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The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Youth Theater *TRAM*

Lynn Mally

“Young people need their own theater, akin to their own spirit,” wrote the actor Nikolai Kriuchkov in a memoir of his life in the theater in the 1920s and 1930s. While he acknowledged that the Soviet Union had developed a network of professional Komsomol theaters aimed at youth, Kriuchkov charged that in general these theaters simply duplicated the repertoire of conventional stages. But *TRAM*, an acronym for the Theater of Working-Class Youth (*Teatr Rabochei Molodezhi*), where Kriuchkov got his start, was different. “It had its own topical themes, its own character, and young people went willingly.”¹

Begun in Leningrad in the 1920s, *TRAM* claimed a passionate young following. Participants attempted to formulate their own aesthetic—a particular integration of art and politics and a distinctive mode of presentation—that they believed was especially appealing to Soviet youth. Already in the 1920s, *TRAM* began to develop ideas that bore a distinct similarity to the radical cultural experiments of the first Five-Year Plan. By rejecting professionally written scripts and conventional training programs, endorsing a collective creative process and insisting that theater be used to illuminate concrete political and social problems, *TRAM* members were forerunners of the culture of “little heroes and big deeds” so insightfully outlined by Katerina Clark.²

Yet despite their openly political objectives, most *TRAM* theaters were unable to find their own voice in the new cultural landscape of the 1930s, a landscape dominated by the state-sponsored aesthetic of socialist realism. This aesthetic rejected cultural experimentation, endorsed the principles of professionalization and attempted to meld Soviet culture with selective elements of the Russian classical tradition. By trying to adapt to these principles, *TRAM* theaters abandoned the very qualities that had made them distinctive.

TRAM was only one example of a proliferating network of new cultural organizations that sprang up in the wake of the October Revolution: union clubs, neighborhood centers, art workshops and cultural circles opened their doors, supported both by local and national funds. Judging by union and club records as well as eye-witness accounts, those most attracted by these new opportunities were primarily

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1. Nikolai Kriuchkov, “Khudozhestvennyi agitprop Komsomola,” *Teatral'naiia zhizn'* 14 (1970): 1–3, quotation 1.

2. Katerina Clark, “Little Heroes and Big Deeds: Literature Responds to the First Five-Year Plan,” in Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 189–206.

young people from their mid-teens to early twenties. Without family responsibilities and drawn by the chance to increase their own horizons, urban youth populated the new clubs and classes.³ By 1929, one national union leader estimated that from 70 to 80 percent of the members of union cultural circles were young people.⁴

Drama groups were a particularly popular form of entertainment in the early Soviet years. They drew on a long tradition of popular theater that had primarily provided access to the Russian classics.⁵ Although many circles still staged the works of Gogol' and Ostrovsky, others turned to new themes, especially depictions of revolutionary upheavals. They also turned to new forms that were more conducive to popular participation than were plays designed for professional stages: "living newspapers" where participants made their own commentaries on current events; music hall revues where satire and buffoonery were the order of the day; agitational courts where actors and audience arrived at collective judgments of current controversial issues; "literary montages" where theater participants constructed their own works out of the speeches, writings and poetry of others; and collectively written plays.⁶ Necessity was often the mother of invention. There simply were not enough professionally written, published plays to serve proliferating local networks. There was also no money for elaborate sets, costumes, makeup or scenery that were considered essential elements of traditional theater.

Both improvisation and financial need combined to create a distinctive style of popular theater in the 1920s, commonly called "autonomous theater" (*samodeiatel'nyi teatr*) to set it apart both from professional groups and from conventional amateur theater that copied professional repertoires. The term was in use long before 1917 and Soviet advocates took great pains to show how the revolution had transformed both the form and content of autonomous theatrical produc-

3. On youth participation in union clubs, see John Hatch, "The Formation of Working Class Cultural Institutions during NEP: The Workers' Club Movement in Moscow, 1921-1923," *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 806 (1990): 10-23; and Diane Koenker, "Class and Consciousness in a Socialist Society: Workers in the Printing Trades during NEP," in Sheila Fitzpatrick et al., eds., *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 47-52.

4. From a report by the cultural division of the national trade union organization, in I. I. Chicherov, ed., *Za TRAM: Vsesoiuznoe soveshchanie po khudozhestvennoi rabote sredi molodezhi* (Leningrad: Teakinopechat', 1929), 56.

5. On prerevolutionary popular theater, see G. A. Khaichenko, *Russkii narodnyi teatr kontsa XIX-nachala XX veka* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975), esp. 108-40, 209-27; and Gary Thurston, "The Impact of Russian Popular Theatre, 1886-1915," *Journal of Modern History* 55 (1983): 237-67. On the transformation of popular theater in the revolution, see Lars Kleberg, "'People's Theater' and the Revolution: On the History of a Concept Before and After 1917," in N. A. Nilsson, ed., *Art, Society, Revolution: Russia, 1917-1921* (Stockholm: Amqvist and Wiksell, 1979), 170-97.

6. For an overview of these club forms, see G. Avlov, *Klubnyi samodeiatel'nyi teatr: Evoliutsiia metodov i form* (Leningrad: Teakinopechat', 1930).

tion. To take one influential example, the Leningrad union activist Grigorii Avlov argued that the revolution had awakened a strong sense of cultural creativity in the population at large. This meant that the organizational tactics of prerevolutionary amateur theater, where professional actors taught their craft to eager, non-professional understudies, could no longer prevail; instead, participants in cultural circles wanted to take over the task of creating theater for themselves.⁷

Avlov and others argued for a new approach to cultural work in clubs which they called the "United Artistic Circle" (*Edinyi khudozhestvennyi kruzhok*). Rather than separating cultural activities into small groups, each with a different task, all media should work together to create public cultural presentations. Those skilled in writing could work on the script instead of preparing poems or short stories; those formerly separated into art circles could create publicity posters and design sets; those involved in sports could devote themselves to movement and choreography. All of this would result in a unified, original cultural creation integrating arts, music and dance in a way that transcended the bounds of conventional amateur theater and gave expression to the creativity of the entire collective.⁸ Although obviously presented in an idealized form, the principles of the United Artistic Circle described in broad outline basic changes already underway in those clubs where participants had begun to create their own plays and public presentations.⁹

