Screenplay for the film "1923 - Vsevolod Meyerhold. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze" written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI

Screenplay Summary:

The text traces the fate of Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold, beginning with his 1923 jubilee and placing his life within the broader political and cultural context of Soviet Russia, from NEP to the Great Purges.

In April 1923, the Bolshoi Theatre celebrates the 20th anniversary of Meyerhold's directing and the 25th of his acting career. His theatre is renamed after him, as if he were already dead, even though he is just entering the most brilliant period of his work. This creative peak coincides with the New Economic Policy (NEP), which deeply shocks many Bolsheviks. Some drink themselves to ruin; many experience NEP as a betrayal of the ideals of October 1917. Lenin, while forcing through NEP "seriously and for a long time," abandons some of his former dogmas and admits that the state has expropriated more than it can manage. Trotsky speaks of having "summoned the devil of the market," warning of the growth of capitalist forces, even as the extra-economic administrative–command system that will later underpin Stalin's industrialization takes shape.

Meyerhold, for his part, had established relations with the new regime early on, not out of deep Bolshevik conviction but out of circumstance and wounded pride: he had been hurt by the February Revolution and targeted by pre-revolutionary antisemitic attacks. Under Lunacharsky he gains positions in official theatres and launches a "Theatrical October," a revolution in stage art. He creates the "Theatre of the RSFSR No. 1," experiments with biomechanics, acrobatics, extreme rhythm, constructivist sets and modern music. He trains his own actors in State Higher Director's Workshops that look more like a specialised gymnastics studio than a school of acting.

In the 1920s, while Lenin's wife Krupskaya wages moral and ideological campaigns – banning hundreds of books and even folk tales – NEP brings Western films, jazz, fashion and magazines to Moscow. Meyerhold fully exploits this climate. He stages The Magnanimous Cuckold with an elaborate moving set, acrobatic acting and what is said to be the first jazz band on a Russian stage. The public is hypnotised; some party leaders, including Bukharin and Frunze, are passionate admirers. Despite moralistic attacks from Lunacharsky, Meyerhold continues to mount dazzling productions (Earth in Upheaval, The Forest, Forward, Europe!) which mix satire, high speed, tap dancing, Charleston and American jazz. In one notorious case, he replaces a character's name with "Stalin," prompting cries of "Down with Stalin!" from the audience.

At the same time, ideological control tightens. Glavrepertkom, the Main Repertoire Committee, is created; Meyerhold is labelled the leader of a "formalist" trend, and the term "Meyerholdism" enters the vocabulary of denunciation. The anti-formalist campaign against Shostakovich's opera Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk foreshadows his fate. Some of Meyerhold's productions are banned, including a play that openly depicts the horrors of the Civil War. His theatre is closed as "alien to Soviet art," despite the support of Stanislavsky, who offers him a place in his opera studio.

In June 1939, at an All-Union Conference of Directors, Meyerhold openly attacks what is happening on Soviet stages, calling socialist realism pitiful and untalented, and warning that the

hunt for formalism is destroying art itself. Shortly afterwards, he is arrested, tortured in Butyrka prison, beaten with rubber straps, forced to sign fabricated confessions, and finally sentenced to death. In letters to Molotov and to the USSR Prosecutor he describes the torture, retracts his coerced testimony, and names the investigators – a courageous gesture with almost no hope of saving his life.

At the same time, his wife, the actress Zinaida Reich, is murdered in their Moscow apartment three weeks after a search in which the NKVD seizes a bold letter she has written to Stalin. Their flat is promptly split and allocated to Beria's secretary and chauffeur.

The text ends on a bitterly ironic note: on the very day of Meyerhold's arrest, his friend Dmitri Shostakovich conceives the idea of his Seventh Symphony – the future "Leningrad Symphony" – which will resound throughout the world, while the pioneer of Soviet avant-garde theatre is silenced, erased and shot.

Screenplay:

1923 – Vsevolod Meyerhold

On 2 April 1923, in Moscow, on the stage of the Bolshoi Theatre, they celebrated the 20th anniversary of Vsevolod Emilievich Meyerhold's work as a director and the 25th anniversary of his work as an actor. Delegations from factories and military units came to congratulate the jubilarian. From the government he was awarded the title of People's Artist of the RSFSR. His theatre on Sadovaya-Triumfalnaya Street was renamed the Meyerhold Theatre, as if Meyerhold were already dead.

Meanwhile, he had no intention of dying at all. He hadn't even married for the second time yet. He had only just fallen in love with the former wife of Sergei Yesenin, Zinaida Nikolaevna Reich. Besides, the celebration at the Bolshoi coincided with the very beginning of the brightest period of Meyerhold's work.

And this period, in turn, coincided with that time in our history which is called NEP, the New Economic Policy. NEP made a very strong impression on many people.

