

EUROPEAN PERFORMATIVE THEATRE

**THE ISSUES, PROBLEMS AND TECHNIQUES OF
CRUCIAL MASTERPIECES**

Annamaria Cascetta



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The Issues, Problems and Techniques
of Crucial Masterpieces

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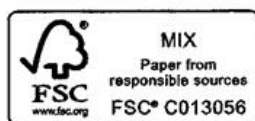
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From militarism and authoritarianism
to the weapon of joy in *Gaudeamus*
by Lev Dodin

Passing from questions about tradition, our all-round view of performative theatre moves, in my excursus on its most important thematic paths, to the theme of human comity, whether it is threatened by war, the baser instincts that take pleasure in violence, militaristic exaltation or whether it is built up and defended by democratic passion and peaceful coexistence. Performative theatre deals with the theme with original and pioneering expressive invention, practising the free relationship with the original text, collective improvisation, departures from a linear narrative and the explosion of visual and choreographic creativity. On the theme of war, a master of contemporary theatre, nurtured by the tradition of the great Russian experimental theatre, Lev Dodin, has produced a cult spectacle. And as always happens in the best live art, its specific significance is extended to make a universal statement about human life.

Lev Dodin returned twice in the nineties and the early decades of the millennium to his cult spectacle ‘*Gaudeamus*’, an essential example of a method, a form of expression and a lucid reflection on the contemporary world and life. Two generations of actors have measured themselves with this work in two periods that appear close, yet are separated by a deep divide.*

Twenty-five years after its first performance, *Gaudeamus*, a cult spectacle presented by the Maly Drama Theatre of Saint Petersburg – with Lev Dodin as its artistic director since 1983 – has not exhausted its evocative power, symbolic charge or universal message.¹ The work is based on the novella *Stroybat*, by the Muscovite Sergei Kaledin² (born 1949). The tale belongs to the genre known as *Chernukha*, literally ‘darkness’, a neorealist current with pessimistic and sensationalist overtones, founded as an immediate

* In the context of this book it seems significant to present an analysis of the spectacle conducted, under my guidance and supervision, by two young students of mine: Anna Castoldi and Francesco Marzano, to whom I extend my thanks.

reaction to Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy.³ This artistic genre turned Gorbachev's transparency into protest, a quest for order and morality amid chaos and brutality. Its language and content denounced the violence rife in Soviet life, portraying its excesses and crudeness. Kaledin was an outstanding exponent of this strand in the theatre.

The novella is an account of everyday life in the 'second unit, first platoon, fourth company at N. military base, construction battalion',⁴ in a city in eastern Siberia in March 1970. The battalion, 'a crowd of rabble',⁵ is a sampler of varied and problematic humanity. Each character is distinguished by an impairment, a tic or a vice, and many of them are representatives of marginal ethnic groups (Jews, Turkomans, Moldovans, gypsies and so on).⁶ Babay, the company orderly, is incontinent. Bogdan, the unit commander, has a crick in the neck. Kostya, a private soldier, is flap-eared and has a problem with his kneecap. He is in the habit of finding resemblances to movie actors among his companions. Fisha is a shortsighted Jew with a fixation on study. Nutso Vlad, a half-Moldovan gypsy with fake gold teeth, has blood in his urine after being beaten up in the guardhouse. The Oldster, an ex-convict, is ruined by his experience in the disciplinary battalion. Almost dumb, he drowns open-eyed.⁷

Stroybat is a choral depiction, without a protagonist (except perhaps Kostya, by virtue of the extensive narrative space assigned to him). The story plunges readers *in medias res*, immersing us in the grotesque and surreal everyday events in the unit. The plot, if the novella can be said to have one, is fragmented into small episodes alternating with frequent flashbacks. It proceeds by fits and starts with a continuous alternation of dialogues and narrative sections, with frequent use of free indirect speech. Little or nothing happens: 'But here?... In a year and a half only one alarm.'⁸ Some of the events are a direct consequence of the backstory: Kostya, one month away from discharge, has stolen a box of glazed donuts. Caught in the act, he is punished by being made to clean the unit's latrines. There are no salient episodes, except perhaps the clash between the second and fourth companies in the second half of the story, during which Fisha kills a veteran, and its epilogue – in the form of an official letter of merit – which prefigures Kostya's admission to Moscow University. The casual succession of scenes of battalion routine amounts to a denunciation of alienation in military life, with its systematic oppression of the weak and the logic of *homo homini lupus*.

Publication of *Stroybat* was persistently hampered by military censorship, which objected:

S. Kaledin has collected all the deleterious occurrences, all the coarseness, all the cruelty and absurdities scattered through all the logistics battalions of the country's military engineering corps. In this period, fraught with nationalist tensions, publishing *Stroybat* in a magazine with a very high circulation means abetting the enemies of *perestroika*, the nationalists.

In short, it was ‘an attempt to stab the Soviet Army in the back’.⁹ The first attempts at a stage adaptation of the text were likewise blocked by the U.S.S.R.’s Defence Ministry. Dodin’s production, *Gaudeamus*, marked a breakthrough by finally making it known:

At Leningrad’s Little Theatre [Maly Theatre in St Petersburg], the theatrical adaptation of *Stroybat*, directed by Lev Dodin, went off smoothly. The generals’ reach did not extend to Leningrad. Six hundred versts is a long way. After Leningrad the production started to travel the world and was successful. Which I’m glad about, naturally enough.¹⁰

It should be recognised that the production’s long run, lasting many years, had the merit not just of making *Stroybat* widely known, but also of developing a further, and more universal, level of interpretation, achieving a greater historical breadth. Following the fall of the Berlin wall, Kaledin’s story, and Dodin’s production inspired by it, had a definite ideological and political significance, with explicit satirical and parodic implications. But a revival of *Gaudeamus* in 2016 has to take into account a changed mindset and a new historical outlook. The director explained this point:

Some of today’s actors were not born in 1990 or were no more than a few years old. They never knew the Soviet Union at first hand or Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of *perestroika*, so their collective imagination is different from the actors who preceded them in the same roles. *Gaudeamus* is a spectacle that speaks of people, of humanity, the relations binding them to each other, the way they relate to the system, whatever it is, whether just or unjust. You see the circus of life on stage.¹¹

The renewed production has young graduates of the Academy Theatre in St. Petersburg performing alongside members of the Maly Theatre company. It is no longer just about the U.S.S.R., the Cold War and the 1979–1989 Soviet-Afghan War, but the senselessness of all wars, the degeneration and abuse of military hierarchies, bureaucratic indulgence as an outlet for a rottenness more deeply rooted in humanity and the army as a place of mis-education. The play speaks of the absurdity of certain political systems,¹² the threats of terrorism and the weight of *all* ideology and fanaticism. Far from being political theatre and seeking to suggest solutions,¹³ *Gaudeamus* problematises current events. It speaks of a war that is not fought on the stage, of which we hear only echoes. It speaks of a generation that feels a sense of incipient loss and impermanence in life. It speaks about us, because we, too, know about the world wars only by report and about contemporary wars only from filmed images. Hence the third verse of the collegiate hymn which gives the play its name¹⁴ is highly emblematic. Sung in the finale, it sets its seal on the meaning of the play, becoming something more than a traditional *memento mori* for a group of carefree students:

Vita nostra brevis est, brevi finiatur,
venit mors velociter,
rapit nos atrociter,
nemini parceretur.

Historical context

Gaudeamus saw the light in the U.S.S.R. under Gorbachev. His government policy of *glasnost* ('transparency') marked a radical change in the life of the country, moved by the belief that the effective circulation of information and the individual responsibility of citizens were essential to enable the country to progress economically, politically and culturally. The 27th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1986) moved beyond Leninist democratic centralism ('freedom of discussion, unity of action') in the direction of more concrete democracy and greater participation in public life. Censorship of the media and intellectual work was damped down and then formally abolished in August 1990.¹⁵ The need was felt to shed light on the shortcomings of official Soviet historiography. In a famous speech in February 1987 Gorbachev declared:

It is agreed that there should not be any more *white spots* [blank pages] in either our history or in our literature. Otherwise it would not be either history or literature but artificial, conjunctural construct... History has to be seen as it is.¹⁶

Locking step with the new 'transparent' political-cultural policy, the economic programme of *perestroika* sought to achieve technological competitiveness and an intensive market economy. It was believed that this would boost the output of consumer goods and services and diversify products by giving independence to individual companies (1987).¹⁷ The success of Gorbachev's planned reforms depended, however, on a general change of mentality, after many centuries of political and diplomatic isolation and self-exclusion from the system of international relations.¹⁸ Shedding this mistrust was essential if the country was to achieve this much-coveted goal of liberalising the economy and democratising politics. Thinking globally, tackling problems through cooperation between states: these were the cards played by Gorbachev in foreign policy (which in 1990 earned him the Nobel Prize in peace 'for his leading role in the peace process which today characterises important parts of the international community').

This attempted alignment between the reform and a change of mentality, however, seems to have failed. One direct proof of this lies, among many factors, in the conspicuous place of militarism in the state's organisation. The military component has always been central in Russia, due to historical, economic and ideological causes, from the days of the tsarist empire down to the Cold War and beyond, despite *perestroika*.¹⁹ If the boundary between

the military and civilian sectors was uncertain and often negligible under Soviet rule, even today the two can hardly be described as completely separate. Its potential on the home front has been tested in recent years by Putin, who has gambled part of his popularity on armed intervention ranging from Georgia to the Crimea, Donbas and Syria. Despite the country's economic difficulties, the president has reawakened Russian pride.²⁰ In the eyes of the electorate, Russia can again throw its weight around internationally, with a show of force, so overcoming the trauma suffered with the collapse of the U.S.S.R.:

For a mid-ranking power facing severe economic hardships, Russia is very active militarily. Its GDP is just 34.45% of Germany's and 47.61% of France's. All the same, Moscow has the world's second-largest nuclear arsenal and its armed forces are 800,000 strong, all fairly well equipped and active simultaneously in two theatres of war, the Ukraine and Syria. Even in a lean period, Russia is unwilling to make military concessions while engaging in brinksmanship. It is obvious that Moscow devotes far more attention to the defence sector and perceives the military instrument as the principal, if not predominant, way of securing its national interests and ensuring its own survival.²¹

Hence it is hardly surprising that militarism has had considerable weight in the Russians' collective imagination, influencing the way they conceive the world. This explains its conspicuous presence in Russian literature and theatre. *Stroybat* and *Gaudeamus* are two emblematic works that seek to analyse militarism, offering two responses to it.²²

Artistic context

The ascending arc in the arts led from compulsory compliance with Socialist Realism to the state of covert 'discreet establishment of nonconformity' in the 1970s and 1980s and the attainment of freedom of expression with *glasnost*.²³ This was on the whole a historic achievement for Russia, though freedom was still hindered by controls and not fully exploited immediately because of a general cultural inertia.²⁴ In 1987, paralleling the privatisation of businesses, the Ministry of Culture conducted an experiment in theatrical freedom. It gave complete artistic and managerial independence to the theatres, which would govern themselves by boards representing the members of the company and technical staff.²⁵ This was a substantial breakthrough for the theatre system and was carried out despite various aftershocks: disagreements within companies, financial concerns (there would be fewer state subsidies), replacement of artistic directors and discord and theatre closures.²⁶ The upshot, paradoxically, was that under the new regime of freedom the theatres were less fertile and innovative than before. Cultural offerings tended to be flattened under the weight of the market

forces unleashed by abolishing censorship. Productions had been more original before *glasnost*.²⁷

These difficulties were fiercely resisted by some theatres and directors, strengthened by incessant work and especially the close-knit support of the troupes, ensuring a solid and shared artistic vision. Examples are Pyotr Fomenko, Sergei Zhenovich, Vladimir Mashkov, Anatoly Vasiliev with his School of Dramatic Art, Oleg Tabokov with his Studio Theatre, Oleg Yefremov and Mark Zakharov, to name only a few. Lev Dodin, the leader of the Maly Drama Theatre, is rightfully numbered among this group.

