However, Stalinist trials were qualitatively different not only

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8 Some of the well-known trials were: The trial of the so-called St. Petersburg Combat Organisation in August 1921; the trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries in 1922, the Shakhty trial in 1928, the closed trial of officials of the food industry accused of organising famine in 1930; the trial of the so-called Industry Party in 1930; the trial of Mensheviks in 1931; a major trial of 'wreckers' in 1933; The First, the Second and the Third Moscow Trials in 1936, 1937 and 1938.

9 Some well-known trials of the Brezhnev-period were: the Sinyavskii-Daniel trial in February-March
from the point of view of the number of accused and the severity of the sentences but because they were surrounded by intensive ideological propaganda.

The most publicised of the Stalinist trials was the Third Moscow Trial in 1938. In this trial Bukharin and Rykov were the chief defendants, who along with the other sixteen defendants were executed. Fitzroy Maclean presents a very vivid description of this trial, which resembles a review of a theatrical performance.\(^{10}\) For instance, describing the opening day of the trial he notes that 'the court room was full of noise and chattering, like a theatre before the curtain went up.'\(^{11}\) In his opinion this 'true drama or performance had the power of affecting the audience personally and directly', and the audience 'had come not only to be excited and edified, but to be horrified, and perhaps terrified by a spectacle, which would partake at once both of the medieval morality play and of the modern gangster film.'\(^{12}\)

Although Stalinist show trials were an essential part of the repressive state apparatuses only a very few cases were dealt with by courts in open or closed trials. Show trials in courts were reserved for special cases which had special political and ideological significance. They were meant for cases for which the state had the required evidence, and had extracted the necessary confessions from the defendants.

The show-trials were mock trials, firstly because in most cases confessions from the defendants were already obtained and the sentences decided. The court room only provided a public space in which the confessions and the sentences were publicly announced and rubber stamped. Most Western commentators puzzled over the confessions made by defendants such as Rykov and Bukharin and failed to find a satisfactory explanation.\(^{13}\) The second intriguing aspect of these trials was the speed with which the court pronounced its verdict.\(^{14}\)

These show-trials were quite theatrical because they seem to be scripted for performances in public. They were, like all trials, designed to show the power of the state, and were aimed to educate as well as intimidate the audience. However, as has been noted by many commentators, admission to these trials was by special invitation.

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1966; the Galanskov-Ginzburg trial in February-March 1968. In addition to these there were minor trials such as the trial of the Red-Square demonstrators in 1968, and the trial of Soviet Jewish dissidents in 1970.


11 F. Maclean, p. 83.

12 F. Maclean, p. 84.

13 For instance, Maclean discusses Bukharin's confession and his 'reply' to the prosecution and suggests that such confessions were the result of an 'ideological and psychological environment', and that 'such things could only happen in the Soviet Union' (Maclean, p. 114).

14 For instance, in 1938 the sentence on Yan Rudzutak a former Vice-Premier and politburo member 'was pronounced in twenty minutes' (Conquest, p. 607).
But this does not mean that the general public was kept in the dark. All forms of the print media were used to inform the public. In fact, it will not be an exaggeration to suggest that two trials took place simultaneously: one within the confines of a court room, and in the presence of an invited audience, and the other outside the court room, and in public. For instance, during the Moscow trial of Bukharin, 'from the announcement of the trial on 28 February till the actual execution, the papers had been full of the demands by workers’ meetings that no pity be shown to the foul band of murderers and spies.'

The Brezhnev-period trials were essentially similar to Stalinist trials with only one major difference. The authorities knew that none of the defendants would confess, and hence the prosecutors had to argue their case more rigorously. However, as in Stalinist trials, they were performed in front of an invited audience and the print and the electronic media covered these trials with the same spirit of party-mindedness [партийность] and social-committedness [гражданственность].

It seems that these trials were less open than the trial of Socrates shown in the play Dialogues with Socrates. They seem to be similar to Seneca’s trial which Nero organised at night in the arena of a Roman circus in front of an invited audience. In Nero’s opinion Seneca was guilty and even gave a clear hint about the sentence when he announced Seneca’s death before the mock trial began. The trial was organised to extract a confession from Seneca and to execute him. Many Soviet trials resembled Lunin’s closed trial, and like Lunin many Soviet defendants were executed in prison, often without a trial.

**Conventions of the Soviet Realist Theatre**

Another significant feature of the three plays is the ‘play within a play’ structure. As was discussed earlier, in *Dialogues with Socrates* the trial of Socrates, in conformity with the ancient Athenian tradition, is structured like a public spectacle with the involvement of chorus and its Coryphaeus. In the play *Lunin* ... the prison cell begins to operate like the stage of a theatre where Lunin enacts the drama of his life. In this way the drama of Lunin’s life become a play within the main play. The ‘play within a play’ structure reaches its climax in the play about Nero and Seneca. In this play the chronotope of the circus-theatre is combined with the motifs of metamorphoses and

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15 Conquest, p. 571.
multiple role-playing. Because of this, the play, like Pirandello's trilogy of the 'theatre within the theatre', succeeds in turning the theatre itself into an object of representation.

However, re-presentation of the theatre in dramatic or performance texts is largely determined by the prevailing theatrical conventions. Radzinskii as an author operated within these conventions when he wrote these plays. Similarly, Soviet performers, readers, and spectators rewrote and recreated them from within similar theatrical conventions. They determine that theatrical givenness from within which these plays were written, performed and viewed. Hence, before describing various readings of these plays by Soviet readers it will be useful to discuss, in some detail, the prevailing theatrical conventions in the Soviet theatre in the sixties and the seventies.

The first chapter described the general cultural and political situation in the Soviet Union in the sixties and the seventies. It was noted that drama and the theatre were regarded as important means of educating Soviet citizens. Their role was central to the task of creating a new Soviet subject, the builder of communism, and because only a realist or socialist realist approach could constitute and present a positive hero, the prototype of a Soviet subject, realism and in particular socialist realism became the dominant paradigm of artistic activity in the Soviet Union.

However, in the first decade after the revolution the authority of realism was not so overwhelming. As noted by many historians, the cultural scene after the October Revolution was truly polyphonic and all forms of arts including drama and theatre were questioning old artistic paradigms, and exploring and experimenting with the new. For instance, there were at least four main forms of theatrical practice: naturalism, stylised theatre, ritual theatre and constructivism.17

This period saw a revolt against the naturalist theatre of Stanislavskii and Nemirovich-Danchenko. Theatrical conventions of the illusionist theatre were subverted and replaced by the stylised and the constructivist theatres of Meierkhol'd.18 These new approaches to the practice of theatre challenged the separate autonomy of the acting and spectating spaces and underlined the theatrical nature of the theatre.19 This challenge to


18 Theatrical scene in post-revolutionary Soviet Union was very complex. It was the stage of complicated political and ideological struggles between various groups in and outside the Bolshevik party. Kleberg describes this struggle in detail and discusses organisations such as The Lef, The Prolekult Theatre, The First RSFSR Theatre of Meierkhol'd, The Moscow Prolekult's First Worker's Theatre of Arvatov and Eisenshtein.

19 Meierkhol'd's 1920 production of the Belgian symbolist Verhaeren's revolutionary drama The
the conventional separation between the acting and spectating spaces also helped to bring the theatre out of its architectural space, and to draw it closer to the genre of public spectacles.  

In 1929 Meierkhol'd planned the production of S. Tretyakov's play _I Want a Child_ [Хочу ребёнка]. For this play he asked the constructivist designer El. Lissitsky to design the sets and planned to use devices which are now commonly attributed to Brecht's epic theatre. The acting space was to be elliptical and surrounded by the spectators. The balcony was to be covered by slogans such as 'a healthy child is the future of socialism'. The stage was to be multi-levelled with bridges connecting the acting space with the balcony. The stage floor was to be transparent, permitting light effects and projections from below. Although production did not eventuate, the concept of 'the stage-arena surrounded by spectators was subsequently appropriated by Meierkhol'd's student N. Okhlopkov in his Realist Theatre.'  

The onslaught of socialist realism seems to have begun in the closing years of the twenties and soon it succeeded in suppressing most of the above-mentioned innovations in theatrical conventions, replacing them with the illusionist theatre and the psychological realism of Stanislavskii. According to Rudnitskii, this turn to realism began in the early thirties when The Moscow Art Theatre enjoyed much greater popularity than the Meierkhol'd Theatre. However, Nemirovich-Danchenko came up

_Dawn_ is cited by many critics as a good example of this new trend. In this play the actors wore no make-up, and the lights in the auditorium were left on. The chorus interacted with the audience urging them to take part in the eulogies to the revolutionary leaders. In the performance on 18 November 1920 Meierkhol'd asked the courier in Verhaeren's play to read an authentic news telegram of the same day, reporting the final victory of the Red Army. In this way, the time-space of the dramatic text was not only disrupted but was juxtaposed with the contemporary time-space.

20 The most noteworthy of these experiments was _The Storming of the Winter Palace_ produced by N. Everinov in 1920 in front of the real Winter Palace. This production had 'at least 8000 participants and 100,000 spectators whose participation was merely a question of degree rather than kind' (Kleberg, p. 64). Meierkhol'd was also attracted to the idea of public spectacle and staged the play _The Earth in Turmoil_ at a public festival in honour of the Fifth Congress of Comintern in 1924. In 1924, S. Eisenstein staged S. Tretyakov's play _The Gas Masks_ in a real gas works in Moscow (Kleberg, p. 88).

21 Rudnitskii, p. 198. In addition to Meierkhol'd, A. Tairov's Kammernyi Theatre in Moscow was challenging the illusionist conventions of the naturalist theatre. The Kammernyi Theatre was established in 1914 and Tairov rejected both the naturalism of Stanislavskii and the 'conscious theatricality' of Meierkhol'd (Rudnitskii, p. 15). During 1926 and 1927 he staged three plays by Eugene O'Neil. The productions were designed by the Stenberg brothers and the sets sparsely but precisely defined the fictional space (Rudnitskii, pp. 236-237).