Some old Bolsheviks simply drank themselves into ruin. The denationalization of private enterprises, freedom of trade, the return of money created a feeling of retreat from everything they had fought for in October 1917. Old Bolsheviks said: "During War Communism we suffered from cold, even frozen potatoes were considered a rare exotic fruit. But in 1918, 1920 the system itself was wonderful, it was real communism." A communist, an official of the Supreme Council of the National Economy (VSNKh), Muravyov, said: "No, I was never a drunkard before NEP; I started drinking out of grief when I saw that in essence nothing remained of my ideal. There are many communists who torment themselves as I do."

Lenin confirms this when he writes that in party circles "the mood is one of gloom and decline," that the mood is "very sour and panicky," "depressed." Moreover, Lenin threatens to resign if NEP is not accepted. He says: "I will leave both the Sovnarkom and the Politburo, I will be a simple publicist."

Lenin had threatened to resign before. In 1917, before the October coup, and in 1918, before the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. This time he threatens in conditions of economic collapse that he himself has created, of monstrous famine and powerful peasant uprisings. Lenin demands the new economic policy “seriously and for a long time.” Insisting on NEP, he throws off one after another those ideas with which he went to the coup in 1917. For the sake of power, he practically parts with political demagogy. Now he says:

> “We have expropriated far more than we have been able to administer.”
>
> “We must rely on the individual peasant. The question of collective farms does not arise.”
>
> “We must not be afraid that the petty bourgeoisie and petty capital will grow. We must arrange things so that the normal course of capitalist circulation is possible, for the people need it, without it one cannot live.”
>
> “A ban on trade, that is, on capitalism, would be stupidity and suicide for the party that tried such a policy.”

In the party that Lenin had cobbled together and brought to power, people committed suicide solely out of horror at NEP. Such cases were recorded more than once, but on the lower party levels. At the highest party level, at the XII Party Congress, Trotsky gave a report, and said, regarding NEP: “We have summoned the devil of the market into the light.” Later, in his memoirs, Trotsky would insist that it was he who advised Lenin to end War Communism. But in 1923, in his report, he said: “The epoch of growth of capitalist forces is beginning. And who knows whether we will not have to defend every inch of our socialist territory with our teeth and nails against centrifugal tendencies, against private-capitalist forces?”

Strictly speaking, Trotsky need not have worried so much. Despite certain economic concessions, it was precisely in the years of NEP that there arose and took shape in industry that Soviet extra-economic administrative–command system which would become the lever of Stalin’s industrialization and which, in the end, would bring about the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Trotsky pronounced these anti-NEP words in the Grand Kremlin Palace two weeks after the celebration of Meyerhold’s jubilee at the Bolshoi.

Another two weeks later a government announcement about Lenin’s illness was published in the newspapers. Before that, apart from a narrow group of people, no one knew about Lenin’s strokes. Now Lenin’s illness was discussed everywhere. It was then that people began to say that Lenin had general paralysis due to syphilis. The Moscow gossip about Lenin’s syphilis became a subject of discussion in the Politburo. Some members of the Politburo – namely Rykov, Kamenev and Zinoviev – believed that simple denial of these rumours was not enough. A special Central Committee commission was therefore formed, given access to the test results and all relevant information. Based on the collected material, the party commission concluded that Lenin did not have syphilis.

It is impossible to imagine free and widespread gossip about Stalin’s health in 1953. In 1923, NEP-era Moscow was a city of free rumours.

For many, NEP turned out to be a great illusion. That section of the intelligentsia and those specialists who had not emigrated or been expelled by 1923, watching what was happening in the country, thought that the revolution was coming to an end, that life was being put in order, that common sense was returning and that it was possible – and necessary – to cooperate with the authorities. In 1923, no one knew that Stalin would soon begin his own "intensification of the class struggle."

By 1923 Vsevolod Emilievich Meyerhold had long since established relations with the authorities. At the end of December 1917, the day after the creation of the Cheka, the People's Commissar for Education, Lunacharsky, convened the first conference of artists and writers of Petrograd. One hundred and twenty people were invited; five came: the poets Alexander Blok, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Ryurik Ivnev, the artist Nathan Altman, and Meyerhold. Lunacharsky wrote to his wife Anna: "Dear baby, I am working hard at taming the intelligentsia."

Meyerhold's presence at Lunacharsky's meeting can hardly be explained by any special fondness for Bolshevism. He was offended by the February Revolution. His production of *Masquerade* was playing precisely during the days of the February Revolution. The spectacle was extraordinarily beautiful. Meyerhold considered the production a success: "I plunged so deeply into the 1830s that once, in response to a printed insult, I seriously tried to challenge my offender to a duel. No wonder this production turned out well."

On the fifth day of the February Revolution, socially active actors appealed to the new authorities, demanding that the production be banned as "a symbol of the decadent theatre of the overthrown dynasty."