Founded in 1944 as a popular theatre in Leningrad, the Maly Drama Theatre has had a long history. It reflects the complicated vicissitudes of the Russian search for an identity, oscillating between the national tradition and receptiveness to European theatre.²⁸ The theatre was founded to foster a return to normal, after the siege of Leningrad was raised in 1944. Embracing the cultural mission of 'public service', shared by other similar European experimental theatres, such as Jean Vilar's Théâtre National Populaire or Strehler and Grassi's Piccolo Teatro di Milano, like them it succeeded in overcoming the socialist influence by its ambitions and by adopting a democratic structure. Its first home was tiny, with just 35 seats (hence its name Maly, meaning 'small'), formerly used as a variety theatre (hence the name 'Drama'). Its artistic standards were significantly raised in 1973, under the artistic direction of Efim Padve and management of Roman Malkin, followed by the first invitations to Lev Dodin to direct productions.

Dodin had graduated in 1966 from the Russian State Institute of the Performing Arts in Leningrad.²⁹ He had already presented major productions at the Bolshoi Drama Theatre and the Moscow Art Theatre when he was appointed artistic director of the Maly in 1983. Finally he had found a permanent theatre home, where he could combine his teaching and performative practice and lay the foundation for a large company of professionals regularly renewed by recruiting students.³⁰ It was with the Maly that Dodin matured a theatrical style of his own, combining and synthesising different strands of acting³¹ and overcoming the 'prisoner mentality' which all Russia was suffering from.³² Traveling steadily towards the West, he established a twofold theatrical life, drawing on the Russian tradition but with a global scope. This process was attained with *Brothers and Sisters*, adapted from the novel by Fyodor Abramov, the first production that Dodin took abroad in 1985. It was then consolidated at the international festivals (with the 1991 Braunschweig Festival and the 1994 Saison Russe in Paris being particularly important).³³ The Maly is the Russian theatre that has greatest international presence, as well as being the first to have created new productions either in collaboration with Western producers or commissioned by them (*The Demons*, *Claustrophobia* and *The Cherry Orchard*), for which it incurred some criticism at home.³⁴

A theatre that transcends all barriers, stylistic, thematic and political, it has received important European recognition. Since 1992 the Maly has been a member of the Union of European Theatres. In 1998 it received the title

of 'Theatre of Europe' (which it shares only with the Odéon in Paris and the Piccolo in Milan), and in 2000 Dodin won the Europe Theatre Prize. Emblematic of this way of seeing theatre is *Gaudeamus*,³⁵ a work that, together with Alexander Galin's *Stars in the Morning Sky* (1987),³⁶ is perhaps the most representative of *glasnost*:

The most impressive (and the simplest) attempt at a dramatic treatment of post-Soviet life came in a production of *Gaudeamus*. The improvisations on the theme of life in an army construction battalion [...] rested on a paradoxical collective decision. Dodin compressed the gloomy and bitter Soviet army reality into sweet, crystalline wafers (quite obviously we could only take this medicine in such a form). Reality was chopped up, prepared and shaped into little parables, rituals and musical sketches, which were called upon to tease out eternal biblical themes in contemporary life. The enormous and infectious energy of the young actors, the garishness of the figurative metaphor, all the other devices of contemporary theatricality became the means by which 'music lessons' were extracted from the depths of a hopeless every-day life. The darker life is, the more joyful art. This was a hopeless optimism, helping us to survive and to resist chaos and corruption.³⁷

The Maly Theatre's productions, despite the uncertainty and scepticism of the years when they were developed,³⁸ have created a bridge to the future and realised one of the cornerstones of Gorbachev's project, in many ways largely unfulfilled: international communication, with Russian opening out to the world.

Structure

The dramatic reworking of Kaledin's novella was the outcome of a long effort by the whole company working together. The play is divided into nineteen scenes: the correct subtitle of *Gaudeamus* (not always given in recent performances) is *Nineteen Improvisations on a Theme of 'The Construction Battalion'*. Here follows a brief summary of its contents, scene by scene:³⁹

- I. *Entrance*. To the rhythm of a cheerful fanfare men run onstage one after the other and fall into rectangular trapdoors open in the ground. One of them before falling recites Hamlet's monologue, 'To be or not to be'. The soldiers seem untroubled; they prance about and engage in horseplay on the snow.
- II. *Consecration*. Enter three soldiers: Bielotchiski, Popov and the Turkoman Babay. The first two try to train the third, who does not speak or understand Russian very well, making him repeat the sound 'muh-muh', used (they assure him) to summon the company. They give him a lump of sugar when he gets it.

- III. *The pep talk.* The recruits gather around the officer Lysodor, who congratulates the soldiers whose leave is approaching, and promises Konstantin Karamitchev (Kostya), the gypsy Nutso Vlad, and the Jew Itskovitch (Fisha) early leave if they clean out the latrines. He gives the soldiers repeated instructions about what not to do when they get their pay. 'Don't get drunk, comrade soldiers! And if you do get drunk, don't leave your comrades. And if you do leave them, at least turn them on their bellies, so they don't choke in their own vomit.'
- IV. *Theme 32.* Lieutenant Shamtchiev reads out various 'themes' from a manual: military rules that prescribe how to march and how to salute a superior. The soldiers parody the instructions, mocking every gesture to grotesque effect, creating a choreography to the notes of a Russian version of *One Way Ticket*.
- V. *The first dance.* Enter a young woman in a skirt, with a pitcher. Night. Milman meets her and introduces himself as a superior, then recites a poem. They wash their heads in one of the trapdoors, which for this purpose represents a hole cut in the ice. Finally the two dance, and, moving closer, they make as if to kiss. A choreography begins on Boccherini's *Minuet*: soldiers approach in a circle with candles; the stage is dark. The 'Girl by the Lake' runs and dances among the soldiers. Each of them seems to take something from her head, perhaps hairpins, as if letting down her hair. Finally the soldiers advance in twos and snuff out the candles.
- VI. *Going to Tatyana.* Kostya is wheeled in drunk in a barrow. Buckets are hauled out of the latrines: it's time to clean them. Kostya asks Fisha to lend him money and then dictates an anonymous letter addressed to the Ministry of Defence to report the mistreatment suffered by the gypsy Nutso Vlad. Babay turns his pay over to Kostya, advising him not to go with women. The scene turns into Kostya's dream, in which his mother, played by Babay, softly speaks of food and the violin (she wanted her son to become a great musician), advising him not to go with prostitutes. To the tune of the popular song *Santa Lucia*, Kostya imagines he's playing the violin, surrounded by four beautiful girls dressed in white. The scene ends with the return to reality. Schubert's *Ave Maria* is playing in the background: wearing boots and jackets, the women become prostitutes who drink and smoke with the soldiers. They belt out a poignant Russian folk song.
- VII. *At Tatyana's.* Kostya and the commander Bogdan eat and drink at Tatyana's to the notes of the Beatles' *Girl*. After the interlude of frenzied music and percussion, during which Tatyana changes her clothes, the courtship begins: she sits on the bed and flirts with Kostya. The two men, drunk, vie violently for the woman (it looks like a rape scene). Only Tatyana and Bogdan remain; he tries to convince her to take up with him, but she runs off. Other women enter, chased by officers. They jump on the bed and the soldiers push it to and fro, singing the same Russian folk song as before.

- VIII. *Tatyana's letter*. To the music of the duel scene from *Eugene Onegin*, Kostya and Bogdan play act a duel. Kostya is killed and lies on the ground. Tatyana comes in on roller skates, declaiming a letter: it is a fantasy in which Konstantin evokes the letter received from her about events the evening before. Tatyana criticises the boy's jealousy, concluding with a prosaic 'It's not my fault if I'm beautiful!'
- IX. *Citizen of the world*. Kostya is drunk again. He is trundled in in a wheelbarrow and left by the latrines. He recites his poems and pronounces in favour of America, which he says he loves. He descends into the latrine, while the soldiers sing *America the Beautiful*, and their hands rise above the trapdoor waving victorious fists and making V signs.
- X. *Dreams*. Babay is hanging out his clothes with Nina, Shamtchiev's fat wife. This is a great comic scene. Babay offers the woman his jacket and tries to win her. The good, frail soldier likes Nina; the two drink hard liquor and he ends up lying on the ground with her on top of him. But then Shamtchiev comes on with a gift for Nina (a new jacket), dances Jacques Brel's *La Valse à mille temps* with her and is trying to kiss her when other soldiers enter. Nina dances with everyone.
- XI. *Theme 35*. Shamtchiev's lesson on the Arab-Israeli conflict. The officer divides the soldiers into two groups and gets them to simulate the two sides, with comic effect. The clash heats up until the simulation turns into a brawl, in which Milman shows unexpected gifts (displaying his mastery of Tai Chi Chuan). In the end he lays into the weakest: the plump Jew Fisha is almost choked, while the soldiers keep repeating the phrase 'Are you enjoying it? What joy!' Mozart's *Turkish March* leads into the next scene.
- XII. *Musical education*. Bogdan is learning to sing from Ludmilla, the barracks' librarian. The lesson is dominated by bawdy talk. She tries to teach him to play the piano. The two of them climb on the piano and with their feet pick out the opening theme of Mozart's *Symphony No. 40*. Finally, as they make out, the notes of the symphony ring out and the piano disappears upwards.
- XIII. *At war*. Kostya dreams of a battle scene: he is speaking into a radio transmitter; at first the war sounds like a game, then real news seems to be coming in from the front. Kostya, in charge of cleaning the latrines and collecting the soldiers' faeces in test tubes, presents a corrosive speech about war in connection with the faecal semantic field: 'If war is war, someone has to be in the shit. We clean the latrines because the country needs crap. [...] And with the weapon of shit, you will bring peace on earth.' Kostya is detailed off to collect everyone's faeces in test tubes thrown up to him from the trapdoors.
- XIV. *Ritual*. There is talk of demobilisation: Lysodor hands out discharge papers to Nutso, Fisha and Kostya, congratulating them. But Kostya, though it was not in his earlier instructions, will have to clean the women's lavatories, again with the help of Itskovitch and Vlad, before he can be demobbed.

- XV. *Bullfighting*. The soldiers drink and smoke hashish with Tatyana. Bogdan tells them about the Oldster, a veteran who was given nine years for committing a murder in self-defence and, straight after being arrested, was sent to the disciplinary battalion. Bogdan then imagines a bullfight for Tatyana (to the theme of the *Chanson du Toreador* from Bizet's *Carmen*). Babay is the bull, mocked and goaded by his comrades with a hatpin.
- XVI. *Bliss*. Some soldiers sprawl about, drunk and drugged. Popov asks one of the others to inject drugs for him. Tatyana vomits. They sing the Beatles' *Girl* out of tune. Bogdan plays the piano and a soldier sings the Neapolitan song *Te vojo bene assaje*. Red balloons fill the stage and are popped by the soldiers as Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* resounds, then fades into the Russian version of *One Way Ticket* we heard before.
- XVII. *Ecstasy*. Still drunk, the soldiers clash with a neighbouring company. While a fanfare sounds with an estranging effect, the soldiers march to and fro. Whenever they reach the proscenium one of them falls to the ground, signifying defeat. At centre stage, a strange metal grate keeps swinging, like a long, narrow cage. The soldiers try to clamber onto it. Then a veteran of the other company comes down covered in blood from the crane and dies: Itskovitch has killed him in the fight. Enter Lysodor with a belt, berating the soldiers and trying to flog them: he warned them against getting drunk! They lie down on their backs, bare-chested. Nina emerges from a trapdoor and turns them onto their bellies. From four trapdoors the women enter naked, their long hair covering their breasts, singing the Beatles' *Girl*. Lysodor accuses Babay of taking the company out while he was meant to be on guard. Babay attempts suicide, but is stopped by his comrades.
- XVIII. *Hangover*. The soldiers sing in memory of the dead (Bortniansky's *Choral Concerto* No. 32), then go back to work. The scene closes with a fanfare, first sung, then played on wind instruments brought up from the trapdoors.
- XIX. *The academy*. Lysodor accuses Kostya of murder; Kostya saves himself by laying the blame on the Jew Itskovitch. Kostya gets a certificate of good conduct (declaimed aloud) praising his discipline and morality, to be presented for admission to Moscow University. All sing the student song *Gaudeamus*, then exit down the trapdoors, closed behind them.

