Russian Avant-Garde Theatre: War, Revolution and Design, 1913 - 1933

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In collaboration with the A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum

18 October 2014 – 25 January 2015

This autumn a new display will present more than 150 radical designs for theatrical productions by celebrated figures of the Russian avant-garde. On view in the V&A's Theatre and Performance galleries will be set and costume designs conceived between 1913 and 1933 from leading artists and designers including Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin, Alexandra Exter, El Lissitsky, Liubov Popova and Varvara Stepanova.

Created over the course of two decades marked by the Russian revolutions and First World War, the works represent an extraordinary point in Russian culture during which artistic, literary and musical traditions underwent profound transformations. New types of theatrical productions demanded innovative design solutions and benefitted from the unprecedented symbiosis of artists, musicians, directors and performers which characterized the period. Artists who worked in a variety of mediums including painting, architecture, textiles, photography and graphics worked collaboratively on theatrical productions to create a rich variety of design. For the avant-garde this work in theatrical innovation came to inform wider artistic practices.

The display takes as its starting point set and costume designs by the prominent painter Kazimir Malevich. On view will be sketches and lithographs for Victory Over the Sun, a Futurist opera which premiered in 1913 in St Petersburg. Malevich designed backdrops made from cloth sheets printed with monochrome graphic forms. A design for one scene depicts a large black and white square divided diagonally. The concept for the set is a forerunner of Malevich's renowned non-representational painting Black Square (1915), a work which embodies the aesthetics of the Suprematist movement originated by the artist. The sketches which will go on display at the V&A illustrate the earliest examples of Suprematism. Malevich's costume designs for Victory Over the Sun will additionally be on view and show voluminous creations in bold colours which reshape the human figure.

The prodigious artist and photographer Alexander Rodchenko will also be represented. For Vladimir Mayakovsky's satirical play The Bedbug (1929) Rodchenko designed radically futuristic ensembles featuring wide silhouettes and breathing apparatus to convey men
from later decades. A series of costume designs for We (1920), a Proletcult Theatre production that was eventually banned by the authorities, are characterized by Rodchenko's use of bold geometric form and bright colour.

Works on display from Rodchenko's fellow Constructivist artist Liubov Popova will include a maquette for a set model for The Magnanimous Cuckold (1922), a farce by Fernand Crommelynck performed at the radical Meyerhold Theatre. Popova's set design was comprised of a mechanical mill, wheels and conveyer belts and provided a backdrop for director Vsevolod Meyerhold to present his acting theory of biomechanics, which favoured gesture and movement over psychological interpretation.

A dozen examples of work by the influential theatrical designer Alexandra Exter for ballet, opera and plays will be included. Exter was known for the austerity of her designs and use of lighting rather than physical structure to construct sets. On display will be a set model,
stage and costume designs for Salome, performed at The Camerny Theatre in 1917, as well as costume design for alien beings for the 1924 Soviet science fiction film Aelita: Queen of Mars. Designs for stage by the renowned film director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein,
known for pioneering work in the practice of montage in film, are also on display. These include costume and set designs for a 1921 production of Macbeth performed in The Vasilii Polenov Theatre, Moscow.

Works on display in Russian Avant-Garde Theatre: War, Revolution and Design, 1913 – 1933 will be drawn primarily from the A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum (Moscow) and St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music. It is part of the Russian
Year of Culture.

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Notes to Editors

Russian Avant-Garde Theatre: War, Revolution and Design, 1913 - 1933 is the V&A's central contribution to Russia Visualised, part of the UK-Russia Year of Culture 2014
The display is curated in collaboration with the A.A Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, Moscow and supported by the Russian Ministry of Culture
A Nick Hern Books publication The Russian Avant-Garde Theatre, 1913-1933, edited by Professor John Bowlt, will accompany the display
Admission is free
The V&A is open daily 10:00 – 17:45 and until 22:00 every Friday

About the A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum
The A.A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum was founded by Muscovite industrialist Alexey Alexandrovich Bakhrushin in 1894. Today the Museum comprises eleven sites and holds a large collection of Russian theatrical relics representing all genres of theatre. There are almost 1.5 million objects in the collection, which includes archives of performers, costumes, set design and a wide range of paraphernalia. The Museum is free to visit and open Wednesday – Monday from 12:00 to 19:00.
http://www.gctm.ru/

Russia Visualised

Russia Visualised is a year-long presentation of visual arts and culture programming across London to celebrate the UK-Russia Year of Culture 2014. Leading galleries and museums contributing a rich variety of exhibitions and events to the Russia Visualised programme include Calvert 22 Gallery, Tate Modern, The Photographers' Gallery, the Science Museum, and the V&A. From Russian space exploration to avant-garde Russian theatre, Russia Visualised will highlight Russia's visual arts heritage and its place in 21st century culture.

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