Meyerhold might also have had a separate grievance from the pre-February years. After the dress rehearsal of *Boris Godunov* with Chaliapin in 1911, a review appeared in *Novoye Vremya* that read: "Considering Meyerhold a talented man, I nevertheless believe that such a Russian play as *Boris Godunov* should not have been entrusted to him. To stage it, one must have a Russian soul." After the première, there was a new review: "The Jew Meyerhold glorifies the Poles in the polonaise scene." Finally, from the rostrum of the State Duma, the leader of the Black Hundreds, Purishkevich, spoke. During the debate on the budget of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, he delivered a long speech about the Russian theatre, claiming that the modern Russian theatre was a place for the corruption of Russian morals and that the reason was "the dominance of Jews on the Russian stage."

By that time Meyerhold was already world-famous. It is curious that he gained his world fame as director of the two most official theatres of the Russian Empire – the Alexandrinsky and the Mariinsky. He had been invited to these posts personally by the director of the Imperial Theatres, Telyakovsky. It is hard to deny the unexpectedness of this choice. The fact was that Meyerhold had just been dismissed by Vera Fedorovna Komissarzhevskaya herself, a great actress and darling of the public.

It is clear why Komissarzhevskaya invited Meyerhold: she was seeking a different kind of theatre. Meyerhold was already a sensation of the "new theatre." He knew how to mix old Venetian and Japanese theatre on a Russian stage. He brought Blok with him. He gave Blok's *The Fairground Booth* its best stage form. Chekhov loved Meyerhold. "Chekhov loved me," Meyerhold writes. And it is just as clear why Komissarzhevskaya fired him. For a great actress like her, there was nothing to do in his productions. And it was not even about Komissarzhevskaya herself. Meyerhold was

tormented by his own powerful “claws” as a director. He could not do anything about himself. He could only work in a very rigid, wilful, masculine director’s theatre.

In the early 1930s Meyerhold staged a parade on Red Square. When the passage of the columns, the flight of the aeroplane, and the theatrical actions on the moving platforms had been rehearsed, he was asked: “What will it all start with?”
He answered: “With me. I’ll come out of the GUM building and blow my whistle three times.” This is pure circus, like Grigori Alexandrov’s film *Circus* – Alexandrov, incidentally, was a pupil of Meyerhold. Because opposite the GUM, on the tribune, stands Stalin. And everything starts with him.

Yet everything could have turned out completely differently. Vsevolod Emilievich studied at the Law Faculty of Moscow University, loved music and played the violin. He very much wanted to get a place as second violin in the university orchestra, but failed the audition. And so, in his despair, he went into acting. Many years later he wrote: “Now I think, I’d have been the second fiddle in some little theatre orchestra under some conductor. They would curse him the way they are cursing me now, and I’d be scraping away and chuckling to myself.”

Meyerhold was justly called “a mad kangaroo that had escaped from the zoo,” because even without any revolution he furiously ran ahead of his time. Meyerhold writes about himself: “I would recast Chekhov’s well-known remark about the gun hanging on the wall in the first act like this: if in the first act a gun is hanging on the wall, then in the last act it must be a machine gun.”

In January 1918, Meyerhold was appointed the Bolshevik head of all theatres in Petrograd. Some of his old acquaintances turned towards the Left SRs and worked on their newspaper *Banner of Labour*. The secretary in the editorial office was Zinaida Reich. She typed. But Meyerhold did not fall in love with her at that time. It was then that he personally met Kamenev, Zinoviev and Trotsky. He broadened his circle of contacts and worked as if no revolution had taken place in Russia. Vakhtangov, for example, could not boast of such self-control. He would stand for long periods at his window, watching the Red Army soldiers marching below, then screw up his face and say, “Bastards!” and move away from the window.

By the spring of 1919, Meyerhold was exhausted by hunger and devastation. In May, he wrote himself a travel order to Crimea and left with his wife and three daughters.

Meyerhold in Crimea – that is the film *A Slave of Love*.

In Crimea things were relatively calm. Crimean towns were full of artists from the capital. Meyerhold was bombarded with questions: “What is the new government like? How does it treat art?” Meyerhold replied: “All life is there. There’s no point in sitting here.”

He urged everyone to go to Moscow. The words “To Moscow, to Moscow…” from Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, in Meyerhold’s mouth in Crimea, sounded extraordinarily fresh.

Then the Meyerhold family left Crimea and went to an estate of acquaintances near Novorossiysk. Vsevolod Emilievich rested, gave private lessons in stage art, staged a children’s performance on the veranda of the house. In the autumn of 1919, the Reds began an offensive. It was awkward to await their arrival at the estate. Meyerhold, with a small group, decided to escape in a motorboat so that they could later make their way to the Reds. They were detained and beaten. The case was then transferred to an investigator for especially important cases attached to the headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief, General Denikin. In wartime, this was a capital case. The investigator said: “I

cannot send a great Russian artist before a firing squad." And he provided a written justification for his refusal. Meyerhold was released. All the other participants in the motorboat episode were shot.