Dodin as director and the Maly Drama Theatre method

Gaudeamus, like Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre's other performances, belongs to the strand of performative and post-dramatic theatre, as defined by Hans-Thies Lehmann in his famous 1999 essay *Postdramatisches Theatre*.⁴⁰ Maria Shevtsova, in her monograph on Dodin, speaks of a 'new postmodern aesthetic' precisely in relation to this work:

Gaudeamus and *Claustrophobia*, although in line with Dodin's usual compositional methods, move towards a new aesthetics for the Maly that, given its features, can only be called postmodernist: absence of narrative, absence of characterisation, dislocation of pieces, fragmentation, montage, non sequitur, parody, pastiche, simulation and the techniques of citation, self-reference and reflexivity. Reflexivity, in conformity with a postmodernist check-list, is used in the productions for the purposes of self-mockery, which is coupled with the mockery of whatever might be imagined to be the 'other', or 'object', of its discourse. Add to this catalogue of postmodernist devices the 'cool' of non-judgement, of a self-consciously objectified, uninvolved stance.⁴¹

In addition to the characters identified here we have to consider other special features that enhance the performative character of Dodin's production and are the hallmark of the Maly Drama Theatre's working method, namely the process of 'continuous creation' and a 'holistic' approach to theatre.⁴²

Dodin creates 'open' works, great collectors of experience, malleable products of artistic and human research. His method has its roots in Stanislavski's last phase, mediated by Boris Zon, under whose guidance Dodin graduated in film directing. The method envisages certain essential steps:

- Preparation: the actors are subjected to the practice of *zachin* ('beginning'), a series of unguided initiatives connected with the themes and purposes of rehearsal, by which they stimulate their own and others' creativity and attitude towards the performance. This ritual practice is routine among Academy students and is kept up in the professional company.
- Warm-up: an integral part of the company's work, usually divided into three parts: voice, dance, music (vocal and instrumental). The actors use their bodies as versatile instruments and train them to all the arts. Warm-up varies to suit each of their productions.⁴³
- Extensive documentation of the text or theme of the spectacle: the whole company is invited to read (novels, essays, chronicles, etc.), explore, discover, and absorb the context of the production. Dodin speaks of a process of immersion: 'a matter of taking in, going through and feeling everything offered by an author'. The actor is a researcher.⁴⁴
- *Études* for improvisation: the actors explore the stage situation, bringing their own experience to it, and allowing various types of material to emerge, starting from ideas drawn from the reference text. When these have accumulated, they are discussed in detail by the group and director.
- *Devising*: from action (exercises, improvisation, discussion) the actors pass to memorising the script (if the performance, as in the case of *Gaudeamus*, is based on a non-theatrical text). The event becomes dramaturgy and the actor takes on the role of co-author. The process consists 'of writing drafts *with, through and in the actors' bodies*',⁴⁵ so

resembling the transcription of an ancient oral tradition. It is discussed collectively, but the director reserves to himself the role of editor and guarantor of its coherence: he selects, cuts, condenses and connects the material that accumulates.⁴⁶

This virtuous creative machine gives rise, as we have seen, to a virtually endless process, guaranteed primarily by the strength of the ensemble.

A bridge of this kind between students and professionals develops a shared language, a unique vision of the theatre and the world. It calls for unflagging training, assiduous research and collective effort, with long periods spent working and living together for the rehearsals, which often run on from year to year. The Maly Drama Theatre is configured as an all-encompassing and exclusive choice.

This results in the long-term planning of the company's projects, the categorical imperative of research and the constant exploration of the humanity that it represents on stage. When preparing for a performance – undertaken after the script has been given a definitive form – Dodin prefers not to think in terms of *repetitiya* (rehearsals), but *proba* ('attempts, trials'), possible realisations of a potential spectacle.⁴⁷ In this stage the actors rotate between parts, interpreting the roles in different ways⁴⁸ This means each actor's experience can be described, in Shevtsova's formula, as a process of *research-during-play-into-play*.⁴⁹ Productions are developed slowly with the actors in the protracted preparation times and are then kept in the repertoire for lengthy periods. As Dodin says:

A big production is like a big book that is created over a long time, as you might build a church with stone over a long period of time, and which then lives for a long time. It does not live with a dead life, but changes with time, with the physical, physiological, biological experiences of those who created the show and who continue to play it. If it is *alive*, it is not staged, but continues to develop. Of course, the production has been drawn, so actors do not have the freedom to reorganize it and say 'I'll go out here, now' or 'I'll come in from here'. They cannot improvise on the drawing that we have found together, but they have maximum breathing space for *internal improvisation* in it, and this *inner freedom* is the space of creative investigation and change.⁵⁰

Once the actors reach the state that Dodin calls – with almost mystical overtones⁵¹ – the 'improvisational mindset', the show will be renewed at every performance and the company always act as if for the first time, even if the script is fixed. Productions are organisms that grow, change and age through the decades and give the ephemeral art of the theatre a 'stillness' that resists the passing of time.⁵² They achieve an almost-mythical timelessness, yet stemming from the vitality of the company and the world's *panta rei* (Heraclitus's endless flow), which seeps onto the stage.

In conclusion, it is appropriate to speak, as Shevtsova does,⁵³ of a 'holistic approach' to theatre in the case of the Maly Drama Theatre. This is due to the focus on formatively completing the person as a whole and the broad horizon of artistic enrichment through multiple disciplines, working to attain the ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art, the chimera pursued by generations of artists: acting, dance and music come together in a spontaneous mix of genres and arts, masterfully managed by all the members of the troupe.

The greatest originality of *Gaudeamus* lies in its mixture of genres by which it forms a hybrid genre of its own. It combines circus, vaudeville, movement, dance (ballet and all sorts of other idioms), opera (including lip-sync arias), choral singing, liturgy and jazz band, which makes a sudden appearance at the end when the students pop out of the holes with the brass instruments they had learned for this production and blast out a rousing finale.⁵⁴

The staging is Dodin's Renaissance.⁵⁵

Staging *Gaudeamus*

We can now try to see how the Maly Theatre's method applies to the specific case of *Gaudeamus*, and the directorial choices that underpin its whole dramaturgical structure.⁵⁶ The freedom to improvise, and the self-generating and maieutic process by which the script develops, are perfectly embodied in the transition from the text of *Stroybat* to the performance of *Gaudeamus*. This is a particularly good example because the starting point is a short story, a text written without any theatrical purpose. Dodin's predilection for fiction, and more generally non-theatrical texts, is due to the scope they leave for interpretation in performance characteristic of the company. Kaledin's story can be seen as a *pre-text* for the drama,⁵⁷ without the slightest possibility of the stage version's being unfaithful to its profound significance, given the meticulous preparatory work that the actors and director devote to the text itself. First they read it collectively, then they recite it, improvising on its themes page by page and then give it its final form (without prejudice to the already-mentioned element of internal improvisation).⁵⁸

The subtitle of the spectacle is eloquent, in fact programmatic, on the question of improvisation: *Nineteen Improvisations on a Theme of 'The Construction Battalion'*. It is meant to convey the work of montage underlying the production, giving the troupe ample space for pure performance and ensuring a degree of freedom for metaphorically bringing out the meanings in the text.

As for the use of the various performative languages, it seems that the director's choice was to base every scene on the dialectic between reality and dream. There is a constant alternation between realistic and dream

sequences.⁵⁹ In the former the cast act in traditional ways (though often overcharged and verging on the grotesque), an approach that is faithful to Kaledin's text and reuses passages of his dialogue. But the latter gradually diverge from the linear narrative and we witness an explosion of visual, musical and choreographic creativity. These are true variations on the theme, proceeding by free association, almost a theatrical stream of consciousness. Starting from a concrete aspect (thing, object, feeling or instinct) of the previous realistic section, they transfigure it into a protean and elusive scene that appears to express the characters' dreams or hallucinations. These typically performative sections exploit all the resources of the young and versatile company. They form a series of crescendos, and gain in intensity as the spectacle progresses until they almost predominate over the acting. They reach a climax between the sixteenth and nineteenth scenes.

Music and dance have key roles as catalysts of the reality–dream transition. A few examples will help illustrate this strategy:

In Scene IV, heavily satirising military formalities and hierarchies, Lieutenant Shamtchiev reads out the rules ('themes' 32–34) to be observed in saluting a superior. He requires the soldiers to slavishly imitate every gesture:

Theme No. 34: 'How to stand to attention!' Figure No. 1: stand to attention at the order 'Attention!' Following the command, quickly fall in line. [...] Stand up straight, relaxed, heels together, toes placed on the line in front. [...] Align legs and knees, without being stiff. Chest out, body slightly bent forward. Stomach in. Stretch your shoulders, lower arms, hands at mid-thigh, palms inward... Yes, something like that ...

He then has them repeat the sequence of movements several times at ever-higher speeds, until the repetition degenerates into a choreography filled with the gags of slapstick comedy. The transition between the realistic scene and the 'surreal ballet' is effected by a Russian version of Jack Keller and Hank Hunter's *One Way Ticket*, resulting in a sort of paroxysmal game of Simon Says with a military background:

Attention! Right dress! Lie down! Together! Open order! One step! Left dress! Smoother! Chests out! Forward march! Tummies in! Shoulders back! Palms flat! Inwards! Sideways! In the middle! Fingers! Hips! Up! Straight! Chins up!

Scene V features the scribe Milman (mentioned only once in the tale).⁶⁰ He appears to the 'lake girl' standing at attention, then repeats his personal details, as if to a superior, while undressing. Then he washes in the lake water with her, reciting a poem and shivering with cold. He offers her his assistance and, with the excuse of the ablutions, makes physical contact and engages in an odd and extremely physical courtship. Milman grasps

the girl's pony tail and begins to whirl around her. At this point the scene turns to dream. The stage lights go down for a moment, then a procession of graceful dancing soldiers appears on the scene and, to the tune of Boccherini's *Minuet*, Milman and the lake girl – now dressed, respectively, in a stylish overcoat and white gown – execute a *pas de deux* at centre stage, continuing the courtship in an imaginative dimension.

In Scene VI Babay entrusts Kostya with his pay to prevent the veterans from stealing it:

Kostya, don't go chasing women today. It's pay day. Go tomorrow! The veterans will take my money if you go. I'm trusting you to look after it, OK? I'm trusting you, and when you give it back, I'll give you three roubles! But don't go chasing women today!

Babay's urging triggers a chain of associations, taking Kostya back to his mother and childhood. The actor who plays Babay lends his voice to the spectre of Kostya's mother, who also urged him to keep away from loose women and lavished him with plentiful advice about eating properly and studying, then praised his intelligence and beauty and recalled his promising career as a violinist, cut short by a problem with his patella.⁶¹ Then the scene shifts to the dream plane through the popular song *Santa Lucia*. Kostya mimes playing the violin, and dances some challenging ballet steps (at times acting deliberately awkward), surrounded by four girls in white.

In the transition to the next scene (Scene VII) the girls become prostitutes dressed in military outfits (Schubert's *Ave Maria* accompanies the transition with estranging effect). Then they take turns at bawling out a Russian dirge, both sad and violent. On the plane of reality, this scene exhibits the brutality of sex in the barracks. Tatyana has sex with Kostya and then he and Bogdan fight over her. The scene slips onto the plane of unreality with the resumption of the Russian lullaby from before, still sung by the four women crouching on a double bed fitted with wheels. They are ringed by soldiers who march around it and push the bed across the stage. We seem to be witnessing a kind of ritual dance or sacrificial rite of pagan Russia, reminiscent of certain productions of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*.

Scene VIII is all a dream that provides a gloss on the previous one: the struggle over Tatyana between the two men turns into a duel. The clue to otherness of the plane of action is given by music from the duel scene in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* (end of Act II). Kostya is defeated and lying on the ground when Tatyana (the image of Tatyana) enters, dressed in red as he is, and pours snow on him from a pitcher and twirls around on skates declaiming a letter (while the music of *Eugene Onegin* continues in the background), urging him not to be jealous of her involuntary contacts with men (Bogdan and Nutso in this case), but adds mischievously: 'It's not my fault I'm beautiful!'