22 Some important events were: the establishment in 1929 of a special committee on the theatre repertoire (Госкомтеатр) in the People's Commissariat for Education; disbanding in April 1932 of all so-called proletarian literary-artistic organisations such as RAPP, VOAPP and RAPM by a decree of the Central Committee of the Party and their replacement by the Union of Soviet Writers which met for its first congress in 1934; closing down in February 1936 of a studio of the Moscow Art Theatre headed by Mikhail Chekhov; disbanding in September of the same year the Leningrad Theatre of Young Workers (ТПАМ); the amalgamation of Tairov's The Kammernyi Theatre with the Realist Theatre of N. Okhlopkov; closing down of Meierkhol'd's Theatre (ГОСТИМ) in January 1938. Meierkhol'd was arrested in June 1939 and executed in February 1940.

23 _The Days of the Turbins, Le Mariage de Figaro, Uncles' Dream_ after Dostoevskii and _Resurrection_
with innovative production when he staged adaptations of the novels by Dostoevskii and Tolstoi, calling these plays 'performance-novels'. These plays were piloted by an actor who played the role of the narrator, who moved in and out of the acting and spectating spaces. Rudnitskii describes the controversy surrounding the production of Gogol's *Dead Souls* in the Moscow Art Theatre, which reflected the struggle between the two forms of artistic practices.24

Soviet drama in the thirties was mainly concerned with the themes of civil war and the First Five Year Plan. Plays on the latter theme were the first form of the so-called 'production plays', a genre which was revived in the seventies. N. Pogodin's *Tempo, Poem about an Axe, The Snow and The Aristocrats* are considered to be typical examples of this genre.25 In the late thirties N. Pogodin wrote two plays of his trilogy about Lenin.

The Second World War saw the appearance of war plays and plays on historical themes, a trend which continued even after the war and socialist realism remained the dominating paradigm of artistic activity.26 It is interesting to note that although thematically Soviet drama in the thirties had adopted socialist realism, a few theatres still used devices of the stylised theatre. Foremost in this regard was Nikolai Okhlopkov's Realist Theatre in Moscow. Describing his productions of the play *The Iron Flood* based on a novel by A. Serfimovich, Rudnitskii notes that Okhlopkov, in the tiny premises of his theatre 'more boldly and more vigorously than other directors tried to subvert the boundary between the actors and the audience and between the stage and the audience. The action took place in a small arena surrounded on all sides by spectators and the light and sound effects intensified the illusion of the audience's participation.'27

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24 Vasili Sakhnovskii wanted to stage *Dead Souls* in the style of Meierkhol'd's staging of the *Government Inspector* by underlining grotesque elements and by using the figure of a narrator on the stage. Stanislavskii was against this idea and changed everything because he wanted to 'create a feeling of the epoch and of the provinces in the time of Nikolai I' (Rudnitskii, p. 271).

25 L. Leonov and A. Afinogenov were the other prominent dramatists who wrote these first 'production' plays.

26 Francois de Liencourt describes how after the war the Party issued decrees to control the theatre repertoire. He notes that the funding for theatres was cut and more than half of the theatres were closed down (de Liencourt, p. 56). Gleb Struve describes in detail the cultural situation after the war when the so-called Zhdanovschina was on the rise and campaigns against the 'cosmopolitan' and the 'decadent west' were initiated. F. de Liencourt, "The Repertory of the Fifties," *Survey*, 46, No. 1 (1963), pp. 53-67. G. Struve, *Russian Literature under Lenin and Stalin 1917-1953* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1971).

27 Rudnitskii, pp. 282-283. Gleb Struve cites Van Gyssegem's remarks about Okhlopkov's production of Pogodin's play *Aristocrats*, who called it to be 'the last word... in the direction of a stylised ...' theatre (Struve, p. 304).
Thus, apart from some notable exceptions the theatrical scene in the Soviet Union up to the early fifties was marked by theatrical conventions of a realist theatre. Most theatres were housed in relatively big halls in which the acting and spectating spaces were rigidly divided by the proscenium arch and curtain. Productions avoided most devices of presentation such as presenters or narrators. The separation of the acting and spectating spaces was accentuated by following realist conventions of keeping the stage illuminated and the auditorium darkened. The setting also followed the conventions of the naturalist theatre, and was mainly concerned with recreating a real time-space. The actors followed the system of Stanislavskii which promoted psychological realism. The theatre stressed the need of authenticating conventions which reproduced on the stage modes of interaction between characters in correspondence with the social milieu. As in all realist and naturalist theatres, the audience occupied the position of a passive observer whose role was to observe the action and to accept the meaning interpreted and represented by the performers. They were denied any significant role in the construction of their own meanings. Theatre critics, reviewers and expert commentators functioned as competent messengers from whom it was expected that they would decode the meaning and would help the audience to ‘see’ and understand it. The spectators were asked to ‘suspend their disbelief’ during the performance, and were encouraged to believe that the world represented on the stage was real and that this world extended outside theatre. Any device which could have foregrounded the theatrical nature of the theatre was suppressed, resisted and rejected. For a realist theatre which wanted to educate the audience by presenting a positive hero this rejection or masking of theatricality was extremely important.

The first chapter briefly discussed the changes in the Soviet theatre during the ‘thaw’ which affected both the content and the form of theatrical productions and challenged the prevailing theatrical conventions. If, for instance, the Sovremennik Theatre in Moscow, which opened as a theatre-studio in 1956 was more concerned with thematic innovations voicing stories hitherto forgotten, Yu. Lyubimov’s Taganka Theatre revived Meierkhol’d’s stylised theatre. In 1964, this theatre premiered Brecht’s The Good Woman of Setzuan and thus introduced Brecht’s ‘epic’ theatre into the Soviet

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28 It is known that Meierkhol’d was planning to build a new theatre designed by Mikhail Barkhin. In this theatre the stage and auditorium were to be merged and the stage had to have no curtain, footlights or orchestra pit. For more details see M. L. Hoover, Meierkhol’d: The Art of Conscious Theatre (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), p. 237.

29 It is interesting to note that the official rehabilitation of Meierkhol’d also began in 1955-1956. The monthly journal Theatre in 1956 published fragments of notes, diaries, speeches and conversations with Meierkhol’d. In March 1961 in the House of Culture of the Moscow State University a special meeting in memory of Meierkhol’d was held. The first volume of the book The Meierkhol’d Notebook [Мейерхольдовский сборник] contains a detailed account of Meierkhol’d’s rehabilitation. The Meierkhol’d Notebook [Мейерхольдовский сборник] ed. A. A. Shereľ, 2 vols. (Moscow: The Meierkhol’d Art Centre, 1992).
According to Alexandr Gershkovich, Yu. Lyubimov 'like Meierkhol'd staged his plays in carnivalistic style' and his productions employed montages, perhaps inspired by S. Eisenstein's techniques of cinematography. But most importantly in each of his productions he challenged the conventional notions of acting and spectating spaces. He did not hesitate to foreground the fact that the audience were seeing a theatrical performance and instead of masking the convention about the 'suspension of disbelief' he reminded his audience that they were following this convention, and that they were seeing and participating in a theatrical performance.

Yu. Lyubimov's Taganka Theatre continued these theatrical experiments till he was forced to leave Soviet Union in 1984. However, this popular theatre was an exception because the rest of the Soviet theatres in the sixties and the seventies were preoccupied with the idea of constructing the new version of the positive hero which could be used as a role model in the so-called 'epoch of scientific and technical revolution'. The significance of 'production plays' in the Soviet theatre in this period has been discussed in the first chapter. These 'production' plays employed all the basic conventions of the naturalist theatre, and their aim was to create on the stage an accurate, almost photographic, copy of the real world. Perhaps that is why many Soviet critics called them documentary plays. In O. Efremov's production of Bokarev's play The Steelmakers [Сталевары] in the Moscow Art Theatre, the huge stage was very meticulously converted into the floor of a steel factory. In a round-table discussion published in Problems of Literature [Вопросы литературы] O. Efremov noted that his production was inspired by the time he had spent in a steel-works in Cherepovets. It needs to be stressed that the author of this play had worked both as a foreman and an

30 It is important to note that in some theatres, conventions about realist theatres were already being challenged. For instance, A. J. C. Campbell describes Okhlopkov's production of Euripides' Medea, which was staged in the Tchaikovskii Concert Hall. This hall does not contain a raised stage with a prosenium arch. An orchestra of some 100 musicians packed the space between the spectators and the acting space, which was surrounded by the spectators. Similarly N. P. Akimov's production of Shvart's The Dragon [Дракон] in the Leningrad Comedy Theatre in 1962, according to Mark Frankland, also used devices which subverted the realist conventions of a strict division between the acting and spectating spaces. A. J. C. Campbell, "Plays and Playwrights," Survey, 46, No. 1 (1963), pp. 68-76; Mark Frankland, "The Current Season: A Note from the Stalls," Survey, 46, No. 1 (1963), pp. 77-82. Okhlopkov's production of Hamlet in 1958 is also considered by many theatre critics as unconventional.

31 Gershkovich, p. XIII.

32 For a more detailed discussion on Lyubimov's theatre see Gershkovich's book. He describes productions such as Ten Days that Shook the World, Master and Margarita and Crime and Punishment.

33 It needs to be emphasised however, that a number of other theatres such as The Sovremennik Theatre and the Bolshoi Drama Theatre under the directorship of G. Tvostonovogov were trying to explore new ways of expanding the scope of a realist theatre.