The drama circle that formed the basis for *TRAM* opened in a Komsomol club in Petrograd in 1922 and was directly inspired by these new approaches to theatrical performance. Its first leader was a young railroad worker and cultural activist named Mikhail Sokolovskii, who had begun to take part in serious cultural work during the civil war.¹⁰ The club attracted aspiring working-class writers and young people from local factories. Some of these first participants, including Pavel Marinchik, then an errand boy at the central post office, and Aleksandr Gorbenko, an apprentice metal worker, stayed with the group until the 1930s.¹¹

During the early years of its existence, the theater at the Petrograd club performed a variety of improvised scripts composed by the participants themselves. Their first public appearance was a celebration

7. G. Avlov, "'Samodeiatel'nyi teatr' i rabota edinogo khudovestvennogo kruzhka," in *Edinyi khudozhestvennyi kruzhok: Metody klubno-khudozhestvennoi raboty* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Knizhnogo Sektora Gubono, 1924), 13-15.

8. *Ibid.*, 16-17.

9. Some clubs attempted to follow the principles of the United Artistic Circle quite literally. See for example "Teatral'naia rabota kluba 'Metallist' v Leningrade," *Rabochii klub* 31/32 (1926): 97-98.

10. On the early origins of *TRAM*, see the memoirs of one participant, Pavel Marinchik, *Rozhdenie Komsomol'skogo teatra* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1965), 16-21.

11. Marinchik, 5-6, 28-40; "Vtoroi vecher vospominanii rabotnikov TRAMa ot 15/IV 1930," TsGALI, f. 2723 (N. G. Zograf), op. 1, d. 534, ll. 8-14 ob; M. Sokolovskii, "TRAM na perelome," *Sovetskii teatr* 2/3 (1931): 17.

of the fifth anniversary of the city Komsomol organization in 1922. Performances on key dates of the "Red Calendar," like the anniversary of Bloody Sunday, May Day and the anniversary of the October Revolution, became a central part of the circle's repertoire.¹² They also formed their own "living newspaper" that specialized in satires on the habits and fashions of Petrograd street youth. Participants saw themselves as advocates of a new kind of youth culture, one that was resolutely opposed to what they viewed as disturbing, petty-bourgeois trends of the 1920s. In the words of Sokolovskii, they hoped to create a "theater of meetings, manifestoes and barricades."¹³

According to the very enthusiastic memoirs of participants, creative work within the Komsomol club was done collectively. All members were drawn into discussions about suitable themes for performances, discussions that continued outside club walls. For this reason, its supporters argued, the theater found topics that were relevant to working-class youth, including the persistent problems of hooliganism and alcoholism among young people. To get their message across, they took their performances to factories and worker dormitories.¹⁴ Thus the forerunner to *TRAM* bore a marked similarity to other radical theaters on the left, like the Workers' Theatre Movement in Great Britain, where participants used their performances to examine specific social issues and viewed streets and meeting halls as part of their stage.¹⁵

By 1925 the Leningrad theater began a far more ambitious project, a full-length play called *Crazy Sashka* (*Sashka Chumovoi*) depicting confrontations between Komsomol youth and apolitical street youth. The central figure, Sashka Chumovoi, was already a stock character in the club's "living newspapers." A slovenly, boastful Komsomol member, Chumovoi also had ties to the NEP underworld of smugglers and embezzlers. In the comedy, Komsomol members and the petty villains of NEP battled over Chumovoi's future, with Crazy Sashka in the end abandoning his shady connections. "I was once a rowdy fellow," sings Chumovoi, "and left the ranks in strife. But now I've put that all behind me and will build a better life."¹⁶ The performance was extremely

12. N. G. Zograf, "Tvorcheskii put' Leningradskogo TRAMa," TsGALI, f. 2723, op. 1, d. 220, ll. 4–26. Zograf was part of a *Narkompros* commission that oversaw *TRAM* work and also a member of the *TRAM* central soviet. His extensive personal archive is one of the best sources of information on *TRAM* activities.

13. M. Sokolovskii, "Puti razvitiia Leningradskogo TRAMa," TsGALI, f. 941 (Gosudarstvennaia Akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk), op. 4, d. 66, ll. 1–2. See also A. Piotrovskii, "Puti Leningradskogo TRAMa," in *Leningradskii TRAM v Moskve, iuni' 1928* (Leningrad: Izdanie GosTRAMa, 1928), 18.

14. "Vtoroi vecher vospominanii rabotnikov TRAMa," TsGALI, f. 2723, op. 1, d. 534, ll. 8–24; Marinchik, 38–82.

15. Eugène van Erven, *Radical People's Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 1–14, esp. 9.

16. A. Gorbenko, *Sashka Chumovoi: Komsomol'skaia komediia* in A. Piotrovskii and M. Sokolovskii, eds., *Teatr rabochei molodezhi: Sbornik p'es dlia Komsomol'skogo teatra* (Mos-

popular with young audiences and played over fifty times in clubs and cultural centers throughout the city, a very long run for a club performance. According to Pavel Marinchik, even the city's street youth were fans.¹⁷ Inspired by this success, TRAM members concluded that they were creating a new kind of theatrical production that was uniquely suited to the sensibilities of urban youth both in its choice of subject matter—the joys and temptations of contemporary young people—and its synthetic combination of language, song, dance and acrobatics.¹⁸

The production of *Crazy Sashka* coincided with the official beginning of TRAM. In 1925 the club circle became an independent theater under the aegis of the Komsomol. Despite this change in status, participants were initially determined to maintain their non-professional standing. TRAM's application form, distributed through the Komsomol, pointedly asked for employment information and for evidence of union membership.¹⁹ TRAM's adamantly proletarian persona was already apparent in the opening march of *Crazy Sashka*: "In the mornings we are always there by our machines, but in the evenings our job is TRAM!"²⁰

Of course the category "proletarian" was at best a fluid one in the early Soviet period.²¹ The Leningrad TRAM included people with less than pure factory credentials, including students, the youthful unemployed and even a hairdresser. Nonetheless it does appear from the spotty records that a majority of TRAM members were initially involved in manual labor. The playwright Pavel Marinchik had moved up to a job as a mechanic at the central city Soviet by 1925 while the leading actress, Natasha Kurochkina, worked at the Skorokhod plant.²²

The new TRAM collective quickly gained influential supporters in Leningrad. The most important was Adrian Piotrovskii, the son of a famous classicist and himself the translator of many Greek plays, who saw in TRAM a spirit akin to popular theater in ancient Greece and

cow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1928), 94–136, quotation 130. The titles of TRAM plays often included contemporary slang. As far as possible, I am using the English titles as they appear in Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, trans. Roxane Permar (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988).