When the Reds entered Novorossiysk, Meyerhold submitted an application to join the party, changed his civilian suit for a Red Army tunic, puttees and a cap with a red star and began working in the political department.

In August 1920, Lunacharsky went to fetch Meyerhold in a special train, brought him to Moscow and put him in charge of all Russian theatres.

In a speech to the collegium of the People's Commissariat for Education, Meyerhold announced the beginning of a "Theatrical October," that is, in fact, proclaimed a revolution in the arts.

To implement this idea, Meyerhold obtained the building of the former Zonal Theatre in Moscow and opened a theatre there under the proud name "Theatre of the RSFSR No. 1." In the 1930s a new theatre building would be built there specifically for Meyerhold. But he would not get it. Today it is the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall.

In 1920, for the third anniversary of October, Meyerhold staged the drama *The Dawns* by the Belgian poet Verhaeren. Not much was left of the Belgian drama on stage. The text was filled with fresh news from the fronts of the Civil War; at one performance they announced the capture of Perekop; from time to time real Red Army soldiers appeared with weapons and a band. The set consisted of a cube, ropes, a sheet of tin hanging down, and circles of gold foil.

But the most interesting thing about this production is that the day after the première it was torn to pieces by Krupskaya in an article in *Pravda*. Lenin's wife wrote:

> "A wonderful fairy tale has been turned into a vulgar farce. The Russian proletariat in the role of a Shakespearean crowd, which any conceited fool leads wherever he pleases – this is an insult… It is unpleasant for us to listen to this phrase-mongering clatter."

It must be said that in the Krupskaya–Lenin household, relations with the theatre were complex. Lenin wrote to his mother from Berlin: "I actually like wandering around various popular evenings and entertainments more than visiting museums, theatres, and so on. Send me 50–100 roubles." In Munich he went to the opera several times. From London he wrote that he would like to see *The Lower Depths* at the Moscow Art Theatre.

In 1921, Lunacharsky asked Lenin to receive him regarding the Moscow Art Theatre. Lenin replied: "I cannot possibly receive you, as I am ill. As for theatres, I advise you to put them all in a coffin."

That same year he called Lunacharsky's suggestion to preserve the Bolshoi Theatre absolutely improper. In accordance with Lenin's opinion, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the RCP(b) resolved to close the Bolshoi Theatre. However, a month later, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee ignored Lenin's instruction and the Politburo's decision. The Bolshoi was not closed, on the grounds that it was "economically inexpedient."

Two weeks after Krupskaya's article about Meyerhold's production, *Pravda* published a "Letter from the Central Committee of the Party" that contained the words: "Elements of the intelligentsia are trying to smuggle their reactionary views under the guise of 'proletarian culture'."

Meyerhold left his post as head of the theatrical department of the People's Commissariat for Education. His Theatre of the RSFSR No. 1 was then closed. Meyerhold responded by opening G VYRM – an awkward acronym standing for State Higher Director's Workshops.

Essentially, in today's language, it was a professional fitness club. In the centre of Moscow, on Novinsky Boulevard, young people, half-naked, did gymnastics from morning till night. They rolled on the floor and on trapezes, jumped over the horse, walked on their hands, fenced. Physicality, plus again physicality, plus musicality, plus a special technique of stage speech, plus brains in the head. Meyerhold called this training for actors "biomechanics." Against the background of the country's collapse, this technical-sounding word was irritatingly industrial. It sounded international, but absolutely did not smell of world revolution. The spectacle of biomechanics performed by Meyerhold's young actors certainly was not for Krupskaya.

At this time Krupskaya was actively engaged in problems of morality and communist education of youth.

She drew up a record-breaking list of banned literature, formalized as an instruction entitled "On the revision of library holdings for the removal of counterrevolutionary and anti-artistic literature." In accordance with this, the following were removed from libraries: the philosophers Kant, Plato, Descartes, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer; the writers Dumas, Leskov, Tolstoy, Boccaccio, Zagoskin, Teffi, and some works by Gogol. In all, 200 authors.

For children, the fairy tales "The Tomcat, Grey Forehead," "Ryaba the Hen," and many collections of Russian folk tales were strictly forbidden. *The Little Humpbacked Horse* was listed under the heading "pornography." *Petya the Little Rooster* was forbidden, evidently for the same reason. And here was Meyerhold with his biomechanics.