34 In the sixties and the seventies many literary and theatre journals arranged such round-table discussions on 'production' plays. O. Efremov's remarks are contained in a round-table discussion about a play The Outsider [Человек со стороны] by I. Dvoretskii which was produced in the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow. "Who is the Contemporary Hero?" ['Современный герой, каков он?'] Voprosy Literatury, No. 6, (1973), pp. 3-56. It is interesting to note that the title of this round-table discussion clearly reflects the main preoccupation of the Soviet Theatre in this period.
engineer in a steel-works. Thus, the play was written and produced as a result of ‘real-life’ experience. The audience enjoyed it because they were ‘trained’ to operate within realist theatrical conventions. Most theatre critics published positive reviews because the play and the production met all the essential criteria of realist, in particular socialist realist plays. The State and the Party were also satisfied with the play and showed this by awarding it a State Prize. Thus, this play and its production very clearly illustrate the functioning of the Soviet theatre which at every level operated or was forced to operate within realist theatrical conventions.

It was mentioned in the first chapter that Radzinskii’s plays on contemporary themes were strongly criticised by Soviet theatre critics because they did not strictly follow the conventions of the realist or the socialist-realist theatre. He was criticised for failing to portray ‘positive’ heroes and for his explorations of new dramatic forms. If most of his contemporary dramatists were, by and large, satisfied with realism in Soviet drama, Radzinskii from the very beginning was interested in the theatre of the grotesque and the absurd. But this was not all. Radzinskii from his very first plays was interested in exploring the themes of the theatre itself. Perhaps that is why even in his early plays one can note the appearance of the ‘play within a play’ structure. For most Soviet critics this was an unnecessary diversion from the main task which was the honest portrayal of Soviet reality. It was mentioned in the first chapter that even N. Akimov, a noted Soviet director and stage designer, who in his own time was well-known for his bold experiments in theatrical forms, was critical of A. Efros’ production of Radzinskii’s *Making a Movie* because the production was stylised and had failed to define clearly the place and the setting of the dramatic action.

‘Marx and Lenin were Socratic’

In 1974, the play *Dialogues with Socrates* was premiered in two prominent theatres in the Soviet Union: The Mayakovskii Academic Theatre in Moscow and The Russian Drama Theatre in Riga. In 1976 the play was also premiered in The Pushkin Academic Theatre of Drama in Leningrad.\(^{35}\) These performances were reviewed in specialised theatre journals and in many national and regional dailies and magazines. The play was able to initiate an interesting discussion in the media, participants in which included a number of Soviet philosophers. One of them was V. I. Tolstykhh who wrote a book entitled *Socrates and Us* [*Сократ и мы*]. Another philosopher, A. Gulyga, reviewed the Moscow performance in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and also discussed the play in his book *Art in the Century of Science* [*ИСКУССТВО ВО ВЕК НАУКИ*].

\(^{35}\) In May 1993 when I visited Moscow, the Mayakovskii Theatre was still performing this play.
In the Mayakovskii Theatre in Moscow, A. Goncharov and his stage designer E. Stenberg staged the play like an ancient Greek tragedy. The stage was converted into a large Greek amphitheatre with tiers of seats rising up and disappearing in the sky on the back-stage. The tiers of seats were interspersed with relatively wider platforms, which were used as the setting of some scenes. According to A. Demidov ‘the director widely used those theatrical devices which are normally associated with the ancient Greek theatre.’ Compared to the original text, the director enhanced the role of the chorus and its Coryphaeus who functioned like a presenter introducing the play and thus ‘represented the voice of the director.’ Thus, rhetorical and authenticating devices such as the setting, costumes, lighting, and the acting underlined the ancient Greek style of this production. Goncharov wanted to preserve ‘the concrete historical colouring and the spirit of the epoch.’

The production in the Pushkin Drama Theatre in Leningrad also followed the style of ancient Greek tragedies, although it was slightly more stylised than the Moscow production. The stage represented a sea-beach covered by rocks and shells polished by wind and water. Movable structures resembling segments of the ancient Greek theatre, the interior of a house, the areopagus, and the prison cell were used to create specific settings. According to Zaitsev the production portrayed an Athenian society which was disintegrating and decaying.

The Russian Drama Theatre in Riga also produced the play ‘in the spirit of ancient Greek tragedies’, although it was more stylised in its overall approach than the two

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37 Demidov, p. 70.
38 Demidov, p. 70.
39 Demidov, p. 70.

above mentioned productions. The action took place on a large circular platform which was thrust into the auditorium so close to the audience that the spectators in the front rows found themselves occupying the acting space. The production was stylised and used Brechtian devices. The circular platform contained large white cubes the function of which changed during the performance. They were used as small platforms for making speeches, and as beds or couches. They were placed over one another to construct a prison wall or a mausoleum for Socrates. The cubes and other props were moved and arranged by the actors themselves who were dressed in white tunics.

Thus the three productions read and presented the play from within the time-space of its protagonists. They produced the play in the style of ancient Greek tragedies and foregrounded its historical time-space by employing rhetorical and authenticating devices such as stage setting, costumes, masks, and the oratorical manner of acting. The most significant in this regard was the use of the chorus and its Coryphaeus. Hence it is no surprise that most reviewers and theatre critics responded to the play as a realist and ‘honest’ portrayal of the ancient Greek philosopher. This is clearly reflected in the title of a review by A. Demidov, ‘The Man from Athens’. In this regard the review of the Moscow production by B. Poyurovskii is quite interesting. He highlights the stylised and non-realistic setting of the play but notes that Soviet spectators ‘are capable to read and see the performance objectively and, because of this, for us this is history, interesting, engaging and educative but only history’. It seems these few stylised devices were capable of transposing the story of Socrates from its concrete historical time-space so that it could find its location within the contemporary Soviet time-space. Poyurovskii seems to be aware of this and, perhaps because of this, he attempted to take the performance back to its historical past. He reminded the Soviet spectators that they were capable of seeing through the stylised devices and to respond to the play as a historical play, which portrays the life of an Ancient Greek philosopher.

Most reviews seem to focus on two complementary and to a certain extent contradictory readings of the above-mentioned productions: on the one hand they attempt to underline that the productions portray an ancient Greek story about an old, ugly but wise philosopher. On the other hand they attempt to show the relevance of the play to contemporary Soviet reality. The latter attempt seems to be inspired by a desire to appropriate Socrates as a suitable role model, a ‘positive hero’. It seems that for many


42 The play was produced by A. Kats and the sets were designed by T. Shvets. The above description is taken from an article by I. Vasilinina, "Path of a Theatre," Teatr, No. 3 (1979), p. 34.
critics the popularity of this serious philosophical play was intriguing and the only way they could explain this was by showing that the problems raised in the play were not completely irrelevant to the contemporary Soviet society.

It is interesting to examine how the dominant discourse of socialist realism appropriated the image of Socrates as a ‘positive hero’. In many reviews this process began by suggesting that Socrates was a philosopher respected by Marx. For instance, S. Povartsov in his review informed his readers that ‘Marx called Socrates the greatest thinker of ancient Greece, a fine and bright philosopher’ and ‘Radzinskii also saw the same thing in the hero of his new play’. N. Zaitsev added the name of Lev Tolstoi, for whom Socrates was one of the greatest philosophers, when he suggested that ‘Socrates has become a symbol of wisdom, and was the favorite hero of Marx and Lev Tolstoi.’\textsuperscript{43} According to A. Kuznicheva ‘many great thinkers such as Hegel, Belinskii and Chernyshevskii were interested in the personality of Socrates’. In this way the greatness of Socrates was authenticated by citing the names of Marx, Hegel, Tolstoi, Belinskii and Chernyshevskii, who were the canonical names in Marxist-Leninist discourse on art and philosophy.

The second step in the process of appropriating Socrates was to demonstrate that the Socratic method of attaining knowledge through dialogues was nothing but a form of dialectics. R. Gorev followed this line when he suggested that Socrates was a ‘born dialectician’. A similar suggestion was made by S. Povartsov who criticised the dogmatism of the ‘second pupil’ of Socrates and noted that a dogmatic student would not grasp the real essence of Socrates’ philosophy who ‘taught dialectics in his dialogues’. A. B. Gulyga, a professional philosopher with a degree of a Doctor of Sciences in Philosophy, went even one step further when he noted that ‘Socrates is very close to our world outlook when he says that a person who is serious can obtain knowledge, and that truth should become the property of the masses.’ In Gulyga’s opinion this is why ‘Marx called Socrates an embodiment of philosophy.’ N. Zaitsev was not fully satisfied with the Leningrad production and wished that in the future performances Socrates’ conversations with the public should be underlined more clearly because according to him ‘Socrates is a hero of the public and a philosopher of the masses.’

After Socrates was pronounced ‘born dialectician’ and a ‘thinker liked and respected by Marx’, it became easy to tell the Soviet audience that the play and its hero

were relevant to contemporary Soviet reality, and that the play did not only tell the story of an ancient Greek philosopher but explored ideas which were essential to become good, honest and responsible citizens. Yu. Alyanskii in his review of the Leningrad production notes that ‘after listening to Socrates on the stage we begin to think that people who lack spiritual strength turn into money-grubbers, careerists, and even traitors and betrayers’. The play and its hero ‘tell us that a person who is spiritually strong is higher and richer than his spiritually weak fellow-citizens who are only interested in jobs, positions and gold’. ‘The dialogues with Socrates’ according to Alyanskii ‘inspire people to become more honest, enlightened and pure’. L. Bykov also underlines some of the important lessons taught by Socrates by suggesting that when people ‘stop loving each other they pave the way for the triumph of egoism which inadvertently leads to betrayal’.44 According to N. Ismailova, Socrates ‘teaches us to think and live morally and honestly’. Many reviewers asked their readers to look at Socrates as a hero who was morally strong, was fearless in his fight against prejudices, selfishness and moral corruption, and who championed freedom of thought. In this way the main protagonist acquired attributes deemed to be necessary for him to become a ‘positive hero’. Yu. Alyanskii expressed a similar opinion when he noted that Yu. Tolubeev, who played the role of Socrates in the Leningrad production, ‘always cherished roles of positive heroes who had spiritual qualities such as kindness and social responsibility’.45

