A CHOREOLOGICAL LABORATORY

Among the many celebrations of modern dance in Moscow in the early 1920s, the 1922 season of the Theater of Ballet, Pantomime, and Buffonade deserves particular attention. It was here that Eduard Elirov hosted a sequence of demonstrations at which some of the many new studios of plastic movement demonstrated their latest dances.\(^1\) On the one hand, the titles and general repertoires of these studios reflected a uniformity of interest (e.g., "the art of movement"), and on the other, were at once very diverse, at least in name, ranging from Mestis (Workshop of Variety Theater) and the Synthetic Dance Studio to the more pretentious Workshop of Organizational Theater which gave courses in the rhythmodynamics of the word, rhythmitized action, emotion technique, construction of movement, acrobatics, plastics, and speech technique.\(^2\) What a paradox! Here was Moscow, the capital of a country torn by revolution and civil war, now witnessing the rapid multiplication of the same kind of private dance and ballet studios that had enjoyed such popularity a decade before.

This strange phenomenon solicited an almost uniform response: "Immediately after the Revolution in those tough years of famine, Moscow witnessed an exceptional interest in choreography. Suitcases in hand, young ladies arrived at the various dance studios where Chernetskaia, Vera Maiia, Valeriia Tsvetaeva, and other bosonozhki [barefoot dancers] competed with the schools of Shalomytova, L. Nelidova, and Vera Mosolova."\(^3\) Viktor Iving, one of the most acerbic critics of those years, retorted ironically: "The result? So many young girls turned up that there was a significant increase in the manufacture of suitcases, or so rumor

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2. On these various groups, see Anon., "Khronika," Zrelishcha (Moscow), No. 1 (1922), pp. 14-15.
would have us believe."4 Iving even went on to define this fad for plastic movement as "plastitution."5 Of course, this was just one more symptom of the extraordinary theatrical fervor that reached its culmination in 1922-23 as the New Economic Policy (NEP) was getting under way, a fervor that encompassed every kind of performance—from variety theater to cabaret, from the circus to the pantomime, from the puppet theater to ballroom dancing, from dramatic theater to music hall.6 Here was an enormous cauldron in which every kind of artist, avant-garde or not, savored the most varied esthetic confections, while the critics cooked up the most bizarre esthetic menus. Eccentric Dances, Mechanical Dances, and Biomechanical Dances were the extreme point of this contamination, representing a category of investigation no less popular than the plastic and classical dance of previous years, except that they developed only after the revolution, i.e., from ca. 1921 onwards.

Iving apart, there were some observers who took this plastic phenomenon and the semi-nude girls dancing in freezing Moscow studios seriously—above all, the art historian Alexei Sidorov.7 In the 1910s Sidorov had frequented the same Munich circles as Vasilii Kandinsky8 and continued to collaborate with him after the revolution, particularly within the framework of RAKhN [Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences].9 Subscribing to Kandinsky’s view that dance or the art of movement was one of the principal, potential sources for a new synthetic and monumental art, Sidorov followed the latest European research on dance and in 1922 published the first comparative study of Western and Russian tendencies (Fig. 59).10 Moreover, Sidorov had the brilliant notion that a theory of

4. V. Iving, "O Piľagore, Chingiz-khane, zvezdakh i chemodanchikach," Teatr i muzyka (Moscow), No. 28 (1923), pp. 941-43.
5. V. Iving, "Vecher vsekh napravlenii stsenicheskogo dvizheniia," Rampa (Moscow), No. 6, Dec. 11, 1922, p. 12.
6. The critic Alexander Abramov remarked: "I do not like great art that blinds with its splendor, but prefer the tiny music-hall that charms with the grace of a single diamond stuck in the middle of somebody’s mug" ("O mikroskopicheskom," Ermitaz, No. 9 (1922), pp. 9-11.
7. As Secretary of RAKhN, Alexei Alexeevich Sidorov (1891-1978) was largely responsible for the ideological orientation of this early Soviet think tank. See N. Kozhina and P. Lebedeva, A. A. Sidorov (Moscow: Nauka, 1974); N. Sidorova, ed., A. A. Sidorov: O masterakh zarubezhnogo, russkogo i sovetskogo iskusstva (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1985).
8. A. Sidorov, "Iz vospominanii sovetskogo iskusstvoveda i knigoveda," Typescript of unpublished memoirs, private archive, Moscow.
9. One of the reasons for Kandinsky’s resignation from INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture) in 1920 was its refusal to accept Sidorov as a member.