And on top of all this came NEP. Soviet life, with the exception of the very unambiguous Stalin period, was always dual. While Krupskaya's instruction was being introduced throughout the country, in Moscow NEP brought Western music, Western films, and Western magazines. To the sounds of tangos, foxtrots and one-steps, queues formed at the cinemas "Chat Noir" and "Magic Dreams." Everyone wanted to watch Mary Pickford, Harry Piel and Chaplin. Women urgently sewed low-waisted dresses out of curtains and had their hair cut short.

Meyerhold was absolutely ready for NEP. Because NEP was new but still very Soviet, he was covered by his party card of the 1920 model. In addition to this party card of the War Communism era, he had exceptional personal connections in the highest party circles. But since NEP, among other things, was a period of relative creative freedom and openness, Meyerhold held his main trump card: in his G VYRM he had managed to train his own actors, who both dreamed of and were capable of carrying out his directorial will.

Among Meyerhold's loyal admirers were men from the command staff of the Red Army. This was probably a peculiar consequence of Trotsky's policy in the field of military construction. Trotsky had placed old military specialists and tsarist officers in command positions; in Meyerhold's theatre they would breathe the air of freedom and defiance they themselves could not afford.

So, in the very first season of NEP, Meyerhold offered Soviet audiences a spectacle never seen before in any respect – *The Magnanimous Cuckold*.

Firstly, there was the bawdy plot: a French story about a husband who, in search of his wife's lover, forces her to let every man in the village pass through the marital bedroom.

Secondly, this story was played in and on an incredible set. They say it was something like a mill with staircases, platforms, slides and countless revolving doors. There were also ramps and trapezes. Everything moved and turned depending on the tempo of the action. And this tempo, or rather the rhythm, was the main trick. Actors without make-up, wearing unisex overalls, did God knows what on this structure from beginning to end, at a *presto* tempo, that is, very fast. The audience was hypnotised, people started clapping in time with the movement on stage, to the point of complete rapture.

And to top it all off, in the third act something appeared on stage that no one had ever seen before. It was jazz – the first jazz in Russia, playing completely new music of unknown charm.

We will never know what was felt at those moments by Mikhail Frunze, army commander and admirer of Meyerhold, sitting in the hall. A year and a half earlier he had broken through Perekop, driving thousands of Russians overseas; and here, eighteen months later, this jazz with saxophones and muted trumpets poured in from over the ocean. And then there were the drums, drums of all sizes. And such freedom of improvisation in this foreign music.

On 12 May 1922, in *Izvestia*, the People's Commissar for Education, Lunacharsky, published an article "Note on *The Cuckold*," which stated in black and white: "All this is heavy and shameful, because it is not an individual deviation, but an entire dirty and at the same time menacing Americanizing wave in the life of art.

It is frightening enough when one hears that European–American civilization has got rolling down this road, but when, to the applause of communists, we ourselves tumble into this pit, it becomes simply horrifying."

This criticism did not frighten Meyerhold at all. NEP was advancing. The most active supporters of NEP – Bukharin, Tomsky, Sokolnikov, Rykov – were Meyerhold's circle. They were at the height of their power. On 11 October 1922, the People's Commissar for Finance, Sokolnikov, introduced a stable currency – the chervonets. On 1 January 1923, the chervonets accounted for only 3 percent of the money in circulation; by the autumn of 1923, already 74 percent. A month after the introduction of the chervonets, Meyerhold released the production *The Death of Tarelkin*. The theatre critic Litovsky – prototype for the critic Latunsky in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* – wrote of *The Death of Tarelkin*: "If Meyerhold really wants to be the director of the theatre of today, he ought to take a party course, a Marxist course."

In 1923, Glavrepertkom was created – the Main Repertoire Committee – a committee for the control of repertoire. It operated in contact with the GPU of the NKVD. Violations of Glavrepertkom's directives were punishable under criminal law.

To say that Meyerhold was not afraid of criticism is an understatement. He went over to direct combat. Regarding one newspaper critic, he instructed the theatre's ushers: "Remove this gentleman from the hall, even if he comes with a ticket bought at the box office. Failure to obey this order will mean dismissal."

Three months later, Meyerhold released the production *Earth in Upheaval* with a dedication to the Red Army and its heroic leader and organizer Lev Davidovich Trotsky. Trucks, motorcycles and bicycles drove onto the stage through the auditorium. On the stage were military units with real weapons, searchlights and small-calibre guns.

The plot is a soldiers' uprising during the imperialist war. Originally it was a French play called *Night*. Meyerhold said: "This play is scum, I hate it." "Then why are you staging it?" one of his actors asked. "I have to," Meyerhold replied. But the production dedicated to Trotsky was, in essence, a musical. And so it had great success. So great that it was included in a campaign to strengthen Soviet aviation. An aeroplane was put on stage, and they tried to start the propeller. This didn't work, but it didn't prevent them from collecting money among the audience and even the impoverished actors. Three years later, a plane called "Meyerhold" was flying in the Soviet sky.