It is important to note that the project of appropriating the image of Socrates does not end by pronouncing him as a ‘positive hero’. The dominant discourse of the seventies demanded that the play and the image of Socrates be shown to be relevant and useful in the context of ‘the epoch of the scientific and technical revolution’. Gulyga’s review of the Moscow production is a good illustration of this approach. He drew the attention of his readers to the fact that the appearance of a historical and philosophical play such as *Dialogues with Socrates* in Soviet theatres was not an exception. Similar serious historical and philosophical plays appeared on the stages of a number of

44 L. Bykov, ”Let us Explore the Human Being...,” ["Исследуем человека...",] *Na Stenu*, 26 July 1983.

45 Demidov ends his review of the Moscow production by underlining the fact that ’A. Goncharov has consistently asserted the image of the positive hero, the one who is a defender of the highest ideals’. According to him,

Искусство не только отражает жизнь, но и что издавна известно, конструирует идеальные образы, дает незаурядные характеры – пример для подражания, вызвавший в нас желание достичь представленного нам идеала. Положительный герой всегда должен быть чуть-чуть значительнее, чуть-чуть лучше нас, находиться на чуть более высокой ступени нравственного и человеческого развития – иначе, какой смысл вообще в герое и какая идея стоит за ним (Demidov, p. 74).
Moscow theatres. The play *Dialogues with Socrates* was part of a distinct trend in the Soviet theatre in the sixties and the seventies. Being a true Marxist-Leninist philosopher, Gulyga explains the appearance of these plays only by locating the essential 'objective social conditions' that determined their appearance. According to him, only certain objective social conditions would have triggered the appearance of these plays, and prepared the Soviet audience to understand and enjoy them. It is not very hard to guess that by objective social conditions Gulyga is hinting at the 'epoch of the scientific and technical revolution', the beginning of which was announced by Brezhnev at the Twenty-Fourth Congress of the party which was held in 1971. According to Gulyga with the appearance of plays such as *Dialogues with Socrates*, 'our theatre has created a form of art, necessitated by the moral demands of the epoch of the 'scientific-technical revolution'.'

The above discussion illustrates that on the one hand the reviewers read the play from within the time-space of its main protagonists, while on the other hand they tried to appropriate the image of Socrates as a 'positive hero' who could meet the demands of a role-model in the 'epoch of scientific-technical revolution'. This discussion, however, will not be complete without considering V. I. Tolstyk's book *Socrates and Us* [Сократ и мы]. This book was written by a well-known academic and philosopher and was a good example of a reading from a position entrenched within the dominant Marxist-Leninist discourse. Tolstyk cites extracts from the play *Dialogues with Socrates* and re-contextualizes them within the framework of the Marxist-Leninist discourse by frequently quoting from the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Hegel. The main aim is to read the play in order to reiterate the well-known ethical norms of behaviour which were published as a new moral-code for the 'builder of communism'. This code was approved at the Twenty-Second Congress of the party which was held in 1961.

In the reviews which were discussed earlier, Socrates was portrayed as a philosopher who was 'liked and respected by Marx and Tolstoi'. Tolstyk reverses this by suggesting that Marx not only liked Socrates but was himself 'Socratic'. In Tolstyk's opinion, Lenin too had a 'Socratic character':

Сократским характером обладал К. Маркс, блистяще завершившая свой диалог с 
буржуазной политэкономией, историографией и философией созданием "капитал" — 
образца честнейшей полемики и подлинно научного добывания истины. "Сократский 
характер" жил в В. И. Ленине, когда он, уверенный в правоте марксизма, смело

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Thus, in Tolstyk's opinion, Marx was able to finish his seminal work *The Capital* only because he, like Socrates, initiated a dialogue with bourgeois political economy, historiography and philosophy. Similarly Lenin showed his 'Socratic character' when he, confident in the truthfulness of Marxism, entered into polemics with the empiriocritical philosophy. Tolstyk's message is very clear - because Marx and Lenin had Socratic characters every other Soviet citizen, in particular every young citizen, should use Socrates as a role-model.

Tolstyk reads the play in terms of a number of binary opposites such as: honest and dishonest philosophers represented in the play by Socrates and Anytus or Prodicus respectively; good and bad (dogmatic) students, represented by the 'second' and the 'first pupil' respectively; the principled and opportunistic behaviour represented by Socrates and Meletus respectively; the individual and the masses, represented in the play by Socrates and the Athenian crowd respectively. Applying this reading strategy, Tolstyk derives from the play the following norms of behaviour: one should feel proud to be a human being; one should always be ready to enter into a dialogue because there is no limit to knowledge and one can learn from every situation; every human being is capable of becoming a good person; one needs to inculcate an attitude of creativity; individuals should subordinate their interests to the interests of the collective; one should be satisfied with the minimum of comforts and wealth like Socrates and resist consumerist tendencies; one should not be afraid of sacrificing one's life for the sake of principles. It is interesting to note that these principles appear prominently in the moral-code for the 'builder of communism' which was discussed in the first chapter.

Thus, all reviews present a uniformly homogeneous reading. They foreground the same 'presence', and the same 'absence' is left unvoiced. Perhaps, because of this the absences and the silences seem to be more glaring. It is hard to imagine that any of the reviewers would have dared to link Socrates' trial with the trials of Sinyavskii-Daniel and Galanskov-Ginzburg which were held in 1967 and 1968 respectively. Similarly, it is impossible to expect from any reviewer to make even a veiled reference to the arrest of Solzhenitsyn in 1974 or to the on-going persecution of Sakharov.

Amongst the reviews discussed above there is only one which includes a comment that could be considered mildly critical of the dominant Soviet discourse. This is a review of a stylised production of the play by the Russian Drama Theatre of Riga. According to the reviewer Gorev, the play underlines Socrates' belief 'that there is no

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47 Tolstyk, p. 33.
absolute truth’. Criticising the dogmatic attitude of the ‘first pupil’ and of Socrates’ other followers, Gorev adds that immediately after Socrates’ death they forgot that ‘every truth was transient and began announcing Socrates’ truth as the only great and unique truth’. It is possible to read in these comments a masked attack on Soviet Marxism which elevated the Marxist-Leninist doctrine into an absolute truth. However, it should be noted that Marxist epistemology does deny the existence of absolute truth. Truths according to Marxism are relative but objective, i.e. relative because they change with time but objective because they are independent of human beings.

It is hard to guess from the published material if the Soviet audience read in this play some type of political commentary on the contemporary Soviet reality. Perhaps the best indicator is its popularity, although it has to conceded that for the Soviet audience living in urban centres, theatre was one of the few means of entertainment because neither cinema nor television were regarded by many to be capable of providing that.

It has already been mentioned that in many ways Soviet culture was a culture of ‘absence’, and that the Soviet audience and readers had mastered the art of reading absences and silences. For instance, a review of a play was possibly read not only in terms of what it said, but also in terms of the stories and ideas which it chose to ignore. Edvard Radzinskii in an interview published in 1991 made a similar observation explaining the falling popularity of the theatre in the relatively free atmosphere of the period of Glasnost.’48 ‘Before Glasnost’, Soviet art including theatre was the art of subtexts, and the Soviet audience was capable of unravelling multiple layers of subtexts’. Then the theatre often functioned ‘like a column or an article of a newspaper’. The theatre was not only an aesthetic experience but also informed about events, deliberately ignored by the official media.

There is no doubt that some Soviet readers were able to decipher the political commentary ingrained in the play Dialogue with Socrates. It was mentioned in the first chapter that a number of editors found it difficult to approve the play for production before a major reworking of the text. One of these editors told Radzinskii that his play was not about Socrates but about Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn. In a documentary film made by the Russian Television, Radzinskii recalls that many Muscovites knew that the officials were creating problems in approving his play.49 As a result the audience began

49 The documentary film entitled A Theatrical Novel [Театральный роман] was shown in Moscow in March 1993. In this film Radzinskii recalls that the day this play was premiered in Moscow, the front rows were occupied by important officials and ministers. He had invited Andrei Sakharov to the premiere because, in his opinion, he was the real hero of the play.
to show up during the rehearsals in the Mayakovskii Theatre in Moscow, and the
militiamen had to be deployed to stop them.

Mikhail Lunin - ‘The Invincible Hero’

The play Lunin or the Death of Jacques Recorded in the Presence of His Master
was premiered in 1978 in the Theatre on the Maloi Bronnui in Moscow. The play was
staged in many state and provincial theatres.50

Dialogues with Socrates tells the story of a philosopher in ancient Athens,
whereas Lunin ... is about Mikhail Lunin who lived just a century ago and whose life is
perceived as one of the most interesting chapters of Russian history. Perhaps this is why
Soviet reviewers showed a more serious engagement with this play than the play about
the last days of Socrates.

The Moscow production was directed by A. Dunaev, whose interpretation was
neither realist nor stylised. The stage was designed to represent two rooms of a prison:
Lunin’s prison cell and the adjacent prison office. The main focusing device was the
candle held by Lunin which moved on the stage with Lunin, bringing props and figures
in and out of the action.51 Instead of recreating a physically concrete space, Dunaev
only alluded to it with various props such as: striped mile posts passing rapidly on a
moveable stand at the backstage; mirrors lighted by Lunin’s candle created the
masquerade-ball room; a Gothic window hinting at the castle and the cathedral. The
play used lyrical music by Mikhail Glinka, which along with uniforms, defined more
concretely the historical time and place. Although the production used stylised
elements, because of the overall thrust of the reading they also gravitated towards and
were consumed by the realist project of recreating historical time on the stage.

An interesting production was staged in a provincial theatre in Estonia, where the
original title of the play was changed to Trial after the Ball [Суд после бала]. The play
was produced in two versions, one which was performed on the main stage of the
theatre and another produced on the small stage. The text of the play was significantly
edited.52 The motifs of the uniforms and the ball were left out of the play and the

50 The play was staged in several theatres such as: Vanemuine Theatre in Estonia; the Okhlopkov
Irkutsk Regional Theatre in Irkutsk; the Chitinsk Regional Theatre of Drama; and in a Lithuanian Theatre
in Sbyaulyae. The Soviet television also screened an adaptation of the Moscow production.