Scene IX has no connections with Kaledin's story. It is pure invention by Dodin and the troupe. Kostya's unpatriotic pro-American tirade, complete

with a quote from a poem by Lermontov ('Goodbye, shabby Russia, / country of serfs, land of lords, / and you, blue uniforms of gendarmes, / and you, people so submissive to them...')⁶² becomes an ironic cabaret turn (but minimal, because the choreography consists only of the hands of the soldiers rising out of a trapdoor), set to the music of *America the Beautiful*.

In Scene XII Ludmilla plays Mozart's *Turkish March* on the piano, still on the real plane, while his *Symphony No. 40* accompanies the transition to the second level of pretence, the unreal. Bogdan and Ludmilla get on top of the piano and pick out the first theme of the opening *Allegro* with their big toes. Then the 'music lesson' turns into a love scene and we hear the symphony welling up with the full orchestra.

In Scene XVI the soldiers get drunk and take drugs to the Beatles song *Girl* (heard earlier in Scene VII as a kind of *leitmotif* for Tatyana). From here on, the musical and performative element takes over in an escalation of bravura that raises the company well above the literal level of everyday life in the Construction Battalion. Strains of the Neapolitan song *Te vojo bene assaje* are heard and red balloons fill the stage,⁶³ then are burst by the soldiers in a powerful scene accompanied by Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, which fades into the pop tune *One Way Ticket* sung in Russian. The clash between the soldiers and the neighbouring company is accompanied by a brass band. After the veteran is killed, still with the estrangement effect, four naked girls enter, with long hair covering their breasts, a quartet of Botticelli Venuses singing the Beatles' *Girl*.

Recourse in all these scenes to various kinds of language, stylistic hybrids, a distancing from the ugliness of reality through *all* the disciplines is an ideological choice even before being an artistic choice, made by Dodin, which resolves the rather flimsy military theme and dissolves it into Art in a sort of final apotheosis. Art is the only possible response, the only solution to reality:

Stage design, lighting and music

The stage design from beginning to end consists of a plain white square, on the one hand, recalling Beckett's *plateau à habiter* and, on the other, with its shimmering reflections, the snowy expanses of Siberia. In the very first scene the actors, entering to the sound of music, fall one after the other into square holes that open up in the stage. These trapdoors are present throughout the show. When they are shut, the actors simply perform on the white boards. In some scenes the trapdoors are used by characters to hide or take shelter; in others they represent the latrines, which the soldiers (Kostya in particular) at one point descend into waist-high, literally immersed in their fatigue duty. They may symbolise humanity's inescapable destiny; but in the first scene the actors do not seem troubled, and slip into them with good-natured resignation. Then props are sometimes flung onstage from the trapdoors, such as the canisters for faeces or the red balloons; or else the soldiers stick their

fists out of them, confirming the vitality of this part of the set. In Scene V, one trapdoor stands for a hole dug in the ice, where two of the soldiers wash their hair.

The white stage set is flanked by black wings. The back wall has a small door which the characters sometimes use to make their exits and entrances (when not using the wings). All the action takes place in the army camp, though in different parts of it: the guest quarters with a bed, the yard with washing hung out to dry, the latrines, the drill ground and an area where they party, which could be any one of the previous four. Some scenes (or parts of them) are staged in the non-place of memory and dream.

The fixed scenery is varied only by props, which can be divided into three groups:

- *Simple* objects, useful to the action but not involving a change of place. These include the bedside table from which Babay issues ridiculous orders, the wheelbarrow in which Kostya is carried about drunk and the transceiver used by Kostya for fun, the sterilised canisters for collecting faeces, the pitcher used for pouring out water, the red balloons and confetti scattered around the discharge party.
- *Complex* objects, indicating a change of scene. Examples are the clothesline in Nina's courtyard, the bed in the guest quarters and the piano, suspended in space, where the soldiers have fun and party. While these objects identify the settings, by their presence indicating where the action is taking place, some places have no identifying feature: the drill ground, for example, consists simply of white boards,⁶⁴ like the latrine area. The only difference between them is the trapdoors, which are open and used only in the second case.
- *Dream* objects, indicating a shift into an unreal world. Tatyana's skates in Scene VIII, improbable in the military context, indicate slippage onto the plane of the imagination; the jackets and boots in Scene VI, worn by the girls in Kostya's dream, denote a return to reality. But the audience is not always given these clues: Scene XIII, for instance, in which Kostya speaks into a transceiver, hovers ambiguously between reality and fiction.

The lights are particularly bright, as the set reflects them like a true expanse of snow. They further distinguish nighttime from daytime scenes: in the first case they are blue and in the second white or yellow. In the musical interval in Scene V, where the lake girl that Milman has just been courting dances amid the soldiers, the light is shed by plain candles. There is a dream atmosphere, and the transition from reality to dream is heightened visually.

The lighting often underscores the music with matching rhythms, from strobe lights for pop music to moonlight for romantic songs played on the piano. The lighting may also penetrate reality and reveal it, as in Scene III,

when the corporal invites his men to look inside his mouth, letting them drag him into the light to get a better look.

In *Gaudeamus*, great stress is laid on the music. It pervades the action and interprets its meanings. As we have seen, its function is to effect the transition from reality to dream, so shuttling between the levels of interpretation of the spectacle. The range of music used is particularly heterogeneous, reflecting the many hybrids in the show. The musical references provided by Kaledin in *Stroybat* are followed in Scenes VII, XVI and XVII, where the Beatles song *Girl* is played. Early in the story, in the description of the company's routine, we read:

The march ended; silence and emptiness took over. Now Kolya Beloshisky would put on the Beatles. Then it was the turn of the Rolling Stones. Kostya knew that tape by heart, he had got it two days before from the recording studio in town.⁶⁵

Then, with an effect of estrangement during the brawl between the two neighbouring companies:

Almost naked, wearing only their shirts, the men of the fourth company crowded the end of the barracks. In front, the deserted parade ground, with the cement lit up, veiled by the night frost.

'Odessa!' Shouted Kunik. 'Get with the music!'

Kolya Beloshisky slipped out of the roaring crowd and obediently climbed the ladder that led to the projector room.

On the parade ground the Beatles began to blare out their lament with feminine voices. [...]

The fourth company, with shovels and pickaxes over their shoulders, shouting followed [Shashka Kunik], the buckles of the belts banging against his knees.

'Never fear, men!,' shouted Kunik. 'The important thing is to throw yourselves on them all together!?'

- 'Oh, girl!...' groaned the Beatles.'⁶⁶

For the rest, the music can be attributed to the company. It is always functional and effective, whether it is reproduced electronically or performed live by the actors, who are skilled singers and instrumentalists.⁶⁷

Relation between the texts

To meet the needs of production and in keeping with the Maly Drama Theatre's established working method, discussed previously, Sergei Kaledin's tale *Stroybat* was adapted to the nineteen improvisations of *Gaudeamus* in a variety of ways. They range from a faithful reproduction of the dialogue

to the expansion of details briefly mentioned, allusions and omissions. Here follows a summary of the contents of the six parts of the tale:

- I. The novella starts in the thick of the action: Bogdanov orders Barbay to carry him piggyback to the latrine because his boots are nailed to the floor. Kostya is shovelling 'frozen shit'. Bogdan talks to him about picking up women during the day. Presentation of the backstory: Kostya, close to discharge, is being punished by having to muck out the battalion's latrines for having stolen a box of glazed donuts. He is helped by Fisha and Nuco Vlad. Presentation of the other soldiers in Bogdanov's unit, the new recruits and the veterans. Parenthetical information about the guard house. Kostya suggests Nuco should write a letter of protest to the Ministry. Injustices in the discharges of the guards and the role of the 'moles' (for example the scribe Milman). Dialogue between Kostya and a guard and then with Valerka Burmistrov, head of the checkpoint, who informs him that the soldiers of Second Company want to beat up Kostya and the others of the Fourth Company close to discharge so they won't 'feel too good'. A gathering to share out the work. Lieutenant Colonel Bykov issues good advice about what to do in case of drunkenness and vomiting. We are given information about Kostya: his protruding ears, his work as a sound engineer, anguished memories of his mother and childhood (the violin) and his problem with his kneecap. Kostya takes a shower and gets dressed to call on Tanya 'the foetid'. Information about Liusenka, engaged to Bogdanov. Payday: Babay asks Kostya who will look after the money to make sure the veterans don't steal it.
- II. Dialogue between Kostya and Valerka. Kostya was drunk the night before. Valerka asks him for five roubles to drink together in the evening. Kostya hasn't got the money but agrees to get it to secure the complicity of Valerka (who comes from the same part of Russia) at the checkpoint. Kostya arrogantly asks Fisha for five roubles. Fisha hands over the money, recommending that he not spend it on alcohol, but in return asks Kostya to dictate something in Russian. The calm and monotonous life of the battalion. The officers Moroz and Lysodor are seen drinking and complaining in secret. Kostya has a doze and then dresses. The city is polluted because of the petrochemical factory. Information about Kolya Beloshisky and that Lieutenant Buryat Shamshiev is with his family (his wife is hanging out the infirmary washing). Kostya reads the letter from Tanya. The orders issued by Commander Brestel: promotions and the dynamics of power. The trial of two young soldiers for misconduct during leave. Kostya-Valerka meet. Fisha and Kostya talk to Lysodor about their discharge (Kostya is detailed off to clean the women's latrines as well). Scene of bribery.
- III. Kostya is already drunk with Valerka. Bogdanov, Popov, Beloshisky, Shtaik, Liusia and the Oldster smoke hashish (of their own

production: they collected it on an expedition to get potatoes). They drink wine and take pills. Bogdan flirts with Liusenka. Kostya recites verses. Then he wants to go and help Nuco and Fisha shovel out the latrines, but Bogdan sends two recruits. Suspicious noises are heard outside. Liusenka vomits. You see a shadow outside the window and a pane of glass is broken (Liusenka's face is cut). Babay wakes the whole company.

- IV. Attack of the Second Company on the barracks of the Fourth: they smash windows, throw stones and curse. The blacksmith Kunik takes control of the situation by pushing Brestel to one side and ordering the company to prepare to make a foray into the parade ground. The Second Company withdraws; the Fourth pursues: they come to blows. Kostya is afraid; he is hit; Nuco avenges him by wounding his assailant. The Second Company sets a trap for the Fourth, which scatters. The soldiers of the guard appear and put an end to the fight with short bursts of gunfire. In the general scramble to escape, the soldiers take refuge blindly in the barracks. Nuco clashes with a guard: Fisha hits the guard with a shovel – to defend his comrade – and kills him. Bykov makes a threatening speech to the whole company. The blame for the action falls on Babay (who raised the alarm). Valerka takes him to the control post. Moroz recognises Kunik as principally responsible and says they will pay for the killing of the veteran (and the blinding of Liusenka).
- V. A commission inspects the Fourth Company half naked and lined up in the barracks and musters the soldiers who definitely took part in the battle in the agit-prop room. Moroz checks the three men detailed off for latrine duty (he knows that Kostya was not there, though he should have been, but in the brawl). Only Kostya has bruises; Valerka announces Babay's attempted suicide.
- VI. A visit by Babay's father, an old Turkoman (he speaks Arabic to a recruit, prays and rests). Kostya should soon receive his discharge, but Moroz points out that he is under suspicion for the murder. At this point Kostya reports Fisha as the person who killed the guard.

There follows a certificate of good conduct praising Kostya for 'morality and educational level': he will use it to gain admission to Moscow University.

The following is a textual comparison between some narrative passages from Kaledin's novella and the script of Dodin's production, remembering that the latter is the result of a wholly abnormal (re)writing. While the common practice for a source text is first to dramatise it and then stage it, in the case of the Maly Theatre the literary text is first 'experimented with on the stage' and is then reconstructed and fixed in the dramaturgy. Our comparison will therefore compare the source text and target text without taking into account the complex intermediate steps related to the sphere of performativity.

In Scene III the officer Lysodor urges the soldiers not to get drunk on their pay, but if they do, to take care of their drunken comrades by turning them onto their bellies and so prevent them suffocating in their own vomit. In Kaledin this is only hinted at (and it involves Lieutenant Bykov instead of Lysodor):

On the parade ground, like every morning, the muster was being held to hand out the fatigue duty. Payday was near, and Bykov yelled at them, as he always did on the eve of payday, that they were not to get drunk, and that if they did, they were not to push one another over so that they fell down. And if some of them did fall down, the others had to turn them over on their bellies because they could choke with vomiting.⁶⁸

In the spectacle this image is expanded into a whole sequence, lively and grotesque:

ALL 'They go back to their homes / The leavers, the leavers ... /
Wherever you look, in these days of May / You see the drunken
wanderers...'