17. V. M. Mironova, *TRAM: Agitatsionnyi molodezhnyi teatr 1920–1930kh godov* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1977), 26; Marinchik, 73. For a sampling of reviews see "K otkrytiiu Teatra Rabochei Molodezhi," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 46 (1925): 19; and N. Levin, "Sashka Chumovoi," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 48 (1925): 12.

18. See for example D. Tolmachev, "TRAM i ego perspektiva," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 12 (1926): 12.

19. "V priemochnuiu komissiiu teatra rabochei molodezhi," *TsA VLKSM*, of. 1 (Tsentral'nyi Komitet VLKSM), op. 23, d. 396, l. 125.

20. Mironova, 34.

21. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The Problem of Class Identity in NEP Society," in *Russia in the Era of NEP*, 12–33; Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 69–75.

22. Marinchik, 76, 78, 102; "Vecher vospominanii rabotnikov Trama ot 12 maia 1930g," "Vtoroi vecher vospominanii," *TsGALI*, f. 2723, op. 1, d. 534, ll. 1–24.

Rome and to the folk theater of early modern Europe.²³ As head of the theatrical division of the Leningrad political education department and director of art education at the prestigious Leningrad Institute of the History of Art, Piotrovskii was an extremely well placed ally. He not only offered institutional support through the political education department, he also became involved in the creation of *TRAM* works. His comparatively elegant apartment, filled with pictures of ancient Greek playwrights, became the unofficial meeting place where *TRAM* members read, discussed and hammered out their new plays.²⁴ Although published *TRAM* plays bore the names of individual authors, participants and observers alike insisted that these group discussions were a major creative force in their work.

For Piotrovskii, *TRAM* was the embodiment of all that was positive in autonomous theater engendered by the revolution. His perceptions of the new theater fit into a grander theory about the continual historic tension between autonomous (*samodeiatel'nyi*) and professional theatrical forms. In his view, autonomous theater emerged organically from the rituals and festivals of the lower classes; it then challenged the dominant modes of expression in established theaters of the ruling class. Such a challenge was currently taking place in Soviet Russia, as working-class groups criticized the presentational style and repertoire of professional theaters that had not changed significantly since the revolution. "By constructing daily life (*byt*), by organizing it in a festive way, the working class with its 'amateur,' 'autonomous' games lays the foundation for a radical reexamination of theatrical forms and marks the way to a theater of the future," Piotrovskii wrote.²⁵

Both Piotrovskii and the *TRAM* director Sokolovskii were convinced that *TRAM* had a unique contribution to make to Soviet cultural life. Together they began to formulate the social and aesthetic principles that they believed distinguished Komsomol theater from other forms of autonomous creation. Both stressed the synthetic nature of *TRAM* productions: *TRAM* works did not rely on words alone; rather they combined music, song, dance, marches and lighting into a unified whole. As opposed to many other amateur theaters where the aim was primarily entertainment, *TRAM* articulated a clear political goal. The group's purpose was not to describe daily life, but rather to change it. Tellingly, they referred to the collective not as a theater, but rather as the agitational arm of the Komsomol.²⁶

From this followed new roles for the *TRAM* actors. Rather than

23. Adrian Piotrovskii: *Teatr, kino, zhizn'* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1969), 5–11.

24. See the memoirs of these evenings by Piotrovskii's wife, Alisa Akimova, "Che-lovek dal'nikh plavanii," in *Adrian Piotrovskii*, 362.

25. A. I. Piotrovskii, "Osnovy samodeiatel'nogo iskusstva," *Za sovetskii teatr!* (Leningrad: Academia, 1925), 73.

26. A. Piotrovskii, "TRAM: Stranitsa teatral'noi sovremennosti," *Zvezda* 4 (1929): 142–52; M. Sokolovskii, "V nogu s komsomolom," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 1 June 1928; A. Piotrovskii and M. Sokolovskii, "O teatre rabochei molodezhi," in *Teatr rabochei molodezhi*, 3–8.

seeing themselves as passive observers of Soviet life, *TRAM* participants were supposed to be activists who drew their subject matter from the factories and dormitories and aimed to influence the behavior of viewers. They most often played characters very much like themselves; their goal was to recreate the language and movement of present-day youth in the factories, not to emulate people whose life experiences were different from their own. Although this demanded rigorous training, it differed from that offered in professional theaters, for example the methods endorsed by Konstantin Stanislavsky who encouraged his actors at the Moscow Art Theater to enter the emotional world of the characters they represented on stage. In an intentional contrast to Stanislavsky's ideas, Sokolovskii maintained that the *TRAM* participant was more an agitator than an actor of the old school.²⁷ The parts *TRAM* actors played were social masks, beneath which the faces of worker youth were clearly visible.²⁸

By the late 1920s, Piotrovskii and Sokolovskii articulated what they believed to be the most important contribution of *TRAM* productions, their dialectical structure. The function of a *TRAM* play was neither to tell a simple narrative nor to reveal the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters; instead, it was to illuminate the contradictions inherent in Soviet life and to depict the internal tensions of characters themselves.²⁹ To underscore the conflicting pressures in the lives of youth, *TRAM* plays did not always have linear plot developments or even unambiguous endings. "Episodes are not linked in the sequence of events," wrote Piotrovskii, "but as elements of a unique 'polemic,' as supporting or opposing sides of an argument."³⁰ This attempt to depict problems as "many-layered, capacious and many-sided" complicated *TRAM*'s agitational role. Too many Soviet plays, wrote Piotrovskii and Sokolovskii, made the tensions of Soviet life seem minor: "They often show observers' conclusions in a simplistic and one-sided way compared to the contradictory complications of our reality."³¹ *TRAM*'s goal was to heighten those tensions and to make the audience face the difficult choices they often confronted in their lives.