51 This description is taken from articles by Maia Kipp and N. Velekhova. N. Velekhova, "Three
Hours and Three Thousand Years," ["Три часа и три тысячи лет,"] Teatr, No. 3 (1980), pp. 30-42;
Maia Kipp, "In Search of a Synthesis: Reflections on Two Interpretations of Edvard Radzinskii's Lunin or
the Death of Jacques, Recorded in the Presence of the Master," Studies in Twentieth Century Literature,
13 (1989), pp. 259-281; Velekhova also discusses this play and the Moscow production in her book: N.
Velekhova, Silver Pipes: Soviet Drama Yesterday and Today [Серебряные трубы: Советская
drama вчера и сегодня] (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel', 1983).

52 E. Kekelidze, "The Idea of Free Will and Liberation," ["Идея вольности и свободы,"]
production concentrated on the present time of the play, centred around its four characters: Lunin, lieutenant Grigor’ev, the prison clerk, and Marfa. The actor playing lieutenant Grigor’ev, the prison officer, also played the role of the ‘uniform of the Tsar’ and for this he only had to place the imperial uniform over his shoulders. This simple device helped to dissolve the difference between a tyrant Tsar and the local executioner of his orders.

The main focus of the play was on the question of betrayal: why during questioning, the Decembrists betrayed each other? why Pestel’, the most honest of all the Decembrists, named more conspirators that any one else? These questions were asked by the ‘uniform of the Tsar’ played by lieutenant Grigor’ev. However, the most interesting aspect of the production was the use of popular contemporary Russian songs, which linked historical time of the play with twentieth-century Soviet time-space. It is interesting that E. Kekilidze, the reviewer, found the use of these ‘songs by Vysotskii’ unfortunate because they ‘lacked the force and the temperament of Vysotskii, and diminished the artistic quality of the performance’.

Like *Dialogues with Socrates* the play Lunin ... was read by Soviet critics as a historical play. They underlined its historical time-space and argued that the play portrayed a Decembrist-period Russia. However, it was argued, and this was in line with their reading of *Dialogues with Socrates*, that the play like all historical plays explored certain basic human issues such as the tyranny, despotism, freedom, betrayal and sacrifice. Most Soviet reviewers judged the play and its main protagonists, the Decembrists including Lunin, from within the discourse about historical materialism. They repeatedly underlined the fact that the Decembrists portrayed in the play belonged to a particular class and that their failure, to a large extent, was a result of their class-consciousness. However, while doing this, the reviewers did not fail to underline the basic human qualities which made Lunin an outstanding person, a role model and a positive hero. This is reflected in some of the titles of their reviews such as: “Unsubdued” ["Непокоренный"]; “The Idea of Free-Will and Liberation” ["Идея вольности и свободы"]; “He was a Fighter” ["Он был борцом"]; “Death and Immortality of Lunin” ["Смерть и бессмертие Лунина"]; “The Undying Spirit of Freedom” ["Неистребимый дух свободы"]; “The Confession of a Decembrist” ["Исповедь декабриста"]; “Confession of a Son of the Century” ["Исповедь сына века"]; “Play about a Decembrist” ["Спектакль о декабристе"]; and “I Myself Chose My Fate” ["Я сам избрал свою судьбу"].


Writing in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, V. Komissarzhevskii read the play from within the discourse about historical materialism. According to him the play belonged to the genre of tragedy and quoted Engels’ views on it, according to whom ‘the tragedy represents the absence of coincidence between the historical necessity and the impossibility of realising that necessity in practice.’

Yu. Smelkov thought that the play was about a revolutionary movement in the history of Russia. An unsigned report in *Moskovskii Komsomolets* agreed with Smelkov and noted that the Moscow production told about one of the most exciting periods of Russian history. In B. Petrov’s opinion the Moscow production ‘has portrayed one of the most mysterious personalities of the last century’. Z. Vladimirova thought that the production ‘is a review of life in the Tsarist Russia and portrays duels between Lunin and the reactionary forces, between Lunin and those who betrayed the cause of liberation, and between Lunin and the power of the Tsar Nikolai I’. N. Zelenova underlined the setting in a prison and noted that in the Moscow production ‘the whole Russia of the times of the Tsar Nikolai I is portrayed like a prison’. Hinting at the way Lunin ‘foolishly sacrificed his life’ she noted that this romantic world outlook ‘very accurately reflects the social relations in contemporary Russia’. According to G. Seliverstova ‘the personality of Lunin reflects the conflicts and the contradiction of the epoch.’ The play portrayed ‘the spiritual strength of the Decembrists, who were the best representatives of that epoch’. N. Paleeva, reviewing the Moscow production of the play, noted that ‘the personality of Lunin can not be understood in isolation from the environment in which he lived and struggled. The play not only represents his life but portrays the whole epoch’. N. Eidel’man, the noted Soviet historian of nineteenth-century Russia wrote, in the theatre-program of the Moscow production that Radzinskii’s play represented ‘an attempt to explain through artistic form, using original documents and artistic fantasy, the mystery surrounding the

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55 Yu. Smelkov, "He was a Fighter," [*Trud*, 27 September 1979].

56 This review does not have a title and is not signed by an author: *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, 6 October 1979.

death of Mikhail Lunin, and by doing so, to take us closer to the cherished meaning of
life and struggle of the representatives of the first Russian liberation movement.\textsuperscript{58}

These reviews thus framed the play, its productions and Lunin within a specific
historical time-space. To a large extent this was fostered by the styles of different
productions, which in spite of using a number of stylised devices by and large operated
within realistic conventions, and did not disrupt the historical time-space. Readings of
this play from within contemporary Soviet time-space approach it from two directions
closely related to each other: firstly, it is recognised that as a genre historical plays not
only portray real historical time and space, but also ‘engage in the exploration of basic
moral values and attributes which constitute the essence of the national character.’\textsuperscript{59} The
second direction centres on the listing of ahistorical and basic human attributes and
values in the play. For instance, most Soviet reviewers presented Lunin as a ‘fighter’, ‘a
slave without a master’, ‘a slave who was not a fatalist’, ‘a person of highest spirits who
died for his ideals’, a ‘chivalrous fighter’, ‘a person devoted to the idea of freedom and
welfare of the people of his country’, a ‘genius’, a ‘thinker’. It is not very hard to guess
that these are some of the basic qualities which Soviet youth was asked by the party and
the state to cherish.

In interpreting the play from the contemporary time-space most reviewers
underlined the theme of the slave and his master. It was noted that in the play Lunin is
not a fatalist like Diderot’s Jacques.\textsuperscript{60} According to Velekhova ‘Lunin not only does not
want to be a slave but does not want to be Jacques the Frenchman.’\textsuperscript{61} Underlining this
difference, Velekhova drew attention to the title of the play, according to which ‘it is
Jacques who dies and not Lunin; Lunin remains immortal.’\textsuperscript{62} N. Khaustov produced an
intriguing interpretation of the motif of the ‘fatalist slave Jacques’ in his article.
According to him, Lunin was ‘obsessed with the idea of his own exceptional being’,
that he was different from the rest and was more sensitive and more heroic than the
others. In this way, ‘he was a Jacques for himself’ - a slave of his own misconception.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{58} The museum of the Theatre on the Maloi Bronnoi showed me the minutes of a discussion on the
first dress rehearsal after which the play was approved. N. Eidel'man participated in the discussion and
commended the play.

\textsuperscript{59} A good example of this reading is N. T. Khaustov, "History and Contemporariness in Ed.
Radzinskii's Play Lunin or Death of Jacques Recorded in the Presence of the Master," ["История и
современность в пьесе Эд. Радзинского Лунин или смерть Жака записанная в
присутствии хозяина,"] in Artistic Creativity and Literary Process [Художественное
творчество и литературный процесс], ed. N. N. Kisilev (Tomsk: Tomskii State University,

\textsuperscript{60} Kipp in her article also makes this point. According to her, Lunin is not fatalist because 'he rejects
predetermined roles' (Kipp, p. 265).

\textsuperscript{61} Velekhova, p. 36.

\textsuperscript{62} Velekhova, p. 35.

\textsuperscript{63} Khaustov, p. 27.
Hence the ‘death of Jacques’ represented the death of the idea of his exceptional self. Khaustov read the play as a story which showed that Lunin killed the slave Jacques sitting in him, and realised that it was important ‘to fight not for establishing one’s own exceptional capacities but for the good of other people.’\textsuperscript{64} It is not very difficult to guess that Khaustov is repeating the well-known principle of socialist ethics according to which the duty of every individual is to subordinate his or her own interests to the interests of the community. It is noteworthy that V. Tolstyxkh underlined the same idea in his reading of \textit{Dialogues with Socrates}.

An interesting feature of a number of reviews is the discussion around Lunin’s criticism of the fatalist slave Jacques. Velekhova reads in this a criticism of a popular view that nineteenth-century Russia and in particular the Decembrists like Lunin were influenced and inspired by non-Russian sources, particularly the French Revolution. According to Velekhova, ‘by forcing Lunin to reject Jacques, Radzinskii has stressed the necessity to protest against the artificial injection of alien social ideas however good they might have been’ for Russia.\textsuperscript{65} N. Paleeva disputed this and noted that the influence of the French Revolution on Russian intelligentsia was demonstrated by many Soviet scholars and could not be ignored. In support she quoted from the works of Lenin, according to whom ‘Russia in the nineteenth century had gone through Marxism.’\textsuperscript{66} She noted that according to Lenin ‘the Decembrists were not psychological exceptions’ but an expression of that new trend which was emerging in Russia, and that is why they became the ‘national pride of the Great Russians [Великороссы].’ Paleeva thought that Radzinskii followed a similar line in his portrayal of the Decembrists which was achieved ‘over the background of the deeply reactionary role of the Russian nobility as a class. The play underlined deep contradictions which characterised the Decembrist movement.’\textsuperscript{67} Paleeva’s review is remarkable in its use of the established Marxist-Leninist discourse, and in its attempt to show that the play was politically and ideologically correct.

