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‘A Very Promising Experiment’¹

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I wish to say a few words about the dramatisation of mass action with which your St. Petersburg comrades concluded the opening day of the Second Congress of the Third International.

Have you ever seen such a scene, in which several thousand artists and extras appeared?

On the square in front of the stock-exchange we saw such a scene.

Do you know of any theatre in which tens of thousands of spectators took part all at once?

According to the assurances of comrade Antselovich, on 19 June, there were up to eighty thousand spectators in the stock-exchange square.

That was outside. Just what was playing?

They were putting on ‘The history of the most important moments of the workers’ movement from 1848 to our own day’. That was precisely the weakest aspect of the very promising experiment in mass staging that was performed in St. Petersburg and must be

¹. [From Pravda, 30 July 1920.]
regarded as a first attempt to create the theatre of proletarian revolution. ‘He who proves too much, proves nothing’, according to the proverb. And in St. Petersburg, an attempt was made to portray too much in the mass scene, and this weakened the impact of what was portrayed.

The St. Petersburg experiment demonstrates that mass dramatic scenes are the most successful and produce the greatest impression.

But the various symbols are less effective and less understood by the audience. The completely empty and dead moments on the stage were the transitions from one setting to another. Incidentally, even a very detailed programme is of little help, because only hundreds among the tens of thousands in the audience could read it.

The successful scenes included the rule of the bourgeoisie in the form of an enormous gold-coin, around which the bourgeoisie revelled; the uprising of the Communards, who drove the revellers from the throne of their merry-making, and the joyous song *La Carmagnole* and the dances of the proletarian fighters in the area cleansed of the bourgeoisie. Then came on stage the struggle by the defenders of the Commune against the White Guards of Thiers, the fall of the Commune, and the shooting of ranks of prisoners who, after the volley, fell from the side of the Neva.

Essentially, the events from the epoch of the Paris Commune would be sufficient to present in a most vivid way the most important moments in the history of the Commune and to provide the content for the entire spectacle, but the authors wanted to say too much, and for this they were punished with a number of scenes that were dull and not well understood by the audience. One empty part that was not understood was the peaceful period after the Commune. The portrayal of the Second International was not successful, apart from the moment when the former socialists divided into two opposing camps at the beginning of the World-War.

The portrayal of tsarism was a great success in the form of the two-headed eagle with the enormous figure of Nicholas in the crown and the whooping Cossacks who were carrying it through the street. The musicians played *God Save the Tsar*. Then the *Marseillaise* sounded and the collapse of the monarchy began. But the rest was quite unsuccessful: the period when Kerensky was in power was dull; the October Revolution only appeared on the stage in passing; and the whole period of the Civil War was a complete failure.

Some of the lighting effects were a great success, for instance the smoke above the corpses of the Communards who were shot, and so on.

The conclusion: a beginning has been made in mass proletarian theatre. Enormous work remains in terms of technical improvements. To this end must be directed some of the efforts that tried proletarian patience by preparing