With these pronouncements on *TRAM* aesthetics, the theorists made two significant points: first, although *TRAM* theater perceived itself as a propagandist for the regime, its expression of political art was neither monolithic nor unambiguous. It sought to inspire participation in Soviet society by revealing the problems and pressures that

27. See Sokolovskii's speech at a meeting of the Leningrad *TRAM*, 4 March 1929, TsGALI, f. 2947 (Moskovskii Teatr imeni Leninskogo Komsomola), op. 1, d. 4, ll. 4-23.

28. A. Piotrovskii and M. Sokolovskii, "O teatre rabochei molodezhi," in *Teatr rabochei molodezhi*, 4-5.

29. A. Piotrovskii and M. Sokolovskii, "Dialekticheskaia p'esa," in N. L'vov, *Plavitsia dni* (Leningrad: Teakinopechat', 1929), 3-9; *idem*, "Spektakl' o sotsialisticheskoi sorevnovanii," in N. L'vov, *Klesh zadumchivyi* (Leningrad: Teakinopechat', 1930), 3-4.

30. A. Piotrovskii, "TRAM," 147.

31. Piotrovskii and Sokolovskii, "Dialekticheskaia p'esa," 5.

were inherent in it. Second, by abandoning straightforward narrative structures and by endorsing non-realistic acting and staging techniques, *TRAM* theater located itself on the side of the theatrical avant-garde in the 1920s. According to Robert Pel'she, head of the art division in the state's political education bureaucracy (*Glavpolitprosvet*), *TRAM* was composed of "little Meyerholds who might someday be greater than Meyerhold himself," a favorable comparison to one of the best known avant-garde directors of the early Soviet period.³²

During the 1920s, the Leningrad *TRAM* staged many popular productions. It consistently chose topical themes—the problem of hooliganism in *Crazy Sashka*; the debilitating problems of anti-semitism among factory workers in *Call the Factory Committee (Zovi fabkom)*; the alienation of young people unable to make peace with NEP in *Work Days (Budni)*; continuing strains between the sexes as young people attempted to start families of a new type in *The Petty-Bourgeois Woman (Meshchanka)* and *The Days are Melting (Plaviatsia dni)*; and the cheerful life shared in youth collectives in *The Rowdy Cohort (Buzlivaia kogorta)*. These plays gained *TRAM* so enthusiastic a following among Leningrad youth that a study of the leisure-time habits of young workers in the Vyborg district in 1928 revealed that *TRAM* productions were the most popular plays.³³ Sympathetic coverage in the press, especially in the national Komsomol newspaper, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, expanded the following of the Leningrad *TRAM* to as far away as Siberia where a group of young workers demanded that the tour of a light opera company be canceled so that the Leningrad *TRAM* could come instead.³⁴

The year 1928 proved to be an important turning point for *TRAM* when it gained the funds to become a professional troupe, freeing its worker-actors and -writers from their jobs in production. Since a significant part of its self-definition had been its links with the factory floor, *TRAM* members made somewhat tortuous attempts to convince themselves and others that they would be professionals of a new type who would not lose sight of their proletarian roots. Their first national charter, drawn up in 1929, stated that *TRAM* theaters had to first exist as non-professional troupes before members could abandon their jobs for full-time theatrical work.³⁵

The shift to professional status allowed *TRAM* to make its first tour to Moscow in summer 1928, which was extremely successful and helped to popularize *TRAM* plays and methods. Performing its most recent

32. "Idut novye liudi," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 16 June 1928. Soviet theater historians recognize *TRAM*'s link to the avant-garde only grudgingly. See Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre*, 203–5.

33. A. G. Kagan, *Molodezh' poste gudka* (Moscow, 1930), 30–38, cited in Peter Gooderham, "The Komsomol and Worker Youth: The Inculcation of 'Communist Values' in Leningrad during NEP," *Soviet Studies* 34 (1982): 522.

34. "Trebuem gastrolei Leningradskogo Trama," *Molodoi rabochii*, 16 March 1928.

35. "Osnovnye printsipy polozheniia o 'TRAM'e," in Chicherov, ed., *Za TRAM*, 69.

plays, including *The Days are Melting* and *Call the Factory Committee*, the group was met by enthusiastic audiences everywhere it went: in Orekhovo-Zuevo, a textile town not far from Moscow, they had to add extra performances; in Moscow itself nearly 25,000 people showed up for TRAM productions.³⁶

Of course, 1928 was a momentous year for another reason—it marked the serious start of the industrialization and collectivization drives that were to transform the face of the Soviet Union. It also marked a shift in Soviet cultural strategies away from tactics of gradual transformation and dissemination to those favoring confrontation and class war.³⁷ Young activists purged educational establishments and attempted to end the dominance of cultural institutions that had survived since prerevolutionary days. They also challenged the role of “bourgeois” specialists and attacked traditional artistic styles which, in their view, were unable to capture the dramatic transformation of the country unleashed by Stalin’s programs.

TRAM was extremely well positioned to benefit from the radicalization of culture during the first Five-Year Plan. First of all, it addressed itself to urban working-class youth, a segment of the population that appeared genuinely enthusiastic about the rapid transformation of the Soviet economy.³⁸ Second, it embraced a collective, egalitarian creative process and made limited use of skilled professionals, which matched the spirit of the most intense phase of the first Five-Year Plan’s cultural revolution. And finally, by insisting on its role as the agitational arm of the Komsomol, TRAM unequivocally advanced a politicization of culture, with their performances conceived as a way to put the theater to work for the completion of the plan.