LYSODOR And then, yes, discharge is fine, but there's also the matter
of pay... Fall in! Right dress! Do it properly. Properly I said! You!
Straighten up! Well, that's better. Comrades! Last quarter, after
payday, we lost three soldiers. They were drunk! One was run over
by a bulldozer, another was burned alive in the storeroom. He
was dead drunk, he hadn't closed the door of the stove. The third
choked on his own vomit... Comrade soldiers! Sons! Don't get
drunk! And if you do get drunk, don't leave your comrades in the
lurch! And if you do leave them, don't leave them lying on their
backs, at least turn them onto their bellies, so they don't choke in
their own vomit. And if they do choke in their vomit ... But you,
don't get drunk, don't get drunk comrade soldiers! And if you do
get drunk, don't leave your comrades! And if you do leave them,
don't leave them lying on their backs. At least turn them over on
their bellies, so they don't choke in their own vomit.

SOLDIER And then?

LYSODOR And then what? Don't get drunk I said! And if you do
get drunk, don't leave your comrades! And if you do leave them,
don't leave them lying on their backs, at least turn them onto
their bellies, so they don't choke in their own vomit. You! Are
you drunk?

SOLDIER Me? No.

LYSODOR Whaddya mean no! Last term!

SOLDIER I wasn't here last term!

LYSODOR You were here!

SOLDIER I wasn't here!

LYSODOR You were here!

SOLDIER I wasn't here!

LYSODOR You were here!

SOLDIER All right then I was!

LYSODOR You got drunk! And you left your comrade! And on top of that you left him on his back and not his belly! And he choked on his own vomit! If you have to get drunk, at least turn him over on his belly, so he doesn't choke on his own vomit! Yeah, but you just want to get your pay and the rest can go get fucked Don't get drunk! And if you do get drunk, don't leave your comrades! And if you do leave them, don't leave them lying on their backs. Turn them on their bellies, so they don't choke in their own vomit.

Almost like a leitmotif, the theme of drunkenness and choking reappears in Scene XVII of the brawl between the two companies:

LYSODOR A fine army they've put together! Stop it Stop it! Nobody move! What sort of people are you? You don't even want to behave in a civilised way, huh? Two years, two years ... Me and the lieutenant... You tell 'em, you tell 'em and keep repeating it, don't get drunk! If you do get drunk, don't leave your comrades. And if you do leave them, don't leave them on their backs, turn them on their bellies, so they won't drown in their own vomit. Why the fuck are you looking at me like that, you? You should worship me! I want submission! I told you, don't get drunk ... Halt! Who is it?

By a similar procedure, Kostya's memories of his mother and childhood in Scene VI start from a short passage in Kaledin:

His mother dreamed of him becoming a musician. Thinking her son was gifted with an exceptional ear, she bought him a violin and for hours forced him to saw away under the guidance of the old sclerotic teacher on the first floor. Kostja scratched and scratched at the instrument until all that standing up put a strain on his kneecap. And his mother told everyone in the building that Kostya had strained his leg, like pianists strain their hands, by all that playing. In the end the sclerotic old teacher died, but Kostya's musical talents continued to give his mother no respite. When he finished school, she sent him to a recording studio. But the following year his kneecap ensured Kostya would end up in the Construction Battalion. At the memory of his home, Kostya thought yet again with anguish that he felt not the least desire to return.⁶⁹

This is transformed in Kostya's imagination in the play, in which his mother's voice is assigned to the actor who plays Babay:

Kostya, son! Leave the women alone! You know how it is, you'll get some disease! Try to eat wholesome, nourishing food. Remember garlic and onions. They contain lots of vitamins and vitamins are good. Blow your nose! Be sure and study! You have to get a good education. You're the smartest, best-looking, most talented of them all. Dry your willy! You've got perfect pitch, you even played the violin... You went to the best teacher and you were his best pupil. It's not your fault that all that standing did in your kneecap. Pianists strain their hands, you strained your leg. You would've become world famous! Like Robertino Loretto! You would've been as famous as him, like Robertino, worldwide! Kostya, Kostya dear ... You're the best son, the best of men. I remember the crystal glasses you gave me with your first pay, small, with slender stems... I'm still afraid to use them. I've set them aside for when you get your discharge! Kostya, darling, I beg you, don't go picking up women today...

Then in Scene VI there is the famous episode when Kostya asks the Jew Fisha for a loan of five roubles. This is Kaledin's text:

'Fisha, lend me three roubles until payday. I mean five,' said Kostya shamelessly.

Fisha did not pull out the money, and Kostya understood the attack had failed. Now Fisha would start nagging. Kostya sat on the boards and put his hand in his pocket to get the cigarettes. [...]

'Three roubles,' Kostya haggled.

'They handed out the pay yesterday, Kostya,' said Fisha. 'You didn't get yours. You weren't there. You were off getting drunk. With Bogdan.'

'So?' said Kostya wearily. 'What should I do. Shoot myself?'

'Quit drinking...'

'Gertrude,' smiled Kostya, 'lend me the money, why be so stingy?'

'You know how much you owe me?? Fisha asked reproachfully, tilting his head to one side. His mother had the same effect on Kostya when he was at home.

'A lot, Fisha, a lot,' Kostya nodded. 'I'll pay it all back. The lot. On Saturday they'll give me some money...'

'I'll lend it to you again, if you promise you won't spend it on wine. Don't you understand?' Fisha raised his voice, which was always monotonous, and raised his arms skyward. 'You could become a goddamn drunkard! Like the rest of them! Like Nuco!'

'What?' From the pit there appeared the smiling face, long-bearded, of the gypsy. 'Give me a puff!'

Kostja handed him the butt.

'Fisha won't lend me the money.'

Scorching his fingers, Nuco finished the cigarette.

'Give him some. And me too.'

'You – I'll give you a pill!' Fisha cut him short, and Kostya knew he would give him the money.

'Why don't you work?' Kostya frowned. [...]

'Will you give me five roubles?'

'Okay,' Fisha solemnly announced. [...]

'Will you do dictation for me today?' Fisha asked with an emphasis on the last word, and unbuttoned the pocket on his knee unhurriedly.

Kostja silently watched the second button still inside the loop.

'For an hour,' insisted Fisha and aimed a wrapped tablet at Nuco.

- Nuco!' Kostya groaned almost weeping. 'He'll be the death of me. I want to throw up, and he says 'dictate to me!'

'Give him the case,' butted in Nuco, taking his side. 'Go on, give it to him!'

'OK,' said Fisha. 'We'll do a stint of work now, and then I'll give you the money.'

'Listen, Fisel,' said Kostya, breathing his winy breath that Bogdan called rotten over Ickovich's face. 'The reason, Ickovich, people don't care for you and all your race is because of this. With your ... mistaken behaviour, you spread antisemitism our people. Am I right, Nuco?'

'Right! All the way,' nodded Nuco befuddled. He grunted vaguely to strengthen his words.

Fisel Ickovich, huge, beautiful, sluggish, stopped for a moment, absorbed. Then he sighed deeply and unbuttoned the second button. Kostya held his breath so as not to affect Fisha's decision.

Fisha pulled out a creased woman's wallet. He rummaged around and after a while took out five roubles in crumpled bills.

'OK, Fisha, I'll do the dictation now. Go to one of the lecture rooms. I'll be right along.'⁷⁰

The text in *Gaudeamus* is short and to the point:

FISHA Karamychev! We've gotta to work harder! We've gotta finish these latrines before it starts getting really hot. Come on, the sooner we finish the sooner you can go ...

KOSTYA Ickovich, lend me five roubles, until payday.

FISHA Karamychev, I'd give you five roubles, but then you'd just drink it all! Can't you understand? You risk becoming a real drunkard, like everyone else, like Nuco Vlad.

NUCO Don't bug me! Give Kostya his money, and give me some too...

FISHA You? I'll give you a pill.

KOSTYA Ickovich, you know why no one likes Jews like you? This is why! They way you behave you make our pure, good, kind people get anti-Semitic feelings they'd never have otherwise!

FISHA Okay, okay, I'll give you two roubles.

KOSTYA Five!

FISHA Two!

KOSTYA Five! Hey, Gypsy! Instead of just standing there suffering, why don't you write a letter of complaint to the Ministry?

NUCO I can't. You write it for me!

FISHA Two!

KOSTYA Five!

FISHA Two!

KOSTYA FOUR!

FISHA Three.

KOSTYA Done!

The dictation mentioned is expressed in two different ways in the story and the play. The former is simply an exercise in Russian-language dictation that Fisha asks Kostya to help him with when Kostya is borrowing money from him. The passage dictated is about a certain Lev Silych Chebukevich, being a text taken at random by Kostya to help Fisha practice.⁷¹ A letter to the Defence Ministry is mentioned in another part of the story as a reaction that Kostya suggests to Nuco because of the violence he suffered in the guardhouse:

Kostya had once suggested the gypsy write to Moscow, the Defence Ministry. Or the public prosecutor. But Nuco had giggled as usual. Kostya would have done it, except he was afraid of being recognised by the handwriting.⁷²

The performance combines these two narrative cues and Kostya dictates Fisha a letter to the ministry to report the mistreatment Nuco suffered:

FISHA Promise me you'll help me today!

KOSTYA Okay. I told you. Write: dictation. Dear Comrade Defence Minister! The writer is a soldier with a construction battalion, Nuco Vlad.

NUCO Karamychev, maybe it's better if we don't put the name...

KOSTYA Okay, incognito. The writer is a soldier with a construction battalion. I cannot sign my name, for obvious reasons. Comrade Minister, following irregular relations, taken too far, between me and Private Sharaev, called the Old...

NUCO Delinquent backslider!

KOSTYA ... delinquent backslider, I get a persistent pain in the head and ass...

NUCO Cut it out, Karamychev! It hasn't got to my ass yet. Its only my kidneys that hurt.

KOSTYA ... I feel a persistent pain in the small of my back, and when I go to the bathroom ... I pass blood. That okay?

NUCO Perfect!

KOSTYA Comrade Minister. I warn you, this letter will be sent to 'Pravda', 'Izvestia', the Central Committee of the Party, the United Nations, the 'New York Times' and 'Playboy'...

Scene VIII, the dream fulfilment of the reading of Tatyana's letter by Kostya, grew out of the following passage in the novella:

He pulled out an envelope. [...] A letter. From Tanka?... Kostya looked with disgust at the envelope and remembered that while he slept they had brought a recruit from the checkpoint. It, was Tanka. He was in doubt: throw it away?... He opened it.

'Hi, Konstantin! Why were you riled with me yesterday? You turned up already drunk, and for some reason Yevgeny was there too. I acted friendly. It's not my fault Zhenya came in the kitchen while I was making the meatballs. Last time you were jealous of someone who wasn't Russian, a Bulgarian, who brought some dumplings to the guest quarters to sell...'

'A gypsy, idiot,' Kostya muttered, throwing the letter in the waste basket. Nuco used to work as a porter at the cold store.⁷³

The text of the letter is essentially unchanged, except for a mischievous addition to the close:

TATYANA Good morning Konstantin. Kostya, what terrible things you said to me last night! You turned up already drunk and what's worse you dragged Yevgeny along with you. I acted friendly. Is it my fault he came into the kitchen while I was making the meatballs? Last time you got jealous about the Bulgarian, the one selling *pel'meni* ...

KOSTYA It was a gypsy, stupid!

TATYANA Kostya! Please don't ever do that again! In the factory there are lots of girls. It's not my fault if they're beautiful!

Scene X is again an imaginative amplification of one plotline:

How Buryat, Second Lieutenant Shamshiev had got in the army was a mystery. He arrived with his wife, a crooked woman, and four children, one smaller than the other. Given the shortage of living quarters, Bykov had put them in the infirmary. Now in front of the infirmary, on a line, all the family's washing was hung out to dry: blue bras, Buryat's underpants, diapers...⁷⁴

In the stage version, the lieutenant's wife is the corpulent Nina, who appears with Babay in an awkward courtship scene while hanging out the washing (notably her knickers) on the line Kaledin also speaks of:

BABAY Hey, were you frightened? Did I scare you! Look, I was joking! Let go, you're hurting me! Why are you doing that? I just wanted to help you!... You're really beautiful, Nina. White. Biug. I like you. A real beauty! I can't stop looking at her. Did it hurt?