After establishing the political and ideological correctness of the play the next step was to show its relevance to the contemporary political situation in the Soviet Union. This approach is visible in most of the reviews but is more clear in articles by N. G. Khaustov and Yu. Smelkov. As a first step in this direction, Khaustov noted that Radzinskii’s play about Lunin was one of the several historical plays which appeared in the sixties and the seventies.\textsuperscript{68} According to Khaustov, the appearance of these plays

\textsuperscript{64} Khaustov, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{65} Velekhova, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{66} Paleeva, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{67} Paleeva, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{68} Some of these plays were: \textit{After a Hundred Years in a Birch Forest} [Через столет в березовой...
was associated with a desire to explore certain basic and stable moral values which constitute the essence of the Russian national character. Referring to Lunin ..., Khaustov noted that the ‘Decembrists followed the better traditions of world culture and cultivated qualities such as: unselfishness, loyalty to an ideal, high moral responsibility, a high sense of civic responsibility, a concern for the motherland devastated in the war against Napoleon.’ Connecting Radzinskiǐ’s play with the political and social conditions in the seventies, Khaustov noted that the play had ‘themes which are very important in defining the moral position of an individual for creating a reasonable social structure.’ Summing up his reading of this play Khaustov wrote:

Лу́нин явля́ется создате́лем опреде́ленной системой ценностей (вобрал опыт прошлого), на которые автор призывает ориентироваться и сегодня: способность к непрагматическому поступку, рождение дея́нное, исходя из нравственной основы, высокие критерии в выборе жизненных путей, способность к обращению позиции в истории и воздействию на нее, духовное мужество в противоборстве с обстоятельствами.

Khaustov thus constituted Lunin as a ‘creator of a whole system of values which is useful in the current Soviet situation’ and listed these values. It is not very difficult to guess that in Khaustov’s opinion Lunin is a perfect role model, a positive hero.

Yu. Smelkov also took up the issue of the ‘positive hero’ in his article. It is interesting, however that he replaced the notion of the positive hero with that of ‘a hero who is in the process of becoming’ [Становящегося героя]. Yu. Smelkov was explaining a ‘deficit’ of positive heroes in the Soviet drama in the late seventies and noted that this was because ‘the demands and expectations of the positive hero have increased’. According to him the days when drama was based on the ‘conflict between a positive hero and his opposite are over, and that the focus has shifted to the internal conflict’. Contemporary Soviet drama is based on ‘internal conflict’ and ‘open finale’. Explaining his notion of the ‘hero who is becoming’, Yu. Smelkov noted that contemporary Soviet drama ‘is locating material for constructing such a hero in contemporary Soviet reality and is attempting to show how that hero became a positive hero; it is trying to portray the movement from his initial position to the final


70 Khaustov, p. 30.
71 Khaustov, p. 35.
ideologically correct position." In Smelkov's opinion the play Lunin ... not only portrayed a positive hero but a 'hero who is becoming positive'. This was a play 'about a man who has travelled a path from his natural non-conformist position to a position where he has found a correct political world outlook.' It is not very hard to guess that Yu. Smelkov is trying to sell the same old wine in an old bottle. It is interesting to note that in his article, he cites N. Eidel'man, according to whom the genre of 'historical narratives was very popular in the Soviet Union because Soviet readers were attracted to the figure of an ideal person, a positive hero.'

In this way contemporary Soviet critical discourse assimilated Lunin as an appropriate role model or a positive hero. Although, it is impossible to expect that any of the Soviet reviewers or critics would have drawn parallels between Soviet prison camps and the 'most horrible prison in the Tsarist Russia', the reviews contain material which can be easily transported from its Tsarist time-space into the Soviet time-space. It was noted that compared to Dialogues with Socrates, Lunin ... is set in a time-space which is much closer to a Soviet reader. Moreover this is the story of a political prisoner who was executed in his prison cell in Siberia while a false statement is being prepared in an adjacent room. N. Zelenova in her review noted that 'in the play the whole Russia of the times of Nikolai I stands out as a big prison'. It is not hard to imagine that it would not take long for any Soviet reader of this review to replace a few words, Nikolai with Stalin and Russia with the Soviet Union, and bring the historical time-space of the play closer to their own contemporary reality.

Most reviews underlined the motif of the 'slave Jacques' and his struggle against his ruthless master. The reviewers also highlighted the question of betrayal by the Decembrists, naming each other in their statements. Any Soviet reader who had heard about the show trials would have easily drawn parallels.

In this regard a review by N. Paleeva is interesting. Although she follows a line which is very similar to the other reviewers, she also cites a number of extracts from Lunin's letters from exile. One of these reads:

"Народ мыслит, несмотря на глубокое молчание. Доказательством, что он мыслит, служат миллионы, тратимые с целью подслушать мнения, которые мешают ему выразить." Lunin believed that in spite of a deep silence the masses did not stop thinking. The strongest evidence of this, in Lunin's opinion, was the fact that the state was spending

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73 Smelkov, p. 7.
74 Smelkov, p. 18.
75 Smelkov, p. 16.
76 Paleeva, p. 110.
millions to spy and listen to all those ideas which the state did not want to be told in the open. These words are as applicable to the Soviet state as they were to the Tsarist Russia. Most Soviet readers and spectators knew that the Soviet state had an elaborate network of spies, informants and phone-taps which would have cost the state millions.

**Seneca - Was He a Conformist or a Helpless Philosopher?**

*Theatre of the Times of Nero and Seneca* was first published in 1982 in the first issue of a new almanac called *Contemporary Drama* [Современная Драматургия], but was produced by major Soviet theatres four years later. The play was first produced in 1983 in the Theatre of Russian Drama in Riga by A. Kats who had earlier produced *Dialogues with Socrates*. It has been noted by several Western commentators that very often the theatre establishment in the Soviet Union followed an unwritten rule: if the authorities felt that a play was politically and ideologically not very correct and could generate controversies it was approved to be first staged in provincial theatres. This provided them with a chance to evaluate the reaction of the audience, critics and sometimes even of the higher authorities. Directors of the main, so-called academic, theatres in Moscow and Leningrad also looked at these productions and the responses of the critics and the authorities before making a decision. These responses were important not only in deciding whether to stage a play but also in formulating the style of production. It can be argued that the reasons why directors such as A. Goncharov of the Mayakovskii Theatre in Moscow and G. Tvostonogov of the Bolshoi Drama Theatre in Leningrad delayed their premieres for four to five years were not purely artistic or technical.

It is interesting to note that although most Soviet productions did not opt for realist and representational styles, they were read mainly from within the time-space of the protagonists. These readings stressed the elements of historical parable in it and argued that, like two other plays of the trilogy, it can be employed to foreground basic human values. Most theatres staged the play in their main halls, although some opted for smaller, circular, circus-like arenas.

A. Kats’ production in The Russian Drama Theatre in Riga opted for a more stylised interpretation. The whole stage was in black monochrome tone with a barrel as the lone prop on the stage. According to A. Chepalk, the production underlined the

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77 The play was produced in theatres such as: The Russian Drama Theatre in Riga in 1983 which took it to Khar'kov in 1984; The Tobol’sk Drama Theatre in Tyumen in 1983; The Mayakovskii Academic Theatre in Moscow in 1986; The Khamernyi Theatre in Erevan in 1986; The Gor’kii Theatre of Rostov in Rostov on Don in 1986; The S. Vurgun Theatre of Russian Drama in Baku in 1986; The Bolshoi Drama Theatre in Leningrad in 1987; The Pushkin Drama Theatre in Krasnoyarsk in 1988; The Youth Theatre in Sumi in 1989; and the Theatre of Drama and Puppets in Mytishi in 1992.

78 I. V. Monisova in her thesis has read Radzinskii’s plays as historical parables.
‘theatre within the theatre’ aspect of the play. A. Goncharov in the Mayakovskii Theatre in Moscow went for a mixed style, producing the play on a stage with a proscenium arch, and creating a space which alluded to the arena of a Roman circus. The play used Roman costumes along with masks underlining the themes of role playing and metamorphosis. The fore-stage showed a basement covered by a lattice. On the left hand side of the stage there was a barrel, while the upper stage showed a wooden latticed structure with thick ropes hanging from it. In the right-hand side of the stage stood a cross which was lifted and brought into the centre-stage in the second act. The latticed structure also contained large masks showing grotesques faces. The stage had semicircular tiers which defined the internal space as an arena of a Roman circus. The stylised approach was also evident in the acting of A. Dzhigarkhanyan, who played the role of Nero. According to Yu. Smelkov, ‘as soon as the scenes of violence on the stage reached their peak, terrorising the audience, A. Dzhigarkhanyan’s Nero reassured them by reminding that they were seeing only a play and nothing more.’

In the Bolshoi Drama Theatre in Leningrad the play was first premiered in a small hall but was later moved onto the main stage. M. Dmitrievskaya found the production on the smaller stage much more interesting. On the bigger main stage ‘the setting became less definitive, and was lost in the largeness of the surrounding space’. The production seemed to have lost its tempo, and words which, according to Dmitrievskaya, ‘were the most important aspect of the play were unable to carry the audience along with them.’ This production did not fully expose ‘the theatre within the theatre’ structure of the play, although in Dmitrievskaya’s opinion it was able to highlight the theme of role-playing. According to her, ‘it was difficult to guess what was controlling Nero’s spectacle - a fixed predetermined script or improvisation.’