As the industrialization drive began in earnest, TRAM collectives spread throughout Soviet territory. Only a handful of TRAM circles had existed outside of Leningrad before 1928 but some observers counted up to 70 by the end of the year and 300 by 1932.³⁹ Some new circles were headed by members of the Leningrad TRAM who opened

36. On TRAM’s repertoire, see *Leningradskii TRAM v Moskve*; on its reception see “Golos rabochei molodezhi,” *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, 6 July 1928; “Na zavodakh,” *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, 13 July 1928.

37. See the now classic article on this theme by Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Cultural Revolution as Class War,” in *Cultural Revolution in Russia*, 8–40.

38. Sheila Fitzpatrick has made the most persuasive case for the role of youth in the first Five-Year Plan. See her “Cultural Revolution as Class War,” in *Cultural Revolution in Russia*, 21–7; and *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union 1921–1932* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 136–57. See also William J. Chase, *Workers, Society, and the Soviet State: Labor and Life in Moscow, 1918–1929* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 256–92; Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin’s Industrial Revolution: Politics and Workers 1928–1932* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 100–35; and Ann Todd Baum, *Komsomol Participation in the Soviet First Five-Year Plan* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987).

39. V. G-ov, “V bor’be za tramovskoe dvizhenie,” *Zhizn’ iskusstva* 19 (1928): 9; Mironova, 6.

groups in Leningrad province, in Moscow and as far away as Baku.⁴⁰ *TRAM* collectives spread to major industrial areas like Ivanovo-Voznesensk and to new construction sites like Magnitogorsk. A national organization began to take shape with elaborate membership rules, including the stipulation that 85 percent of *TRAM* members had to be drawn from working-class youth. Local reports indicated that worker contingents averaged around 80 percent, with the rest of the membership made up of students and white collar employees.⁴¹

As it expanded, *TRAM*'s repertoire became even more topical, addressing the changes in labor organization and daily life demanded by the first Five-Year Plan. At least in theory, though, this shift was not intended to dull *TRAM*'s critical edge; it would not simply praise efforts to complete the plan, but also reveal and discuss real social strains unleashed in the process. The tensions created between these dual tasks—to propagate the new policies of the regime while at the same time providing some critical perspective on the social disruptions that they caused—were amply revealed in the “Revolutionary Agreement” passed by the Leningrad *TRAM* in April 1929. Participants pledged to use their art to propagandize the class struggle and to spread a communist world view; at the same time, though, they promised to “reveal the contradictions in our activities [and] the difficult interrelationship between production and daily life.”⁴²

How the Leningrad *TRAM* attempted to fulfill this very difficult assignment was effectively illustrated in a 1929 play entitled *The Pensive Dandy* (*Klesh zadumchivyi*), written by Nikolai L'vov, who had first come to the Komsomol club as a sixteen-year-old metal worker.⁴³ In an introductory essay, Sokolovskii and Piotrovskii praised the work as the best example to date of *TRAM*'s dialectical method, a method that had become even more important with the inauguration of the Five-Year Plan. They felt that the old, dogmatic style of linear presentation in conventional plays could not adequately represent the struggle between old and new that had been initiated by the industrialization drive.⁴⁴

Initially this seems a straightforward play about youth's heroic role in the industrialization drive. Two seemingly exemplary young Komsomol members, Petr and Niura Korolev, are celebrating their fifth wedding anniversary. Petr, a former sailor on the Baltic Fleet, has just

40. Marinchik, 170, 207; F. Knorre, “Moskovskii TRAM,” *Rabis* 26 (1929): 9.

41. “Ustav Teatra Rabochei Molodezhi,” *Novye etapy samodeiatel'noi khudozhestvennoi raboty* (Moscow: Teakinopechat', 1930), 101. For reports of local membership figures, see *Za TRAM*, 54–56; *Sbornik materialov k tret'emu plenumu tsentral'nogo soveta Tramov pri TsK VLKSM* (Moscow: TsK VLKSM, 1930), 15–27; TsGALI, f. 2723, op. 1, d. 419, l. 79; TsGALI, f. 2723, op. 1, d. 419, l. 58.

42. “Revoliutsionnyi dogovor,” April 1929 conference of the Leningrad regional *TRAM*, TsGALI, f. 2947, op. 1, d. 6, l. 37.

43. M. Sokolovskii, “U istokov tramovskogo dvizheniia,” *Rabochii i teatr* 29/30 (1932): 11.

44. Piotrovskii and Sokolovskii, “Spektakl',” in N. L'vov, *Klesh zadumchivyi*, 3.

completed an important invention for his metal-working plant; Niura, a former textile worker, has been sent by her factory to study to become an agronomist. The first Five-Year Plan is evoked in glowing terms that appear to come straight out of newspaper reports: "Five years!" exclaims the Komsomol cell leader. "Five years of fast-moving life. And then there will be an army of 150,000 tractors in battle position!"⁴⁵

Yet it is the complications in this simple scenario that form the heart of the play. Performed on an elaborate multi-level set reminiscent of Meyerhold's stage designs, the action moves freely between past and present to reveal the tensions within each character. Niura is bored by her studies and the predictability of her life. A secret diary chronicles her search for something more fulfilling; through a series of flashbacks the audience sees Niura in dance classes learning western steps like the Charleston, turning to a fortune teller for advice and even contemplating suicide with cyanide that she has stolen from her institute's laboratory. When the diary is discovered by her Komsomol comrades, she confronts them: "Is this life, the weary round of work? Or is life all the meetings, the discipline, the office where they snoop in diaries? This isn't much."⁴⁶ She leaves in disgust and ends up in a commune of religious sectarians. Petr, a model worker-inventor, also has serious flaws: he is proud of his accomplishments as an inventor primarily because of the financial rewards and tries to win back his disaffected wife through promises of fine clothes, "I'll buy you dresses and a fur coat, Niurka. And stylish boots. Come on, let's live." When Niura leaves anyway, Petr starts drinking with unsavory companions, including malcontents who complain about food shortages and a sailor who fought against the bolsheviks at Kronstadt. Their Komsomol comrades are more concerned with their own successes in production, even contemplating dishonest methods to overfulfill their quotas, than with the young couple's difficulties. Niura's cell leader is presented in a particularly unflattering light. After reading her diary, he tries to drum her out of the organization: "Her vacillation is a fact. Her deviation is as clear as day. And our task now? To fight such evil."⁴⁷ The obligatory happy ending comes at the very last minute: Petr wakes up from a drunken stupor and affirms that there is more to life than money; Niura discovers that she can turn her life into a challenge by committing herself to the Komsomol collective; and all the young workers join together to praise the Five-Year Plan.