Get up! Sit on this! Alcohol! If that Bogdan bastard sniffs the smell he'll snap my head off. One sip. Only a sip. In spite of that asshole. Just a drop. [...] You're heavy. Get up a little. There's a hook down there. You've pulled out my hair ... No, no, no!... Yes!

In Scene XV a brief description of the Oldster compares military service to a prison sentence and its ability to profoundly change the psyche of the recruit-prisoners:

The oldster is really old. He left the camp about three years back, he was in for murder. He went to have a beer with friends, there was a fight and a knife went home. Now he's become very quiet ...

This is a brief version (omitting the fact that he killed in self-defence) of a longer passage in the novella:

Yes, because the Oldster was in the same unit with Zenka [Bogdanov], so there were six in all. For some reason everyone forgot about the Oldster. You never saw him, never heard him. He worked as a mechanic on the vehicle fleet, always in the pit, and when he returned to the company he would sit in a corner and smoke. He never drank, never went out without leave. He was scared Doshchinin [the C.O.] would send him back to the disciplinary battalion. The Oldster was really old. He had enlisted a week before he turned twenty-seven. He had just got out of jail. Murder. He had done almost his whole sentence, and then, when it was coming to an end, they found he wasn't guilty of murder, he only acted in self-defence. He had been given ten years and they let him out two years early. And right off he was sent to the construction battalion! No time to relax after doing time, not even to get used to freedom after suffering two years in the disciplinary battalion. What he was like before all that, no one knew. He had been assigned to another unit, but now he was quiet, almost completely bald, wrinkled, his gnarled hands covered with calluses. On the disciplinary battalion he never uttered a word. He even slept with eyes open. He would pull himself up into the cot, heap the pillows under his head, lie down and stare straight ahead. He was asleep.⁷⁵

Finally Scene XIX is the version of Kostya's good-conduct document, which the novella gives in a sort of diplomatic transcription, turned into a succinct oratorical commentary in the theatre. In both cases the effect is pungently satirical. It extols the moral and behavioural qualities of a soldier we have just seen relentlessly driven by his animal instincts, his immediate vital energies (not necessarily deleterious, but hardly compliant with discipline). He has also informed on one of his friends, Fisha, who is a murderer, but also clearly the most generous with small gestures of affection,⁷⁶ and essentially

he killed to protect his friend Nuco. This is the document that appears at the end of the novella:

Known characteristics of sapper Private Karamychev K.M., year enlisted, 1968 (June), Russian, not a party member, year of birth: 1949.

During his service in the Construction Battalion of the military engineers sapper Private K.M. Karamychev has revealed qualities of initiative, conscientiously fulfilling all his obligations and duties. By the excellent quality of his work, correct military discipline, Private K.M. Karamychev was awarded the title of 'Shock Worker of Communist Labour'. He is promoted to unit commander. Karamychev has played an active part in the social life of the company. He was editor of the 'wall newspaper' and member of the council of the logistics department of the library of the Construction Battalion of N. Sapper Private K.M. Karamychev enjoyed authority among his comrades, distinguished for morality and his level of political education. The present known characteristics are issued for submission to the University of Moscow.

Unit Commander

DOSHCHININ

APRIL 1, 1970

Read and approved.

Acting commander

Logistics Battalion

LYSODOR

April 2, 1970⁷⁷

This is the version towards the end of *Gaudeamus*, before the choral song of the eponymous medieval hymn, evoking the fact that Kostya is about to enter university:

Karamychev, Konstantin Michailovich. Russian, non-party member, member of the Komsomol, aged 20. During his military service he has shown initiative and respect for the regulations. For his excellent attitude to work he was named 'model Communist worker'. Well versed in politics. Morally balanced. This document is a letter of introduction to Moscow State University.

The unifying thread of joy

Gaudeamus is sometimes hard to follow, because of the ease with which it mingles different codes, from ballet to comedy and popular song. Yet this heterogeneous material is welded together by the essential theme, the energy that drives the production: joy. This is the antidote to apologies for

militarism and war, as well as the greatest form of resistance to them: life against death, freedom against oppression.

The title *Gaudeamus* comes from the collegiate song *Gaudeamus igitur*, dating from the thirteenth century, though the melody appears to be older. An internationally known song of college students, it extols joy and merriment, given the brevity of life:

Gaudeamus igitur iuvenes dum sumus.
 Post iucundam iuventutem
 post molestam senectutem
 nos habebit humus!

These words provide a key to the whole spectacle, the atmosphere in which events are immersed. Penned up in a frozen military base in the heart of Russia, with the spectre of war looming over half the world, the soldiers retain a warmth that enables them to clown around and engage in horseplay. Isolated, far from their families and comfort, as they regress to a brutish state,⁷⁸ the laughter and kisses that make their days lighter preserve the core of their humanity – which perhaps is primitive bestiality. The joyous impulse to live is all that remains when the intellectual faculties lie unused. The viewer is not forced to draw an easy moral, observing that men and women can live happily whatever their condition.

Joy appears as a pure vital force (significantly many of its manifestations involve sex), combined with a resigned happiness: the good humour of those who have nothing to lose. Dodin looks at history and the world with intelligent irony. The director's declared intention was to suffuse *Stroybat's* violent world with comedy. Sergei Kaledin's story which inspired *Gaudeamus* looks lucidly at the basic instincts of the human soul, conveying an image of a society based on oppression.

The troupe of the Maly Drama Theatre were puzzled at first. Could such controversial subjects be lightened and the raw tale be performed to laughter?

Dodin had read the book aloud to his students. They were shocked by its sordid contents and relentless negativity as regards the Soviet army, whose violence Kaledin took to be a microcosm of society at large. They were doubly shocked when Dodin asked them to turn this grim world into *fun* using song and music [...]. Gradually they realized that such horrors as blind submission to authority, which in their totalitarian regime they had all known since childhood, could be viewed in an *absurd* light. This realization freed them to devise comic pieces.⁷⁹

The company fully achieved its purpose by using the absurd as a filter. From the reading of the military code to the reproduction of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the actors unmasked the army and the senselessness of war, presenting audiences with brutality in the form of hilarious exaggeration.

The opening words of Shakespeare's famous soliloquy 'To be or not to be' is the very first speech of *Gaudeamus*. To sleep, to dream 'is an outcome devoutly to be wished', and the soldiers certainly dream a lot on stage: their fantasies are the most poetic moments of Dodin's production. But the quote, Hamlet's doubt, is also the starting point for any reflection on life and death. A world so repulsive presents humanity with a choice between living and not living. And the soldiers of this company choose to live: they affirm their right to the joys of life, while struggling with its troubles.⁸⁰

Gaudeamus is rich in deep love for men and women and understanding for their baseness. This amused gaze leads the audience to view Kostya with sympathy, even though his conduct is far from commendable. In a military base suspended on the brink of the Cold War, in a world poised between a yearning for peace and eternally on the verge of conflict, there survive a handful of men still capable, despite everything, of revelling in life. Their pleasure has different overtones, which we will try to identify the various scenes, grouping them according to the different types of 'joy' they express.

Joy as a sexual force

Part of the vital exuberance of *Gaudeamus* lies in sex. There are numerous exchanges between soldiers and young prostitutes, cooks or nurses (not very young in the case of the matron Nina), with men and women engaging in an interplay of shyness and desire, seeking and eluding each other. The allusion to sexual joy comes in Scene V: Private Milman emerges into the moonlight and approaches a well dug in the ice (represented by one of the trapdoors). A beautiful girl comes with a jug to draw water. This is a mythical moment: she looks like a nymph. Laughing, the couple improvise a dance around the spring and Milman reads a poem to the girl. She pours a pitcher of water over the young man's head, then splashes herself in turn. The two take pleasure in the regenerative shower: the water is a symbol of rebirth and fertility, evoking sexual vitality.

Further scenes of courtship, like the one between the soldier Bogdan and the nurse Tatyana, tend more to bestiality than joy, given the fight between Kostya and Bogdan, who go so far as to challenge each other to a duel. More interesting for our purposes is the scene between Nina and Babay. Nina is a plump housewife, married to the officer Shamtchiev, yet in some sense a mother to the soldiers. In Scene X she appears hanging out the washing with Babay. Though not so young or beautiful as Milman and his girl, yet they are just as fresh in their joyous pursuit of each other, until, after a conversation enlivened by distilled liquor, in which the soldier expresses his admiration for Nina (who responds in curt monosyllables), the two lie on the ground with Nina on top (and Babay at some risk of being squashed by her weight).

Scene XII is another scene of sexual bliss, again set in the night. The librarian Liusa is teaching Bogdan to play the piano. The soldier tries to seduce her, but she remains distant. Then the couple sit on the piano and

play it together with their feet. Accused of being frigid, the woman reacts and starts petting with Bogdan. The setting, with music and darkness, gives great poetic intensity to the encounter, while the exchange of bawdy jokes gives it a markedly earthy joyfulness, dissolved in the lightness of the finale, when the piano soars up into the flies hoisted on strong ropes.

Joy as malice

Joy also has a cruel face: as oppression. The pleasure that the vicious side of men's character indulges from oppressing others emerges with particular intensity in two scenes.

The first is a prank, inevitable in a military base. The intended victim for the soldiers hazing is the Turkoman Babay, clumsy and unfamiliar with the Russian language, hence different from the others and weaker. At the start of the play two soldiers torment him, training him to call his comrades by making him imitate the moo of a cow and rewarding him with a sugar lump. The Schadenfreude climaxes in Scene XV. The soldiers involve Babay in a bullfight, getting him to run at a handkerchief shaken by one of them while goading him on with a hatpin. Everyone urges on the bull and the toreador, forming a ring around them. *Gaudeamus*, true, but hardly in a noble cause.

Another interesting scene deals with the Arab-Israeli conflict (Scene XI). The officer Lysodor invite his comrades to playact the war between Palestine and Israel divided into two groups representing Jews and Arabs. He sides with the latter and immediately says he wants to show the others where they are wrong. Naturally he takes the side of Russia and it is highly amusing for the audience to follow these small-scale skirmishes interpreted through the director's irony. The audience is amused: their laughter has a bitter edge, but they also sense the joy in violence. The soldiers clash physically, though in pairs, and the violence is somehow controlled. In these duels the winner repeatedly asks the loser, lying on the ground, 'Are you enjoying it?' Naturally it is the former who is enjoying himself, yet violence stimulates the soldiers' brutal instincts, fostering a wild joy, whether on the part of the oppressed or the oppressors.

Joy as play

If *Gaudeamus* has a single protagonist it is Kostya. Still a student, he dreams of his mother. After a drunken night he is pushed in a wheelbarrow to the latrines, which he has to clean out. Young and joyful, often frustrated by his dreary task, he indulges in dreams and fantasies (he is the soldier who spends most time on the dream level in the spectacle).

At the start of Scene XIII Kostya speaks into a radio transmitter, pretending to attack the enemy from his latrine. As he advances in the jocular conversation, he seems to intercept the frequency used at the front and receives orders from the battlefield. Shortly after, he invites his comrades

to deposit their faeces as a 'weapon and contribution to peace'. The senselessness of war and the hypocrisy of state propaganda reach their height. Then Lysodor really does issue orders to collect the faeces: he has heard it on the radio. Kostya explains it was only a joke, but the officer assures him that it is all true. Soldiers are required to deposit their faeces 'in the service of the people's economy': it is an order of the Soviet. All through the scene the audience struggles to distinguish dream from reality, as they mingle in the events onstage.

Another moment of 'joy à la Konstantin' occurs in Scene VI. Badly hung-over, Kostya lavishes praise and declarations of loyalty on none other than the United States of America. A moment of amusing irreverence in which *America the Beautiful* rings out and the 'comrades' join in (un)patriotic pride raising their left fists in victory from the latrines.