The play found more interesting interpretations in less well-known regional theatres. The production in The S. Vurgun Theatre of Russian Drama in Baku defied the strict boundaries between the acting and spectating spaces, and used a number of presentation devices. The actors appeared on the stage without a proscenium curtain and waited for the audience to take their seats. The stage and the auditorium were brightly lit, and the actors were dressed in Roman tunics, some carrying masks. When the

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82 Dmitrievskaya, p. 11

83 Dmitrievskaya, p. 10.
audience was ready, they announced the title of the play. Thus these small changes in normal Soviet realist theatrical conventions were able underline the theme of role playing and the ‘theatre within the theatre’ structure in the play. Following a Brechtian convention the audience were made aware that they had come to see a play.

In the Kamernyi Theatre in Erevan the acting space was moved right into the centre of the auditorium. The acting space was circular and resembled the arena of a circus. Like a normal modern-day circus the audience surrounded the circus-arena. The original text of the play was also edited to delete Seneca’s alleged involvement in a rebellion against Nero. According to M. Diloyan, this change helped to underline Seneca’s guilt; ‘he was guilty not for rebelling against Nero but for keeping quiet.’ It is important to stress that most productions discussed earlier did not try to disrupt the historical time and place of the play. By staging the play within a space which resembled a modern Soviet circus arena, and which also alluded to the arena of a Roman circus, this production was able to introduce this disruption.

The production in The Gor’kii Theatre in Rostov also staged the play in a circus-arena. The original text of the play was edited drastically to change the ending. The finale in this production did not show Seneca’s execution, and instead, Seneca was shown to be proudly standing upright, glowing in the brightness of the floodlights. Nero, on the other hand was confused and looking defeated. This up-beat ending of the play seems to have shifted the responsibility of Nero’s crimes solely onto Nero.

Thus, it seems most Soviet productions failed to come out of the time-space of the protagonists. None of them, with the exception of the production in an Erevan theatre, seriously attempted to disrupt the historical time-space of the play. Most of the allusions to time-spaces other than the historical were created by employing semi-realist setting and mode of acting. Not many productions were able to force the reviewers to see the ‘theatre within the theatre structure’ in the play.

It was mentioned earlier that most Soviet productions read the play as a philosophical parable which underlined the relationship between tyrants and intellectuals. Most reviewers also highlighted this as the basic theme of the play. However, the question of moral responsibility of the excesses was resolved differently. In an interview, Radzinskii also drew attention to this and noted that this question was


87 The production in the Jacques Cocteau Repertory Theatre in New York by Eve Adamson was able to do this by dressing Seneca in twentieth-century costumes.
resolved differently by productions mounted in different countries and cultures. In most productions, Seneca was portrayed as a conformist philosopher who was held responsible for the excesses. In other productions, such as the one in the Copenhagen Royal Theatre in Denmark, Seneca was portrayed as a helpless philosopher who was trying to survive in a totalitarian state. Finally, in a few other productions the question of the moral responsibility was left unanswered, leaving the audiences to find their own answer.

Compared to the other two plays of the trilogy, this play is more political, painting a very accurate portrait of one of the greatest tyrants in human history. It is not very difficult to imagine that a Soviet reader or spectator would have drawn the parallels between Nero's uncontrolled tyranny and Stalin's repression. However, most Soviet reviewers knew that it was impossible to voice such parallels in the print media. The readers and the audience were also aware of this, and in this way, the reception of the play was carried out in an environment where readers and spectators and performers and reviewers were conscious of these constraints. However, it is interesting to examine how some of the commentators avoided these parallels and by doing so made them more obvious.

V. I. Tolstykhh penned an explanatory note in the theatre-program of the production in The Mayakovskii Theatre in Moscow. Tolstykhh had earlier written a book *Socrates and Us* in response to *Dialogues with Socrates*, in which he tried to assimilate the image of Socrates as a positive hero. In his commentary on the play about Nero and Seneca, Tolstykhh argued that the portrayal of Nero, Seneca and Rome was historically accurate. True to his Marxist training, he cited F. Engels' comments about Seneca to demonstrate Seneca's complex role in creating and maintaining Nero's despotic rule. However, Tolstykhh did not stop at this. Underlining the significance of this play in the contemporary situation he noted that 'although the image of Nero in the play is historically accurate, it nevertheless forces us not to forget all his followers and imitators right up to Hitler, Samosa and Pinochet.' It is not very hard for any informed Soviet reader to add the missing names in this list. A point to be noted here is that the signature V. I. Tolstykhh in the program carries his full academic title: the Doctor of Philosophical Sciences and Professor. The author's name followed by his title in this way begins to function as a device which validates and authenticates the discourse. However, Tolstykhh was not the only one who employed the canonical name of Engels.


89 V. I. Tolstykhh, Theatre program of the play *Theatre of the Times of Nero and Seneca* in the Mayakovskii Academic Theatre in Moscow (Moscow, The Mayakovskii Academic Theatre, 1990).
V. Klepikov who reviewed the production of The Tobol’sk Drama Theatre also used a similar quotation from Engels.\textsuperscript{90} Similarly, M. Diloyan in his review of one of the most interesting productions of this play in the Kamernyi Theatre in Erevan listed a number of dictators similar to Nero, such as Hitler, Polpot and Pinochet leaving out the most obvious name. However, while describing Nero’s tyranny and Seneca’s role of a conformist, many reviewers employed general statements which can be very easily read by Soviet readers in the context of their own historical experience. For instance, V. Neverova in her review of a production in the Pushkin Drama Theatre in Krasnoyarsk noted that the play reminded of ‘those open and hidden mainsprings of horrible nightmares of a not very distant past.’\textsuperscript{91} In many reviews Seneca’s conformism and his indirect participation in the excesses of Nero were used to underline the dangers associated with the position of remaining silent in a totalitarian society. Most Soviet reviewers perceived Seneca as a silent and conformist philosopher who should take moral responsibility of Nero’s excesses. In their opinion Diogenes, the old man in the barrel, was the only hero in the play because he was not afraid to speak. However, some productions tended to acquit Seneca. For instance, in the production in The Gor’kii Theatre of Rostov the finale was altered to show an invincible and proud Seneca standing before a confused and defeated Nero. Similarly, in a review of the Moscow production Yu. Smelkov tried to defend the role of Seneca. Many reviews also highlighted the fact that the play represented a show trial of Seneca, reflected, for instance, in the fact that the most common title was, \textit{The Trial of Seneca} [Суд над Сенекой].

It is noteworthy that although some reviewers underlined the themes of role playing and metamorphoses, and attempted to foreground ‘the theatre within the theatre structure’ of this play, not many focused on the fact that one of the most significant themes of the play is the theatre itself. The only exception in this regard is a review of the Moscow production by B. Lyubimov, according to whom, ‘Radzinskii has written a philosophical parable, and not simply a parable, but a play-parable in which the main image is that of the theatre itself.’\textsuperscript{92}

It was mentioned earlier that in Yu. Smelkov’s opinion Lunin in the play \textit{Lunin} ... was not only a positive hero but a hero who was shown to be in the process of becoming a positive hero. According to Yu. Smelkov, he was a ‘hero who was becoming’. In


\textsuperscript{92} B. Lyubimov, “Venus, Nero and Seneca,” [“Венера, Неро и Сенека,”] \textit{Teatral’naya Zhizn’}, No. 7 (1986), pp. 4-5.
Smelkov’s opinion Seneca is also portrayed as a hero who is ‘in the process of becoming’ [стаповывящийся]. According to him, Radzinskii’s play demonstrates ‘that a person can show moral upliftment after suffering a moral degradation, and die with honour.’

History and How It is Written?

As was mentioned above most Soviet performers and reviewers read the three plays as parables in which historical themes are used to raise certain basic human problems. Not many experts raised the question of historical authenticity of the time and people portrayed in these plays, although with regard to the play Dialogues with Socrates most critics agreed that the play was largely based on Plato’s The Last Days of Socrates. In a note in the theatre program of the production in the Theatre on the Maloi Bronnoi, N. Eidel’man, the noted Soviet historian of the Decembrist Russia remarks that Radzinskii had mixed historical facts with creative imagination to create a realistic portrayal of Mikhail Lunin. Eidel’man is perhaps referring to the mysterious circumstances surrounding Lunin’s death. It is not known whether Lunin died from an apoplectic attack or was executed in his prison cell. According to Eidel’man the play ‘uses original documentary material and creative imagination to explain and to solve the mystery about Lunin’s death.’ With regard to Theatre of the Times of Nero and Seneca most reviewers agreed that the play presented historically accurate portraits of Nero and Seneca.

It is interesting that most Soviet reviewers failed to underline the way these plays, in particular the last two plays of the trilogy, foreground the very practice of writing history. Yu. Smelkov in his article presents perhaps the only available example where V. Guseev, a reviewer attacked the way Lunin ... distorted the known historical facts. However, Guseev was not concerned with the way Lunin’s death is portrayed in the play but objected to the scene which described Lunin’s last meeting with his lover N. Pototskaya. According to Guseev, ‘such a meeting could not have taken place.’ In support he cited Lunin’s letter to his sister.

In Lunin ... the process of writing history is foregrounded in the very first ‘scene’. The prison clerk is fabricating the statements of the witnesses about Lunin’s death, according to which Lunin died from an apoplectic attack. The two versions of his death come ‘face to face’ in the next scene in which lieutenant Grigor’ev informs Lunin about

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93 Smelkov, 1986, p. 20.
95 Smelkov, 1986, p. 22.
his impending execution. Lunin is told that although he will be strangled at three o’clock by two convicts, ‘in order to save him from insults it has been decided to announce that Lunin died from an apoplectic stroke’ [76]. In this way, the play confronts its readers with two versions of the history about Lunin’s death and underlines the way the official version is ‘written’ and circulated.

A similar confrontation is seen in the play about Nero and Seneca. In this play Nero is not only playing the roles of an actor, director, judge and an executioner but also of a historian. In the first part of the play, before Nero begins Seneca’s trial, he pronounces Seneca dead:

Неро... Вот ты стоишь здесь живой, о твоея смерти уже болтает весь город.
(Шепчет.) Потому что свершилась моя последняя метаморфоза. Пока ты беседовал здесь живой — я превратил тебя в мертвца.