Despite its clear political message, this play was hardly facile propaganda. Like early works by the Leningrad *TRAM*, it attempted to address actual problems in the lives of Soviet youth—disaffection, materialism, alcoholism, the strains of young marriages and the alternatives provided by religious groups. Supposedly positive changes introduced by the plan, such as the encouragement of higher education and

45. L'vov, *Klesh zadumchivyi*, 13.

46. *Ibid.*, 48.

47. *Ibid.*, 45.

invention among workers, could have negative results when they led to harmful rivalry and materialism. The play also presented a differentiated view of the “right-thinking” Komsomol activists who appeared unfeeling and self-righteous.

In addition to its variegated presentation of Komsomol youth, *The Pensive Dandy* posed technical challenges for the audience. Action often moved from past to present several times within a single scene and the troupe used the different stage levels, music and elaborate lighting to indicate changes in time.⁴⁸ Although Piotrovskii and Sokolovskii insisted that such complexities were completely understandable to proletarian audiences, even a sympathetic critic admitted that this play demanded a lot of its viewers.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, the play was very favorably received in Leningrad and performed on *TRAM* stages outside the city. It directly inspired one of the first original plays of the Moscow *TRAM*, *Put Her There (Dai piat')*.⁵⁰

Themes of production and socialist competition quickly came to dominate *TRAM* work throughout the country. And although many new *TRAM* circles opened with Leningrad *TRAM* plays from the NEP era, such as the very popular *Work Days*, as they became more established, they began to examine the specific difficulties and victories of local industries. The Tashkent *TRAM* investigated the cotton industry, for example, while Archangel theater participants worked on a play called *Forest (Les)* that depicted the lives and struggles of forest workers in the far north.⁵¹

The central *TRAM* apparatus expanded very quickly; by 1929 it could claim a national governing board in Moscow, a *TRAM* administration within the Komsomol and local supervisory boards for both Leningrad and Moscow provinces. At the first national *TRAM* conference that year, participants dissected repertoires, analyzed training techniques and attempted to work out national standards for *TRAM* membership. Most important, they engaged in long and often tortured discussions intended to define *TRAM*'s purpose and unique aesthetic approach. In the initial stages of this debate, the vision of the Leningrad *TRAM* prevailed—*TRAM* was not a theater in any conventional sense, its goal was to work for social transformation.⁵²

The agitational approach of *TRAM* theaters won support from an unlikely quarter in late 1929 when the old trade union leadership

48. *Ibid.*, 8.

49. S. Mokul'skii, “Klesh zadumchivyi,” *Zhizn' iskusstva* 20 (1929): 6–7.

50. I. Beletskii, “O tvorcheskoi puti Moskovskogo Tsentral'nogo Trama,” *Za agit-propbrigadu i TRAM* 1 (1932): 22–24; A. D. Piotrovskii and M. Sokolovskii, “P'esa v bor'be za piatiletku,” in N. Rostoslavlev, *Dai piat'* (Leningrad: Teatinopechat', 1930), 5; Mironova, 59. The title is a pun, since it literally means “Give Five” and refers to the Five-Year Plan.

51. “Novyi tramovskii god,” *Sbornik materialov k tret'emu plenumu*, 3.

52. Compare the statements by Tsil'man at the April 1929 Leningrad *TRAM* conference, TsGALI, f. 2947, op. 1, d. 6, l. 34 to the final resolutions passed at the first national *TRAM* conference in July 1929, Chicherov, ed., *Za TRAM*, 73.

under Mikhail Tomskii was ousted as part of Stalin's consolidation of power. The central trade union organization in the 1920s had by and large expressed fairly conservative cultural positions, urging that autonomous union theaters make better use of the classics and employ professionals to improve club productions.⁵³ Since union cultural groups themselves incorporated a significant number of working-class youth, they took a dim view of TRAM's claim to be developing a theater specifically designed for this important contingent. However, union hostility lessened with the shift in leadership and the new national cohort explicitly denounced their predecessor's reverence for professional forms as yet another indication of their opportunism and "rightist tendencies."⁵⁴

As a clear indication of this shift, the national union leadership gave its support to a new kind of cultural circle, theatrical propaganda troupes known as *agitprop* brigades. Conceived as a way to unify cultural work and production, these factory- or club-based groups performed for their fellow workers at lunch breaks, on the shop floor or in factory dormitories; some also went out to the countryside to agitate for collectivization. The brigades were ideally composed of industrial shock workers, groups of mainly young volunteers who attempted to speed up production through a variety of methods. Indeed, participants in *agitprop* brigades defined themselves as shock workers in the cultural field, aiming to improve working habits, reduce waste and increase class consciousness through agitation.⁵⁵ These cultural troupes typically composed their own repertoires that addressed timely issues within the setting of the local factory or community.

Agitprop brigades often had very close ties to the TRAM movement and numerous brigades were started by TRAM circles. Indeed the distinction between the two groups began to blur as TRAM intensified its agitational activities. To take one example, from 1928 to 1931, the Irkutsk TRAM reported giving over 600 performances to a total audience of 212,000. Participants also claimed an exhausting level of social work, taking part in the collectivization drive, collecting money for the national loan campaign, building grain silos for state farms and even helping local coal miners meet their production quotas.⁵⁶

TRAM's visibility was further increased by its links to *agitprop* brigades. There were also indications that TRAM's influence was spreading to other media with the beginning of groups in the visual arts (IZORAM), film (KINORAM), and music (MUZORAM). By 1930, dele-

53. See K. Tverskoi, "Teatral'naia rabota Leningradskikh profsoiuzov," in *Profsoiuzy i iskusstvo*, eds. Z. A. Edel'son and B. M. Filippov (Leningrad, 1927), 53–66.