Kostya's joy seals the spectacle with the song from which it takes its name. In the final scene, the young man has finally returned home. It is the day of his admission to university. All the actors – many of whom have only recently qualified themselves – sing the Latin hymn *Gaudeamus igitur*. They rejoice, not only in the fiction, for the success of their comrade, but also for their own path of theatrical and human training culminating in *Gaudeamus*.⁸¹

To be brief: What is the path of escape from oppression? The content and form of the novella seem to point to laughter, now irreverent and biting satire, now hysterical outbursts giving vent to tension, or seeming to indicate the refuge of the characters in a world of dreams and the imagination. But it also seems to recommend the more sterile and dangerous path of selfish concentration on oneself, on one's own special interest, a drift that can hardly resist or improve the general situation.

Dodin, by contrast, a teacher of generations and witness to a long history, through the nature of his theatre and his work, seems to point out another way: that of creativity and lightness, tough, strong and rigorous, expressed by the group of young actors in the collective experience and freedom of the stage, around which audiences worldwide come together freely and are guided to both feel and think.

Gaudeamus, and Dodin's theatre in general, can be seen as a kind of agit-prop of our own times, but with a beneficial tendency. Didactic theatre in post-revolutionary Russia once sought to educate the public, often illiterate, to identify themselves with the ideology of the Soviet state through plays, music and pantomimes. Dodin, on the contrary, seeks to offer a more informed public (European, or rather global), without the pretence of educating, a method of survival valid for everyone in the minefield that is the world and in the gruelling battle that is everyday life. We are all enrolled in an army in which the martial law of nonsense, brutalisation and oppression is in force. This should not and cannot prevent flashes of vitality from tearing the curtain of 'existential claustrophobia',⁸² the plague of modern humanity

or moments of ephemeral but dazzling beauty from giving us joy. The only salvation lies in art: *Gaudeamus igitur!*

Pereat tristitia, pereant osores!
Pereat diabolus,
quivis antiburschius,
atque irrisores.

Notes

- 1 A Maly Drama Theatre–St. Petersburg production, with the support of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. Since the first performance (St. Petersburg, Maly Drama Theatre, 11 July 1990) the production has been regularly repeated by the company, with numerous performances abroad: Britain (1991, 1992, 1996), France (1991, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2014, 2015), Switzerland (1991), Finland (1991), Austria (1991, 1994), Italy (1992, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2016), Spain (1992), Germany (1992, 1996), Portugal (1993), U.S.A. (1994), Israel (1995), Netherlands (1995), Brazil (1995), Romania (1995), Australia (1996), New Zealand (1996), Sweden (1997), Denmark (1997), Hungary (1997), Greece (1997, 2001), Canada (1999) and Korea (2001).

Adapted and directed by Lev Dodin; Assistant director: Oleg Dmitriev; Sets: Alexei Porai-Koshits; Artistic collaboration: Valery Galendeev; Teachers: Mikhail Alexandrov, Evgenii Davydov, Yurii Khamutyanskiy, Yurii Vasilkov; Technical director: Alexander Poulinets; Scene Montage: Sergei Ivanov; Stagehands: Igor Ivanov, Dmitriy Zaiko, Viktor Gorodkov; Sound: Yurii Vavilov; Lights: Pavel Efimov, Alexander Pospelov; Costumes: Maria Fomina, Ekaterina Toporova; Properties: Tatiana Kuritsina; Makeup: Olga Chudakova; Stage manager: Irina Prikot.

Cast: Evgenij Sannikov (Konstantin Karamitchev ‘Kostya’), Aleksei Morozov/Stanislav Tkachenko (Bogdanov ‘Bogdan’), Phillip Mogilnitsky (Omar Kerimov ‘Babay’), Leonid Lutchenko (Nutso Vlad), Aleksandr Bykovskij (Itskovitch ‘Fisha’), Artur Kozin (Sharaev ‘The Oldster’), Beka Tculukidze (Bourmistrov), Evgenii Serzin (Dima Milman), Stanislav Tkachenko/Andrei Kondratiev (Popov-Bielotchiski), Pavel Gryaznov (Major Lysodor), Stanislav Nikolskii (Lieutenant Shamtchiev), Mariia Nikiforova (Nina Shamycheieva), Ekaterina Kleopina (Ludmilla), Danna Abyzova (Tatyana), Daria Rumiantseva (girl on the ice lake), Arina von Ribben (the other girl).

This analysis drew on the following sources: viewing of the production (Piccolo Teatro di Milano, 27–31 January 2016), the Russian script and the press kit kindly provided by the Piccolo Teatro di Milano, a video recording of the performance (first production and cast: www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPyIfI0f2Ow) and the photo service provided by the Maly Drama Theatre (photographs by Viktor Vassiliev), partially available at www.mdt-dodin.ru/gallery/showall/485.html. I wish to thank the Maly Drama Theatre in particular in the person of Dina Dodina for material kindly and promptly made available to me. All links, here and later, were consulted for the last time and were active on 26 May 2016.

Essential bibliography consulted: *Lev Dodin. Un regista in dieci spettacoli*, edited by the Ufficio Edizioni del Piccolo Teatro di Milano, October 2000; Maria Shevtsova, *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre: Process to Performance*,

Routledge, London and New York, 2004; Fabrizio Chirico, “‘*Gaudeamus*’ (1990). Teatro, letteratura e politica: 19 improvvisazioni sul degrado e sul riscatto dell’uomo contemporaneo”, in A. Cascetta and L. Peja (eds.), *La prova del Nove. Scritture per la scena e temi epocali nel secondo Novecento*, V&P, Milan, 2005.

- 2 Sergei Kaledin, *IV Compagnia Stojbat*, Italian translation by Sergio Leone, Einaudi, Turin, 1992, with an appendix by the author ‘*Strojbat*’ e *la censura* (Italian translation by Franca Crestani). The Russian original, Стройбат, published between 1988 and 1989 in the review ‘Novyi Mir’ is now printed in Сергей Каледин, Повести и рассказы, СП ‘Квадрат’, Москва 1994 and is available online at the website <http://lib.ru/PROZA/KALEDIN/strojbat.txt>. The appendix is a memorial on the vicissitudes of the publication of his text due to military censorship, published 23 February 1992 in ‘Moskovskie Novosti’, it is available in Russian at the website www.index.org.ru/censor/kaledin.html. The quotations are translated from the Italian edition.
- 3 See the section ‘Historical context’.

‘*Chernukha* is a slang term popularized in the late 1980s, used to describe a tendency toward unrelenting negativity and pessimism both in the arts and the mass media. Derived from the Russian word for ‘black’ (*cherny*), *chernukha* began as a *perestroika* phenomenon, a rejection of the enforced optimism of official Soviet culture. It arose simultaneously in three particular areas: ‘serious’ fiction (published in ‘thick’ journals such as ‘Novy mir’), film, and investigative reporting. One of the hallmarks of Mikhail Gorbachev’s *glasnost* was the open discussion of the misery and violence that were part of everyday Soviet life, transforming the form and content of the nation’s news coverage. [...] Often condemned by critics across the ideological spectrum as ‘immoral’, *chernukha* actually played an important part in the shift in values and in the ideological struggles concerning the country’s legacy and future course. Intentionally or not, artists, writers, and journalists responded to Gorbachev’s call for ‘openness’ with works that exposed the long-repressed underside of Soviet life. (www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3404100240.html)

- 4 Kaledin, *IV Compagnia Stojbat*, cit., p. 10.
- 5 Ibid., p. 20.
- 6 There is a curious analogy with the eccentric human cases in the partisan group of Dritto’s detachment, described, in a military context of a different kind, in Italo Calvino’s *The Path to the Spiders’ Nests*.
- 7 The full names of the characters in the novella are Babaj Kerimov, Zenka Bogdanov, Konstantin Karamychev, Fishel Ickovich, Nuco Vlad. For the sake of clarity (given the range of transliterations of Russian names), here are the other names of the characters who appear both in the story and in the dramatis personae of the play: the scribe Dima Milman, the Uzbek Misha Popov, the sapper Kolya Beloshisky, Major Lysodor, Second Lieutenant Burjat Shamshiev, the librarian Ludmila Anatolevna (also called ‘Liusenka’ and ‘Liusja’; ‘Ludmilla’ in the play) and Tanya ‘the foetid’ (also called ‘Tanka’ and ‘Tanyushka’; ‘Tatyana’ in the play).
- 8 Kaledin, *IV Compagnia Stojbat*, cit., p. 33.
- 9 Kaledin, ‘*Strojbat*’ e *la censura*, cit., pp. 103, 108.
- 10 Ibid., p. 108.

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- 11 From the programme notes to the production at the Piccolo Teatro Strehler, 27–31 January 2016.
- 12 Shevtsova, *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre*, cit., pp. 102–103, identifies absurdity as the hallmark of the play.
- 13 Dodin has stated:

I've always felt that I don't do political theatre or political plays [...]. Political theatre implies there is a way to know the answer to the problems it attacks. But I never know what the answer is. Those who go in for politics direct their energy against something. They never want to know the truth about people.

(From an interview with F. Barringer published in 'Held over: Russian Politics', *New York Times*, 30 October 1994, cited in Chirico, "Gaudemus" (1990), cit., p. 436)
- 14 See the section titled 'The unifying thread of joy'.
- 15 However, for the publication of *Stroybat*, see Kaledin, 'Stroybat' e la censura, cit.
- 16 The full speech was printed in *Pravda* (14 February 1987) and reported by Yegor Yakovlev in his *Moscow News* (22 February). It is cited in Arup Banerji, *Writing History in the Soviet Union: Making the Past Work*, Social Science Press, New Delhi, 2008, p. 97. The noble purpose does not really seem devoted to 'truth' in an absolute sense, as a parenthetical comment in the speech suggests: 'Criticism should always be from a party point of view.'
- 17 For a complete and up-to-date picture of the phenomenon see *Perestroika: Process and Consequences*, edited by Markku Kangaspuro, Jouko Nikula and Ivor Stodolsky, Finnish Literature Society, Helsinki, 2010.
- 18 Francesco Benvenuti speaks of an 'acute complex of political-military encirclement contracted by the Bolsheviks in the civil war years' (*La Russia dopo l'URSS. Dal 1985 a oggi*, Carocci editore, Rome, 2007, p. 28).
- 19 The American historian Richard Pipes goes so far as to describe militarism as the Russian mindset, emphasising the years of the U.S.S.R.'s 'stagnation' under Brezhnev as inextricably 'linked with non-military factors – in other words, how deeply and broadly Soviet peacetime thinking about victory in war touches every aspect of political, economic and social life, and how intensely militaristic, as a consequence, is its outlook' (*Militarism and the Soviet State*, in 'Daedalus' CIX (Fall 1980), 4, pp. 1–12).
- 20 See Orietta Moscatelli, 'Non di sola patria', *Limes*, no. 1, 2016 (*Il mondo di Putin*), pp. 77–84.
- 21 See Gustav Gressel, 'Come convivere con la militarizzazione della Russia', *Limes*, no. 1, 2016, cit., pp. 95–102, at p. 95. See in the same review Carlo Jean, *La guerra ibrida secondo Putin*, pp. 85–94, on the economic, diplomatic, psychological and communicative media as supports to the military.
- 22 According to Dodin:

The military setting exacerbates a dynamic that has always existed: the absurdity of a collective and coercive order that humiliates, modifies, and destroys the individual. The army is a metaphor for a system that cancels the individual in an endless chain of abuses. It happened in Soviet Russia, in Nazi Germany, and it happens wherever the self is transformed into a mass force. Often without realising it. As Ibsen says in *Enemy of the People*, the most terrible thing is the slavery of those who do not know it.

