The history of cabaret in Russia has yet to be written. Although such a history is of comparatively short duration (the first Russian cabaret, Nikita Baliyev’s The Bat, was founded in Moscow on 29 February 1908), few scholars, Russian or Western, have written on the establishment and development of the many cabarets in Moscow, St. Petersburg; and other cities just before and after the revolution. In any case, the entire subject still suffers from the traditional academic division of culture into “noble” and “vulgar” forms. According to this conditional scheme, the cabaret occupies a rather low position in the cultural hierarchy and perhaps for this reason historians have tended to neglect or misinterpret the concept of cabaret whether in Western or in Eastern Europe. In the context of the Russian cabaret, this traditional division of the arts carries little validity since the more important establishments functioned on an artistic level not necessarily lower than that of the so called professional theaters. The cabarets such as The Bat, The Crooked Mirror (St. Petersburg), The Blue Bird (Moscow, Berlin, and New York), The Stray Dog (St. Petersburg), The Café Pittoreseque (Moscow), and the Blue Blouse complex of variety theaters in Moscow and elsewhere in the early 1920s attracted famous dancers, choreographers, artists, and actors—from Tamara Karsavina to Vsevolod Meierkhol’d, from Boris Romanov to Georgii Iakulov, from Sergei

* This article, when presented as a paper at the Cornell conference, was accompanied by many slides of designs, documentary photographs, and programs pertaining to the various Russian cabarets. Although a few of these images are included here, the vast majority, unfortunately, must be omitted.

1. Little has been published on the history of the Russian cabaret. The main source of information is the programs issued by the various cabarets, especially those of The Bat and The Blue Bird, in Russia, Western Europe, and the USA. Useful information on the Russian period of The Bat is also provided by Nikolai Efros in his book Teatr Letuchala mysh’ N. F. Balieva (Moscow: Solntse Rossi, 1918). See also G. Khaichenko, Russkii narodnyi teatr kontsa XIX-nachala XX veka (Leningrad: Nauka, 1975); G. Wolf, J. Rennert, and W. Schmidt, Elena Liessner-Blomberg oder die Geschichte vom Blauen Vogel (Berlin: Der Morgen, 1978); and John E. Bowlt, ed., Russian Stage Design. Scenic Innovation, 1900-1930: From the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Nikita D. Lobanov-Rostovsky (Jackson: Mississippi Museum of Art, 1982), passim. Unfortunately, the standard books on the history of European and American cabaret, such as Lisa Appignanesi’s The Cabaret (New York: Universe Books, 1976), make little or no reference to the Russian contribution.
Sudeikin to Aleksandr Rodchenko. The list of names is long and includes celebrities from the Imperial theaters, from the Ballets Russes, and from the avant-garde—indicating that artistically, dramatically, and musically the Russian cabaret attained a very high professional level both in Russia, in the Soviet Union and in emigration.

Obviously, not all the cabarets of Russia can be discussed within the scope of a single article, the more so since the term “cabaret” came to be applied indiscriminately to any manifestation of Kleinkunst especially just before 1917, and numerous restaurants, nightclubs, and small theaters adopted the title of cabaret. In any case, apart from general characteristics such as intimate premises and rapid sequences of numbers (as opposed to single spectacles lasting an entire evening), there was no common artistic or ideological trend that united the major cabarets such as The Bat, The Stray Dog, and The Café Pittoresque; their clientèles tended to be different, as did their productions, their compères, and their reputations. Two cabarets in particular, however, The Bat and The Café Pittoresque, did, in many ways, epitomize the finest accomplishments of the tradition of the Russian cabaret, were vital, dynamic institutions, received international acclaim and, in the case of The Bat, became the focus of émigré society in the 1920s. For these reasons, The Bat and The Café Pittoresque form the center of attention in the later part of this essay. Prior to this, however, some preliminary remarks on the position of the Russian cabaret vis-à-vis the indigenous Russian theater might be opportune.

The format of the Russian cabaret—a confined stage housed in a small restaurant or café providing entertainment through variety sequences sometimes with topical social and political significance—was borrowed from Western prototypes, especially from the Paris and Munich cabarets of the 1890s. But the Russian cabaret also depended upon a number of specific features that were germane to Russian culture. For example, one reason why the spirit of cabaret thrived well on Russian soil was perhaps because of its reliance on spontaneous performance, audience participation, rapid interchange of acts, incorporation of “vulgar” art forms such as clowning, acrobatics, pantomime, and the pliaska. In other words, the middle-class Moscow and St. Petersburg audiences who attended the cabaret evenings witnessed, and responded to, the continuation of the age-old Russian folk theater. More precisely, those select audiences of dandies, intellectuals, and nouveaux riches, their “langorous wives, like Venuses issuing forth from beautiful foams of muslin and diamond constellations,”2 encountered a modern extension of ancient performing arts such as the balagan and the skomorokhi, even the religious procession and the Orthodox church service. These theatrical forms had existed for cen-