The Audience As Myth and Reality:
Soviet Theatrical Ideology and
Audience Research in the 1920s*

People’s Theater and Audience Research

Theater as an art form is unique in its close interrelation between artist, performance and spectator. Even though everything on the stage is planned and rehearsed in detail—as in contemporary theater, which is headed by a director—there is no real performance until it is all perceived by a live audience, whose reactions in turn influence the course of the performance. Although such observations are traditional and commonplace, very little actual knowledge exists about the dynamics of the theater performance and how the audience functions within it.¹ Instead, this has long remained the domain of lofty theoretical declarations or postulates which advocate some ideal concept of the interrelation between stage and audience as existing in actual reality or—more often—as a goal to be reached.

One of the most important modern theatrical programs based more on a postulate than on scientific knowledge, was that of a “people’s theater.” It manifested itself in different variations in Germany, Russia, France and Scandinavia from the end of the nineteenth century to the interwar period of the twentieth century.² Essential to this socio-politically oriented program was the idea that theater was not only communication between stage and audience, but that the audience also was—or should be—representative of the collective as a whole. The concept of a “people’s theater” had its roots in German Romanticism and the young revolutionary Richard Wagner. It was a

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utopian program for a theater that would regain its moral and political authority by addressing the entire collective—the nation, the people—which was gathered or at least represented in the auditorium, as it once had been in ancient Greece. When the stage spoke, the collective as a whole was thought to listen.

In Russia, after the October Revolution, the utopian concept of the people's theater became very influential both for the revolutionary mass pageants (sometimes assembling ten thousand or more spectators) and for the professional revolutionary theater. Before the opening of the RSFSR Theater No. 1 in Moscow in 1920, the director Vsevolod Meierkhol'd declared that the foundation for all theatrical art—the relationship between the stage and the audience—had altered radically after the Revolution, and now, "every spectator is, as it were, a model of Soviet Russia."3 The artist's power to influence and intervene in society thus seemed to have increased tremendously. If every spectator was "a model of Soviet Russia," then the theater could speak with a new feeling of authority and significance. The problem was, of course, that the "representativeness" of the audience was pure postulation, and that the utopian program of an all-uniting "people's theater" was soon to be confronted with the change in Soviet reality from radical War Communism to pragmatic and pluralistic NEP. This confrontation led to basic re-evaluations and changes in Russian theater practice and theory. The topic of this article, the discussion on theater audience responses and scientific audience research of the mid-1920s, can be said to lie in the intersection of practice and theory.4

Today, the Soviet discussion of the problem of the audience is interesting from two aspects. First, it has a general significance as an early attempt to define the object and methods of scientific audience research. In fact the Soviet theater specialists participating in the discussion formulated problems—although certainly without solving them—which theater scholars in the West only recently have touched upon. The discussion was however not initiated for purely theoretical reasons but because theater workers themselves had the no doubt correct feeling that the concept of the political people's theater did not work under the conditions of NEP. Thus, the second aspect of the topic is the audience discussion as a symptom of the crisis of the people's theater and the need for new approaches to the audience.5

5. The only researchers who, to my knowledge, have dealt with the topic approach it exclusively from the point of view of the development of Soviet theater sociology, leaving out of consideration the question of the interrelation between theatrical practice and re-