At this point the People's Commissar for Education, Lunacharsky, proclaimed the slogan: "Back to Ostrovsky." Meyerhold, who had not forgotten Lunacharsky's accusations of "Americanism," said: "Excellent," and produced a dazzling show.

He cut Ostrovsky's play *The Forest* into 33 episodes. It was performed at a cinematic pace. The title of each episode lit up on a screen hanging on the stage. This is how they do it now in pop concerts. An incredible number of various objects passed through the actors' hands with kaleidoscopic speed and were turned into bits of action. The text was broken up by the rise and fall of swings and giant steps. And all this under the musical accompaniment of accordions, a brass band, a piano, a Russian folk choir, a Mordvin choir, and solo singing. In the role of Arkashka Schastlivtsev – Igor Ilyinsky. The critics did not know how to react. The public thronged to the theatre. Sometimes, for weeks, *The Forest* alone would be performed, replacing all other shows. Evening after evening, in the centre of Moscow, two men appeared on stage – Schastlivtsev and Neschastlivtsev. They walked along a road that climbed upward, in the light of the glowing screen beside them. Schastlivtsev – Ilyinsky – was Charlie Chaplin's own brother.

Lunacharsky could do nothing about it. Art is a universal thing; art couldn't care less about Lunacharsky; it flies about in the ether with its symbols and images, which know no boundaries. Thirty years later, in Federico Fellini's films, a little woman, Giulietta Masina, will walk along a road in exactly the same way as Ilyinsky and Chaplin. The shell – male or female – does not matter. Happiness and unhappiness are unisex experiences.

Cinema is preserved. The feeling from a stage production cannot be conveyed.

We know Meyerhold's actors from the cinema: Ilyinsky, Samoilov, Martinson, Sverdlin, Okhlopkov, Gerdt, Tsaryov, Zharov, Garin.

Many years after Meyerhold's death, Erast Garin would say: "Good Lord! What naïve idiots we all were. If only someone had peeked into the mirror of the future!!!"

In the summer of 1924, Garin played seven roles at once in a Meyerhold production called *Forward, Europe!* (in Russian, *Daesh Evropu*). All the roles there were divided into positive – the communists and those with them – and negative – the bourgeois. There was no way to fault the director. The trick was different: all the communist characters were dead boring. When they recited their monologues, the public coughed, yawned and rustled their programmes. And they instantly stopped coughing and rustling as soon as scenes from bourgeois life began. Gentlemen in evening dress, dashing naval officers with their ladies in backless gowns sat at little tables in a cosy café, and before them and apparently for them began American tap-dancing, followed by the Charleston. And all this under the disapproving, teasing accompaniment of real American jazz.

Especially for "D.E." (as *Forward, Europe!* was called in Moscow theatre slang), Meyerhold hired a genuine American jazz band – Sidney Bechet's, which happened to be in Moscow at the time. In

Meyerhold's own theatre band played a future famous screenwriter, Yevgeny Gabrilovich: "I was the pianist of a jazz band that doesn't know notes and plays everything on inspiration."

The record case of "playing on inspiration" was Meyerhold's production of Erdman's *The Warrant* (*The Mandate*). And there, both the actors and the audience played "on inspiration."

Actress Tiapkina, from Meyerhold's troupe, recalls: "In Erdman's play, one of the characters had the surname Chicherin. Meyerhold said: 'Comrades, Chicherin is a big figure after all. It's awkward. We need someone smaller.' And he suggested replacing Chicherin with Stalin.

So after Garin, at the première, pronounced Stalin's name from the stage, the hall exploded: 'Down with Stalin's crooks! Down with Stalin!' The entire party elite was present in the hall. The applause turned into an ovation. When, after the performance, Meyerhold and Erdman came out to bow, what was happening in the hall resembled a demonstration. The hall roared: 'Down with Stalin! Down with Stalin's henchmen!'"

Meyerhold wrote: "When you work, it is fun. I have always been a very cheerful person." After the performance, Bukharin, Kamenev, Frunze left enthusiastic notes in the visitors' book of the Meyerhold Theatre. People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs Mikhail Frunze wrote: "I did not expect to see and experience what I saw and experienced here." Six months later Mikhail Frunze would die in the Botkin Hospital during a routine operation for a stomach ulcer.

A year after Frunze's death, in December 1926, Meyerhold staged *The Government Inspector* (*The Inspector General*). It was, essentially, the finale of NEP. In the final dumb scene, as the bells rang, a white curtain with a golden inscription announcing the arrival of the real inspector rose up from under the front of the stage.

In 1928, Stalin for the first time personally banned the staging of Erdman's second play, the comedy *The Suicide*. At the same time, the Soviet government sent Meyerhold's theatre on tour to Paris. From Paris, Meyerhold formally petitioned for permission for himself and his theatre to remain abroad. The reason: he had nothing more to do in the Soviet Union. He was gently refused, and the theatre returned to Moscow.