.... Короче, как ты умер для истории, мы уже выяснили. И в подробностях. Теперь нам остается решить как ты умерешь на самом деле... Стоп! Простите! Ведь есть и еще один вопрос — за что ты умерешь?

... [143].

Nero had asked Eros to send the centurions to bring Seneca but Eros informed Nero that when the centurions reached Seneca’s palace they found that he had already committed suicide by calling his surgeon and getting his veins cut. Eros also informed Nero that the crowd around the circus was told of Seneca’s suicide, and every one in Rome had started talking about it. Thus, although Seneca in the play is still alive the news about his suicide is already circulating in Rome. In this way, the play confronts its readers and spectators with two versions of Seneca’s death – one by suicide and the other by execution. However, the author or the historian of both versions is Nero himself. He is the all powerful tyrant who has a whip in his hand, and who not only uses it to metamorphose people into animals but also writes the ‘true’ histories of their lives.

Thus, the two plays of the trilogy underline the fact that the history is written by those who are powerful, that the so-called official histories are necessarily not true but seem to be true or are taken to be true because they are circulated by the people who control and exercise power, however the plays also foreground the relation between facts and fiction, and between ‘historical’ facts and literary imagination. They underline the idea that not only gaps in histories can be filled by events created by literary imagination but that even the so-called historical facts can be re-contextualised in such a way that they can look like fabricated facts.

Lunin’s preoccupation before his execution to leave a note about the real circumstances of his death, and to secure a real witness of this event in the form of a
Polish priest, can be read as attempts to create a credible alternative history. Lunin is impatient to leave a written note about his execution and remarks: "The words fly away but the written words stay" [81]. He is sure that even a small note left by him will be read by people before that note is destroyed, and will thus gain circulation and start competing with the official version.

Lunin obtained a promise from lieutenant's Grigor'ev that he would allow a Catholic Polish priest to come and close his eyes after his death, and when he noticed that the priest was brought and put in the adjacent cell, he was happy because he knew that he had secured a vital witness. He was sure that the priest would not be able to keep quiet and would tell other people, and that in spite of oaths to keep quite they would also speak and tell, and the hidden fact would no longer remain hidden.

It is interesting that most Soviet critics seem to have overlooked or avoided this aspect of the play. It is strange more so because historical materialism, the basic paradigm of Soviet historical writing, operates on the fact that histories are written by the classes who control power and are written from their own point of view and in their own interests. It is possible that Soviet critics and commentators found it not very safe to underline the relation between the fact and the fiction in the writing of histories. It would have not only questioned the objective nature of historical writing by the proletariat and its intellectual fellow-travellers but would have also questioned the authenticity of written Soviet history. It is true however, that most Soviet readers and critics would have been able to read this idea from and into these plays. It need not be emphasised that most Soviet citizens were aware of several non-official versions of their history, being circulated orally amongst them. Most of them had read Stalin's Short Course and were aware of its gaps and silences. In spite of every repression and perhaps because of this repression, they were also aware of the oral versions of the same events which contested the official versions.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter discussed contemporary Soviet readings of the trilogy. It was argued that the three plays can not be reduced to the re-presentation of the time-space of their protagonists. These plays were written, read, performed and seen from within their own specific time-spaces, the chronotopes of the 'creating world' which created the historical world portrayed in them.

*Dialogues with Socrates* and *Lunin* ... are structured around the chronotope of the prison, and even in *Theatre of the Times of Nero and Seneca* the chronotope of the circus-theatre resembles a prison where Seneca is brought before Nero. All three plays contain the motif of trial. In *Dialogues with Socrates* this trial takes place in the open
space of an Athenian acropolis. In Lunin ... the trial is closed and is set within a prison. Finally, Seneca’s trial in the last play takes place on the stage of a Roman circus. It was argued that Soviet readers and spectators must have interacted with the chronotope of the prison and the motif of trial from within their own time-space i.e. from within their own historical experience of prisons, concentrations camps and show trials, because they were the main chronotopes of the ‘creating’ world - the world which created the world portrayed in these plays. Radzinskii as a writer and most Soviet performers, readers, spectators and critics were aware of these real chronotopes of their own world. It is possible that this was one of the main factors which ensured a that these plays remained popular with Soviet spectators.

All three plays contain in them ‘a play within the play’ structure. This structure reaches its maximum potential in the play about Nero and Seneca where the motifs of multiple role playing and metamorphoses combine with the chronotope of the circus-theatre to make the theatre itself an object of re-presentation. This play which makes theatricality its focal point was able to underline the relation between illusion and reality in the theatre and the world outside it.

It was argued that like any other play, these plays and in particular the play about Nero and Seneca which uses ‘the theatre within the theatre’ structure were written, performed, read and seen from within the prevailing theatrical conventions. These were the conventions of the realist and socialist realist theatre and constituted the real chronotope of the theatre in the Soviet Union. These conventions defined that ‘givenness’ of the theatre which was questioned, explored and represented by these plays. A large number of reviews which were discussed in this chapter clearly show that most performers, spectators and critics interacted with these plays from within the conventions of the Soviet realist theatre. Most Soviet theatre with only a few exceptions performed these plays as realist plays by underlining the historical time-space. None of the productions attempted to subvert this time-space and foreground the contemporary time-space. The sole exception was a production of Lunin ... in a small Estonian theatre which used contemporary popular songs of Vysotskii, a dissident actor, poet and a singer.

Most Soviet reviewers also underlined the historical time-space of these plays. All those productions which used devices of the stylised theatre were criticised by critics because according to them, they distorted the historical time-space by making it ambiguous. However, it does not mean that these plays were not read from within the contemporary time-space. Most reviewers went to a lot of trouble to show their relevance to contemporary Soviet reality. Books and reviews by Soviet philosophers Tolstyhkh and Gulyga are good illustrations of the way by which the images of Socrates
and Lunin were appropriated as ‘positive’ heroes and role models for the Soviet youth of the epoch of ‘scientific and technical’ revolution. It was also noted that one well-known Soviet critic found Lunin and Seneca good examples of heroes ‘who are portrayed as becoming positive’. It is important to stress that this appropriation of Socrates and Lunin by the discourse about the positive hero might have served as a blessing in disguise, because it seems that without such an appropriation it might have been very difficult for the censoring bodies to grant their approval for the staging of these overtly political plays.

Most Soviet readers, spectators and reviewers were aware of their political nature. It was discussed earlier that many Soviet readers including the official editors knew that the play about Socrates was not only about Socrates but about Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn. The political nature of the final play of the trilogy was noted by almost all Soviet reviewers who stressed that the main theme of the play about Nero and Seneca was the role of intellectuals in totalitarian states. It is interesting that most Soviet commentators in their reviews mentioned the names of almost all tyrants and dictators including Hitler and Pol-Pot leaving only one name unmentioned.

As was discussed in this chapter, most Soviet productions were staged in big halls of major Soviet theatres following very strictly the conventions of Soviet realist theatre. These productions used authenticating devices which foregrounded their historical time-space. Rhetorical devices which could have subverted the separation between acting and spectating spaces were avoided. The aim was to preserve and to portray the historical time-space of these plays. However, in some productions a simple rhetorical device of direct address was used effectively to reveal the contemporary significance of these plays.

All three plays contain ample textual material which can be used by the actors as an address directed to the audience. For instance, in Dialogues with Socrates the two speeches of Socrates can be directly addressed to the audience. Similarly, in the play Lunin ... in which most of the texts is in the form of a long monologue of Lunin can be directed at the audience. In particular, Lunin’s words which are addressed to the ‘gentlemen’ of the nobility can be directed at the spectators in the hall. Finally, the play about Nero and Seneca can be completely acted as a direct address to the audience. From this point of view, Seneca’s letters to Lucilius provide an excellent opportunity to enact the reading of these letters as directed at the audience. It is not very hard to imagine that many Soviet performers must have used this simplest of rhetorical devices to re-contextualise the text within the contemporary time-space. An interesting device that was used in the Leningrad production of Dialogues with Socrates was mentioned to me by a number of Soviet critics and spectators. In the second act the actor who was
playing the role of Pritanus, the official who announces the death sentence of Socrates, is said to have copied the speech and mannerism of none other than Leonid Brezhnev.

The second chapter argued that the three plays are not framed strictly as plays but are 'novelised plays' or 'novels in dialogues'. In these plays, in particular in Lunin ..., the presence of a mediating narrator is very real. Unfortunately, most Soviet theatres and performers overlooked this, and the plays were produced as plays. It can be argued that if these productions would have recognised the presence of a mediating narrator and would have attempted to place the narrator on the stage, the plays would have opened a number of hitherto unknown layers of meaning. In particular, it would have become very easy to realise on the stage various shifts between the time-spaces of these plays.

It is important to stress that these plays were produced by Soviet directors such as Goncharov and Dunaev who are well-known for their realistic style. A director like Yu. Lyubimov would have approached this play very differently. It is interesting that in an interview which I recorded in March 1993 Radzinskii mentioned that the play Dialogues with Socrates, was being rehearsed by Yu. Lyubimov in the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow. Radzinskii told me that in some ways he was happy that Yu. Lyubimov was not allowed to stage this play because according to him, Lyubimov was planning to stage it as a political play, making extensive use of the devices of the stylised theatre. Radzinskii was apprehensive that such a stylised production would have forced the authorities to ban the play.

In the preceding chapters the three plays were read from within the time-space or the chronotopes of their main protagonists. This was aimed to show how the literary chronotopes of the prison, masked-ball and the circus-theatre function as effective plot-constitutive and time-visualising devices. This chapter, on the other hand, presented a reading from within the chronotopes of the world of their authors, performers, readers and spectators. The aim was to show that the historical time-space of these plays is not a rigid or fixed time-space, but a time-space which can be negotiated from within the contemporary time-space, the time-space of the 'creating world'. From this point of view the plays no longer remain historical parables but turn into political plays.