54. "Problemy kul'turnoi revoliutsii i zadachi kul'turno-politicheskoi raboty profsoiuzov," *Pravda*, 14 July 1930.

55. G. Avlov, *Teatral'nye agitpropbrigady v klube* (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1931).

56. V. Ipatov, "TRAMy v tret'em godu piatiletki," *Za agitpropbrigadu i TRAM* 1 (1931): 37–38.

gates to a national *TRAM* conference proudly proclaimed that their group was the leading force in all autonomous art. “*TRAM* alone, all by itself, cannot fulfill its historical mission. Only as the vanguard (*golovnoi otriad*) of all autonomous art, only as the active participant and leading brigadier of *all* restructuring of *all* armies of autonomous artistic forms can *TRAM* truly become the new, socialist phenomenon in our art.”⁵⁷ This amounted to a radical restatement of *TRAM*’s objectives, one that was bound to inspire opposition in the contentious and faction-ridden cultural world of the first Five-Year Plan. The loudest and most powerful opponent *TRAM* provoked was the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, better known by its acronym *RAPP*.

The history of *RAPP* during the first Five-Year Plan remains a contested topic: scholars debate whether it was the agent of the Communist Party or whether its efforts to shape Soviet cultural theory and practice in fact overstepped the Party’s intentions. They also debate whether the aesthetic principles of the organization were more or less appealing than those of socialist realism that were to follow in the 1930s.⁵⁸ What is not subject to debate is that *RAPP* was always a forceful and unpleasant opponent. The organization had initially limited itself to the critique of rival literary groups and professional theaters, but as the efforts to fulfill the plan reached a frenzy in 1930–1931, *RAPP* turned its attention to autonomous theater and began to oppose what it considered to be the politically suspect and aesthetically false approach of *TRAM*.

The leadership of *RAPP* linked the *TRAM* movement, particularly the Leningrad *TRAM*, to the ideas and practices of the Leningrad *Litfront*, a dissident wing of the national association of proletarian writers, who believed that literature during the first Five-Year Plan had to become more closely tied to life. In order to do this, writers should abandon traditional plot structures and psychologically detailed attempts at character development and, instead, turn to short sketches and documentation taken from the lives of workers and peasants.⁵⁹ *TRAM* theater, with its emphasis on illuminating the problems of youth and its opposition to the techniques of professional theater, did indeed bear similarities to the spirit of the *Litfront*. The Leningrad *TRAM* had even performed a work of one of the most vocal members of the *Litfront*, the playwright Aleksandr Bezymenskii. By late 1930, *RAPP* had succeeded in turning the charge of “*Litfrontizm*” into a dangerous offense. This group, *RAPP* leaders argued, was essentially nihilistic and

57. “Novyi tramovskii god,” *Sbornik materialov k tret'emu plenumu*, 6. See also O. Litovskii, “*TRAM*,” *Smena* 2/3 (1931): 28.

58. Contrast the views in Edward J. Brown, *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature 1928–1932* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), where he defends *RAPP*’s differentiated aesthetics to those in the classic Soviet study, S. Sheshukov’s *Neistovoye revniteti* (Moscow: Moskovskii Rabochii, 1970), where socialist realism is portrayed as rescuing Soviet culture from *RAPP*’s fanaticism.

59. See A. Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia, 1928–39* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1991), 82–89.

incapable of creating psychologically convincing characters. Their aesthetic errors were linked to more serious political failings: through rather strained logic, the head of RAPP charged that *Litfront* was part of a bloc of highly-placed critics of Stalin's social and political policies.⁶⁰

At a January 1931 conference on theater, RAPP turned these same charges against TRAM. While recognizing TRAM's important position within the autonomous theater movement, RAPP leaders charged that the theater had been led astray by the "rightist" ideas of Piotrovskii, an agent of "the now defeated *Litfront*."⁶¹ These views were elaborated in greater detail in RAPP's major statement on theater, "RAPP's Duties on the Theatrical Front," published in fall 1931. In this lengthy denunciation of all current tendencies in Soviet theater, RAPP charged that TRAM denied the importance of the theatrical heritage and refused to learn from professional theaters. Other serious criticisms included its focus on "class-alien elements within the Komsomol" and its attempt to minimize the importance of the actor and the script in plays.⁶²

TRAM participants and theorists quickly capitulated to RAPP's criticisms and launched a full-scale re-evaluation of their theatrical approach, an about-face that can in part be explained by the radicalization of politics during the first Five-Year Plan. By linking aesthetic dissidence to political opposition, RAPP made self-defense a dangerous proposition. Undoubtedly, though, the participants' understanding of TRAM's political mission also contributed to the theater's speedy submission. As the self-proclaimed agitational arm of the Komsomol, TRAM was not in a position to criticize decisions that appeared to reflect official policy. Shortly after RAPP's assault, TRAM participants began to denounce the influence of Piotrovskii and the serious errors of the Leningrad TRAM. At a national TRAM meeting in summer 1931, one leader, Ivan Chicherov, stated that Piotrovskii had caused TRAM to abandon a linear plot structure in favor of confusing experiments and excessive improvisation.⁶³ He also asserted that Piotrovskii did not understand the concept of the dialectic at all, despite the fact that he had developed a so-called dialectical play. "*The Pensive Dandy* was based on just such a false, mechanical understanding of the dialectic," Chicherov charged. "In fact, it was completely incomprehensible. Why did a good Komsomol girl, a good young woman, suddenly turn to sectarianism? . . . There are a whole number of completely schematic, unconvincing and false elements in the play."⁶⁴

60. *Ibid.*, 89.

61. "Za proletarskii teatr!" *Sovetskii teatr* 2/3 (1931): 1.

62. "O zadachakh RAPP na teatral'nom fronte," *Sovetskii teatr* 10/11 (1931): 4-10, esp. 8-9.

63. I. Chicherov, "Oshibki i nedostatki tramovskogo dvizheniia," 23 June 1931, TsGALI, f. 2947, op. 1, d. 32, ll. 3-6. See also *idem*, "Za boevoi soiuz RAPPa i TRAMa," *Za agitpropbrigadu i TRAM* 1 (1931): 5-10.