During NEP, Meyerhold and his wife, Zinaida Reich, had visited Paris more than once. Once they were sitting in a small cabaret. Meyerhold recalled the famous pre-revolutionary Petersburg artistic club "The Stray Dog" and said: "But with us, in the Soviet Union, now all stray dogs are finished! Instead of stray dogs – solidly entrenched boars with tusks."

He was always superbly dressed, both in Paris and in Moscow. The peasant shirt and cap with the star he wore long ago and for a very short time. Zinaida Reich's daughter by Yesenin, Tatiana Yesenina, recalls: "When Meyerhold put on a tailcoat, you could just fall flat on your back: that clothing brought out all his theatricality." Meyerhold knew this very well. The beautiful Zinaida Reich had to choose her outfits with particular care to match him, especially at diplomatic receptions. In Moscow, Meyerhold was surrounded by foreigners. During NEP he was not restricted in his contacts. For the West at that time he was the number-one Russian director. European and American critics, directors and theatre historians kept coming to Moscow to see Meyerhold.

Strangely enough, in the 1930s there were no fewer foreign guests at Meyerhold's theatre than before. The theatre was made an official attraction for foreign tourists. In the evenings, Meyerhold's apartment was also full of foreigners. In addition, the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs, Genrikh Yagoda, would appear from time to time, always with some of his staff. Meyerhold dressed

even better than before: suits from the top Moscow tailors, changed daily, English ties, Italian hats. The style was strict, conservative. All around, in theatres and restaurants, people wore semi-military tunics “à la Stalin,” tunics with Caucasian-style cartridge belts, boots and felt cloaks. And just then Meyerhold staged the sentimental and very bourgeois play by Dumas fils, *The Lady of the Camellias*. Everything was very beautiful and very chaste. The love scenes were extremely restrained, but every evening the audience cried. The production was running at the height of the most terrible Stalinist repressions. Meyerhold, who usually ran ahead of his time, this time coincided with his time completely. He gave people the opportunity to weep freely in his theatre. Outside its walls, practically everyone had reasons to cry. Meyerhold’s wife, Zinaida Reich, in the title role, by her excellent acting justified those tears.

We have no way of forming our own idea of what kind of actress Zinaida Reich was. Nevertheless, we can judge her inclination to improvisation. Once she leaned out the window and called a policeman. Stretching her hands toward him, she said slowly, almost gasping: “I… believe… in the teachings… of Marx… Engels… Lenin… Stalin.”

The great director Vsevolod Meyerhold was a good acquaintance of the great composer Dmitri Shostakovich. Shostakovich wrote his first opera, *The Nose*, in Meyerhold’s apartment and under the impression of his *Government Inspector*. Especially for Meyerhold and Mayakovsky, Shostakovich composed the music for the production *The Bedbug*. In January 1936, the names of Meyerhold and Shostakovich appeared side by side in the programme of the Leningrad Maly Opera Theatre’s tour. Meyerhold had staged *The Queen of Spades* there, and Shostakovich had written *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. A third name was also listed – Ivan Dzerzhinsky with the opera *And Quiet Flows the Don*.

On 17 January 1936, in the foyer of the government box of the branch of the Bolshoi Theatre, there was a conversation between Comrade Stalin, Chairman of the Government Molotov, and the composer Ivan Dzerzhinsky.

During the conversation, “the ideological-political value of the production of the opera *And Quiet Flows the Don*” was noted.

And on 28 January, *Pravda* published an epoch-making editorial article under the headline “Muddle Instead of Music,” which launched Stalin’s campaign against formalism in art. The target of this attack was Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth*. The article in *Pravda* was epoch-making without question. First, because for the first time in the history of Bolshevism the Kremlin stepped beyond the bounds of ideology into the sphere of the most abstract of the arts – music. Second, because the idea of the struggle against formalism in art, in Stalin’s manner, was genius: it is impossible to define or grasp what formalism is. Which meant everyone would be afraid. Everyone would be under the bell jar.

On 14 March 1936, the chairman of the Committee for Arts Affairs, Kerzhentsev, called Meyerhold “the leader of the formalist trend in Soviet theatre.” On 20 March, in *Literary Gazette*, the term “Meyerholdism” appeared.

In a report by the political-secret section of the Main Directorate of State Security of the NKVD about the reactions of artists to the article on Shostakovich, Meyerhold is quoted as saying: “Shostakovich is now in a very difficult condition. They called him from my theatre to ask him to write new music for *The Bedbug*. But he said he couldn’t do anything. It is hard for me too. Several

times while working I caught myself thinking – no, that will be Meyerholdism. I must do it differently."