(Quoted in an article by Sara Chiappori, 'L'anima russa di Dodin', *Repubblica*, 27 January 2016)

- 23 For an overview of Russian twentieth-century theatre, see: *A History of Russian Theatre*, edited by Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, in particular Chapter 17, 'Russian Theatre in the Post-Communist Era' by Anatoly Smeliensky (trans. Stephen Holland), pp. 382–406 (pp. 392–396 for Dodin and the Maly Theatre); Mikhail Shvidkoi, *Russia*, in *The World Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Theatre*, Vol. I: *Europe*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, pp. 704–737; Massimo Lenzi, *La natura della convenzione. Per una storia del teatro drammatico russo del Novecento*, *Testo e immagine*, Turin, 2004; Massimo Lenzi, *Il Novecento russo: stili e stilemi*, in Roberto Alonge and Guido Davico Bonino (eds.), *Storia del teatro moderno e contemporaneo*, Vol. III: *Avanguardie e utopie del teatro. Il Novecento*, Einaudi, Turin, 2001, pp. 99–206 (pp. 205–206 for the Maly Theatre).
- 24 See *Culture and the Media in the USSR Today*, edited by Julian Graffy and Geoffrey A. Hosking, Macmillan, London, 1989, in particular the 'Introduction' (by G. A. Hosking, pp. 1–5), and the chapters 'Glasnost and the Soviet Press' (by Mary Dejevsky, pp. 26–39) and 'Soviet Theatre: Glasnost in Action – With Difficulty' (by Michael Glenny, pp. 78–87). In the chapter on the press, notice how, in spite of the many serious issues in the country concealed or toned down and the impenetrability of the Communist Party and the KGB to *glasnost*, the latter seems to constitute and materialise into reality as a compromise between freedom of expression and the limits imposed by socialism. Note in this respect Gorbachev's speech in January 1988:

We are for *glasnost* without reservation or limitations, but for *glasnost* in the interest of socialism. To the question of whether *glasnost*, criticism and democracy have limits we answer firmly: if *glasnost*, criticism and democracy are in the interests of socialism and the interests of the people they have no limits! This is our criterion.

(Ibid., p. 39)

- 25 See Shevtsova, 'The Maly in Context', in *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre*, cit., pp. 16–18; *Culture and the Media in the USSR Today*, pp. 81–82; Konstantin Scherbakov, *Plays and Polemics on the Soviet Stage: 1987/88 Premieres*, *The Drama Review*, XXXIII, 1989, pp. 3, 166–174.
- 26 The most famous example was the division in the Moscow Art Theatre, which in 1987 split into two theatres, the Chekhov Art Theatre directed by Oleg Yefremov and the Gorky Theatre directed by Tatyana Doronina, reflecting the ideological opposition generated by *perestroika* between democratic and reactionary. After the MAT other theatres declined or closed; Yuri Lyubimov (Taganka Theatre) was ostracised and temporarily deprived of Russian citizenship in 1984.
- 27 See *A History of Russian Theatre*, cit., pp. 382–386; *Culture and the Media in the USSR Today*, cit., pp. 83–84 and Shevtsova, *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre*, cit., p. 12.
- 28 For a detailed history of the Maly Theatre, see Shevtsova, 'The Maly in Context', in *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre*, cit., pp. 3–35.
- 29 Since 1992 renamed the Academy of Theatre Arts. Since 1989 Dodin has taught directing, though since the mid-nineties he has had to reduce his teaching work because of the Maly Theatre's commitments abroad. His work as a teacher is increasingly conducted in rehearsals in the company.
- 30 Dodin himself has observed: 'You could say that the principle of the Russian theatrical school consists precisely in this union between the academic world of

the theatrical profession, based on a centuries-old culture, and practical experience of the theatre' (quoted by Raissa Raskina, *Qualche osservazione sul Sistema teatrale russo di ieri e di oggi*, *Ariel*, XVIII, 2003, pp. 1, 55–58).

- 31 Working in the post-Efros and post-Lyubimov era of theatre (the two most influential tendencies in Russian theatre since Stalin), they were obliged to define themselves as one or the other. Lev Dodin's direction became, in one sense, the art of mediation, of the attempt to create a synthesis which does not recognize the boundaries between "own" and "other". In this respect the director relieved the fate of Vakhtangov, who tried to find the golden mean between Stanislavsky and Meyerhold at the beginning of the 1920s.
- (*A History of Russian Theatre*, cit., p. 393)
- 32 This effective expression was used by Bulgakov in a letter to Stalin in 1931.
- 33 See the space devoted to Dodin in the press dossier in *Saison russe* quoted in *Il Patalogo*, XVII, 1994, pp. 183–207.
- 34 See *A History of Russian Theatre*, cit., p. 395.
- 35 It has also been awarded important prizes: Prix du meilleur spectacle étranger du Syndicat de la critique (1992), Regional Theatre Prize (1992), Premio UBU (1993), The State Prize of Russia (1993).
- 36 See Shevtsova, *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre*, cit., pp. 13–16.
- 37 *A History of Russian Theatre*, cit., pp. 393–394.
- 38 See *Dostoevskij o l'eterno ritorno*, interview with Dodin by Franco Quadri, *Il Patalogo*, XXIII, 2000, pp. 277–282:

We had no idea those were the last years of Soviet Russia, which is why it was important to say what I thought. I wanted to weaken, not strengthen the Soviet power because, then as now, we didn't know and do not know what will happen tomorrow, whether tomorrow will bring us the future or the past. (p. 280)

- 39 A similar operation is carried out in Chirico, "*Gaudeamus*" (1990), cit., pp. 443–446, in *Lev Dodin. Un regista in dieci spettacoli* and in the programme notes of the Piccolo Teatro di Milano for the October 2000 production. The titles of the scenes, based on a performance of the play by the Maly Drama Theatre, are taken from the first. The second presents a summary table comparing the contents of the play with those in the story on which it is based (taken in turn from Frank Zszusa, '*Claustrophobia*': *cinquant'anni di storia russa chiusi in una stanza*, dissertation, academic year 1997–1998).
- 40 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, translated and with an introduction by Karen Jürs-Munby, Routledge, London and New York, 2006.
- 41 Shevtsova, *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre*, cit., p. 103.
- 42 For Dodin's method, see the section *Questioni di metodo*, in Chirico, "*Gaudeamus*" (1990), cit., pp. 439–443 (based on the masterclass held by Dodin on 28 November 2002 organised by the Piccolo Teatro di Milano) and the chapter 'The Work Process. Improvising, Devising, Rehearsing', in Shevtsova, *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre*, cit., pp. 36–60. An interesting source, rich in examples and interviews, is the *Film about Dodin and MDT* (the video of an open lesson held by Lev Dodin, available online in three parts and dubbed in English: www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmY0SKHmXHo; www.youtube.com/watch?v=U087nrud_DQ; www.youtube.com/watch?v=f11005LzjDI).

- 43 See Shevtsova, *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre*, cit., p. 44, which sums up the function of the warm-up as the
- triple principle embedded in the company's work as a whole: responsiveness to given circumstances, exploitation of acquired techniques (diction, vocal line, clarity, rhythm, tempo, speed [...]) and a stretching of what had already been acquired on the assumption that training is, in Dodin's words, "an uninterrupted process, without end".
- 44 Shevtsova, *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre*, cit., p. 46.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 46 The material cut out is not lost, but remains in the 'substrate' of the play, providing a depth perceived by the public: Shevtsova speaks of the 'power of the unseen palpable in the seen' (*Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre*, cit., p. 54).
- 47 Shevtsova, *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre*, cit., p. 56.
- 48 *Ibid.*, pp. 57–58.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- 50 Quoted *ibid.*, p. 49; my italics.
- 51 For which, see *ibid.*, p. 55 (evolution of the self of the actor and the performance) and pp. 58–60 (creative energy, mind–body unity and transparency).
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- 55 See *ibid.*, p. 51.
- 56 See the chapter 'The Student Ensemble. Gaudeamus and Claustrophobia: Postmodernist Aesthetics', in Shevtsova, *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre*, cit., pp. 101–114.
- 57 See Chirico, "Gaudeamus" (1990), cit., p. 441.
- 58 Other plays by Dodin based on fiction include *The House* and *Brothers and Sisters* in the eponymous novel by Fyodor Abramov; *The Demons* in the novel by Fyodor Dostoyevsky; *Claustrophobia* from texts by censored Russian writers: Venedikt Erofeev, Ludmila Ulitskaya, Vladimir Sorokin and Mark Kharitonov; *Chevengur* from the eponymous novel by Andrei Platonov.
- 59 See Chirico, "Gaudeamus" (1990), cit., pp. 447, 450–451.
- 60 Kaledin, *IV Compagnia Stojbat*, cit., p. 13.
- 61 See the passage quoted in the section 'Relation between texts'.
- 62 M.J. Lermontov, *Addio Russia trasandata* (1841).
- 63 According to Shevtsova the balloons represent 'the drug-induced state of the characters' (*Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre*, cit., p. 110).
- 64 The object that reveals the setting of the training might be the little book the lieutenant uses to explain the military rules, but it is not thanks to this that we understand where we are: the actors suffice for this.
- 65 Kaledin, *IV Compagnia Stojbat*, cit., pp. 17, 18.
- 66 *Ibid.*, pp. 65, 67.
- 67 Following is a list of the music that has proved possible to identify scene by scene:
- I. *Military March (waltz)* from Georgy Sviridov's *Snowstorm*
 - II. –
 - III. –

- IV. A Russian version (Синий, синий иней) of Jack Keller and Hank Hunter's *One Way Ticket (to the Blues)*
- V. Boccherini's *Minuet* (from the *from the String Quintet in E major, Op. 11 No. 5*)
- VI. *Santa Lucia*, traditional Neapolitan song; Franz Schubert's *Ave Maria*; Russian folk song
- VII. The Beatles' *Girl*; *Carnaval* from the Santana album *Moonflower*; Russian folk song (the same as in Scene VI)
- VIII. The duel scene from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* (end of Act II)
- IX. *America the Beautiful* (lyrics by Katharine Lee Bates, music by Samuel A. Ward)
- X. Jacques Brel's *La Valse à mille temps*
- XI. – [in the transition to the following scene: Mozart's *Turkish March* (from the Piano Sonata No. 11 in A major, K. 331)]
- XII. Mozart's *Turkish March* and Symphony No. 40
- XIII. *Blue Scarf* (Синий платочек), a Soviet song from World War II (lyrics by I. Galitsky and M. Maximov, music by E. Peterburgsky).
- XIV. –
- XV. Theme of the *Chanson du Toreador* from Bizet's *Carmen*
- XVI. The Beatles' *Girl*; the Neapolitan song *Te vojo bene assaje* (lyrics attributed to Raffaele Sacco); *Ode to Joy* from Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*; again the Russian version of *One Way Ticket*
- XVII. The Beatles' *Girl*
- XVIII. D.S. Bortniansky's *Choral Concerto a cappella No. 32* (Psalm 39); fanfare (played live)
- XIX. *Gaudeamus*, mediaeval student song (setting by I. G. Günter, lyrics by C.W. Kindleben)

68 Kaledin, *IV Compagnia Stojbat*, cit., p. 16.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

70 *Ibid.*, pp. 27–30.

71 *Ibid.*, pp. 30–31.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

73 *Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

75 *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

76 See *ibid.*, pp. 28 (Kostya's mother's advice and Fisha's generosity in lending, even passing over his friend's anti-Semitic outburst) and 79 (worries over Nuco's health).

77 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

78 The animal connotations of the characters are obvious in scenes like the first, where Milman tells Babay: 'You're not a rookie, Babay: You're a monkey', or in Scene IV, where, in the urgent sequence of gestures parodying a military salute, the soldiers take on gorilla poses (arms dangling, jaws out) or in Scene XV, where Babay is again degraded to a beast (this time as the victim, the bull in the fake

bullfight). It seems that joining the battalion automatically causes a degrading metamorphosis.

79 Shevtsova, *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre*, cit., p. 53.

80 See *ibid.*, p. 111, for a meta-theatrical interpretation of the use of this quote.

81 See Chirico, “*Gaudeamus*” (1990), cit., p. 455 and Shevtsova, *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre*, cit., pp. 102–103.

82 See the play *Claustrophobia* also by Dodin: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYqC7fYEXZc.

Chapter 5



Figure 5.1 *Gaudeamus*, by Lev Dodin. © Photo Viktor Vassiliev / Maly Drama Theatre Saint Petersburg.



Figure 5.2 *Gaudeamus*, by Lev Dodin. © Photo Viktor Vassiliev / Maly Drama Theatre Saint Petersburg.



Figure 5.3 *Gaudeamus*, by Lev Dodin. © Photo Viktor Vassiliev / Maly Drama Theatre Saint Petersburg.