Finally, Meyerhold undertook a production of a Soviet play, *One Life*, for the 20th anniversary of October. After the dress rehearsal, the show was banned. According to preserved recollections, the production was utterly hopeless. The horrors of the Civil War were shown on stage with unprecedented frankness. A powerful impression on those who attended the dress rehearsal was made by a silent scene: a girl, raped by a platoon of Red Army soldiers, walking across the front of the stage. Remember, this was in a production for the anniversary of the Revolution.

After this, Meyerhold's theatre was closed, with the wording: "Liquidate the theatre as alien to Soviet art."

The only person who offered the now-unemployed Meyerhold a job was Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavsky.

The founder of the Moscow Art Theatre, who had been removed from work there for ten years, now headed an opera studio. He said to Meyerhold: "At the Art Theatre I am no longer the master, Vsevolod Emilievich, but in the opera and in my studio I still give the orders. And that place is all I can offer you now."

"Our opera will flop, Konstantin Sergeyevich," Meyerhold replied.

Zinaida Reich ordered herself a blouse embroidered with musical notes.

Stanislavsky died in August 1938. In June 1939, Meyerhold took part in the All-Union Conference of Directors.

On the third day of the conference, he was the third speaker. He said: "In all conscience, I regard what is happening in our theatres now as terrible and pitiful. I know that it is talentless and bad. And this poor and wretched thing, called socialist realism, has nothing to do with art. And theatre is art! In hunting down formalism, you are destroying art!"

Shortly before Meyerhold's end, the Central Committee secretary Lazar Kaganovich visited a rehearsal.

What was happening on stage did not interest Kaganovich, and he left the hall. Meyerhold rushed after him. Kaganovich got into a car and drove away. Meyerhold ran after the car until he fell.

"Lying on the floor, face down, I discovered in myself the ability to writhe, convulse and squeal. They beat me here, a sick 65-year-old man: they laid me face down on the floor and beat my heels and back with a rubber strap." This is an excerpt from Meyerhold's statement to head of government Molotov, which he wrote from Butyrka prison. He was arrested in the night of 19–20 June 1939.

"When I was sitting on a chair, they beat my legs with the same rubber. When these parts of the legs were filled with internal haemorrhages, they beat again on these red-blue-yellow bruises, and the pain was such that it seemed to me that boiling water was being poured on my legs. I screamed and cried from pain. They beat me on the face with their hands. This caused such monstrous terror in me that my nature was stripped bare to its roots. Death is easier than this, I said to myself. And I set my self-accusations in motion, hoping that they would lead me to the scaffold. And so it happened. Article 58, clauses 1a and 11." In short, this meant "execution by shooting."

Meyerhold also wrote a letter to the Procurator of the USSR, Pankratyev. This Prosecutor of the USSR had no higher legal education; he had only finished primary school. To this prosecutor Meyerhold wrote: “I renounce the forced false testimony. I lied, the investigator wrote it down, and some answers he dictated himself to the stenographer. I ask you to summon me. I will name the investigators who forced me to invent things.”

In fact, he was not a naïve man. He was a sober, firm, but hopelessly talented man living in the 1930s in the Soviet Union. In the record of the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court it says: “The defendant stated that he did not consider himself guilty and did not confirm the testimony given during the preliminary investigation.” That was more than many marshals in the Stalinist trials were capable of. Moreover, Meyerhold firmly knew his place in history and, unlike many others, thought about his name after his death.

Meyerhold was arrested in Leningrad. On the evening before his arrest, he was visiting Garin and kept calling his wife in Moscow. No one answered the phone in the flat on Bryusov Lane. A search was underway there. A copy of Zinaida Reich’s letter to Stalin had already been seized. In the NKVD’s inventory, that copy was listed as item number one. Then came Meyerhold’s passport and party card. In Reich’s six-page letter to Stalin there was a phrase: “If you do not understand art, turn to Meyerhold. It would do you no harm to take lessons in understanding art from him.”

On the day of the search, they did not arrest Meyerhold’s wife. Three weeks later she was brutally murdered, stabbed to death in their apartment.

Immediately after this murder, it was decided to settle people in the vacated apartment. Zinaida Nikolaevna Reich’s father called a deputy of the Moscow Soviet, People’s Artist of the USSR Ivan Moskvin. Moskvin came to the phone and immediately declared that “the public” refused to bury his daughter. The old man replied that he would bury his daughter himself, but asked to stop the eviction. Moskvin cut him off: “I consider that your eviction is right.”

The flat was divided into two parts. Even now, the boundary is visible on the parquet. One half was occupied by Beria’s secretary, the other by Beria’s chauffeur.

On the very day of Vsevolod Meyerhold’s arrest, Dmitri Shostakovich was struck by the idea for his brilliant Seventh Symphony, which the whole world knows as the “Leningrad Symphony.”