64. Chicherov, "Oshibki," ll. 7 ob.-8.

The assault on the Leningrad *TRAM* and its methods led to much soul-searching among other groups that had been inspired by the techniques of the first *TRAM*. At a national meeting of *TRAM* organizations in 1931, an entire evening was devoted to a discussion of a work by the Baku *TRAM* organization, *Oil (Neft')*, inspired by *The Pensive Dandy*. Based on material that *TRAM* members had gathered from local factories, the play had been performed throughout Baku as *TRAM*'s contribution to the production drive.⁶⁵ Despite its local popularity, conference members lashed out at the play: it did not accurately portray life in Baku, the characters were not convincing and it did not offer clear plot development. According to one *TRAM* member, the play was not about the oil industry's struggle at all: "Instead it depicts the illnesses of *TRAM* growth, illnesses which to a certain degree infect the whole movement."⁶⁶ The solution was to rid *TRAM* repertoire for good of all formalistic and mechanistic elements.

Piotrovskii himself was drawn into the vortex of self-criticism, confessing at the beginning of 1932 that his ideas about autonomous theater were fundamentally flawed. His theories were based on reactionary bourgeois notions—inspired by Viacheslav Ivanov and even Nietzsche—and they reduced the struggle of classes to a struggle between different theatrical schools. Piotrovskii regretted his attempts to isolate autonomous theater from the influence of professionals and to undermine the role of the actor within theatrical productions, and apologized for his endorsement of disjointed, plotless performances. "Instead of raising the mass art of worker youth to the standards of great bolshevik art, my 'theory' simply impeded its growth. Therefore this idealistic, bourgeois theory served the politically dangerous cause of the class enemy," Piotrovskii concluded.⁶⁷

These self-denunciations by *TRAM* leaders led to a marked shift in the movement's practice. In very short order, *TRAM* groups began to simplify the aesthetic structure of their productions, abandoning extensive use of dance and complicated lighting. They also simplified their political message: instead of showing that the industrial plan could potentially cause problems for worker youth, *TRAM* plays began to present entirely positive Komsomol heroes at war with a variety of class enemies.

As an indication of these changes, Sokolovskii produced a play called *Unbroken Stream (Sploshnoi potok)* in 1932 that was a real departure from his earlier work. Based on material that he had gathered on trips to new construction sites, it was a straightforward presentation of a production collective's struggle to complete the construction of a dam

65. See the comments of I. A. Savchenko, head of the Baku *TRAM* and one of the authors of *Oil*, in "Disput o postanovkakh Bakinskogo Trama: Neft' i Pogibla Rossiia," 9 July 1931, TsGALI, f. 2723, op. 1, d. 537, ll. 6–8 ob., 68 ob-70.

66. *Ibid.*, ll. 9–31; quotation l. 31 ob.

67. A. Piotrovskii, "O sobstvennykh formalistskikh oshibkakh," *Rabochii i teatr* 3 (1932): 10.

before the onset of the spring thaw. Stripped of any of the elements that had distinguished *TRAM* works in the past, the play lacked song, dance and satire, and there was hardly any attention paid to the specific problems of working-class youth.⁶⁸ Valerii Bliumenfel'd, a Leningrad critic who had been very sympathetic to *TRAM* in the past, called the play "silent": it sparked no interaction with the audience at all, almost as if the actors played alone without viewers. Bliumenfel'd concluded that in trying to cut itself off from the influence of Piotrovskii and concede to the criticisms of *RAPP*, *TRAM* in fact had rejected its whole heritage. It was turning to the style of Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theater and isolating itself from the youthful worker audiences that had once been so enthusiastic about its plays.⁶⁹ Other viewers noted that this play—without the songs and dances of the old productions—made the weaknesses of *TRAM* actors painfully apparent.⁷⁰

TRAM's efforts at reorganization did not abate when the Communist Party intervened to restructure all literary and artistic organizations in April 1932 and summarily dissolved self-proclaimed proletarian cultural groups like *RAPP*. According to a widely publicized resolution, such organizations had become too narrow and sectarian, hindering the further development of Soviet culture, and would be replaced by national artistic unions open to all classes.⁷¹ With one fell swoop, the Party's intervention eliminated *TRAM*'s most persistent critic. At the same time, though, it marked a major shift toward a cultural policy that was extremely hostile to the old values of *TRAM*. All autonomous theatrical groups were urged to overcome their opposition to the use of professional directors and professionally written plays, to institute training programs that integrated theatrical history and to provide a more thorough education for actors. *TRAM* received such advice in unambiguous terms from the Komsomol leadership.⁷²

Criticisms of *TRAM* became even more harsh after a national festival of autonomous art in August 1932, where a variety of *agitprop* brigades and *TRAM* circles performed. The press reviews of this festival were almost uniformly negative: both *TRAM* and *agitprop* brigades offered monotonously similar, unprofessional work that lacked real character development and sophisticated writing.⁷³ The advice offered

68. [Mikhail Sokolovskii], "Sploshnoi potok," TsGALI, f. 2723, op. 1, d. 531, 11, 110–61.

69. V. Bliumenfel'd, "Za propagandistskii stil' v 'Trame,'" *Rabochii i teatr* 12 (1932): 14.

70. See Marinchik, 240; Zograf, "Puti Leningradskogo TRAMa," TsGALI, f. 2723, op. 1, d. 220, 11, 103–4.

71. "O perestroike literaturno-khudozhestvennykh organizatsii. Postanovlenie TsK VKP(b) ot 23 apreliia 1932 g.," *Pravda*, 24 April 1932.

72. See "O perestroike tramovskogo dvizheniia. Resolutsiia TsS VLKSM po dokladu TsS Tramov," TsGALI, f. 2723, op. 1, d. 423, 11, 7–11.

73. For a small sampling of these reviews, see Ia. Boiarskii, "Samodeiatel'noe iskusstvo na vysshuiu stupen'," *Sovetskii teatr* 9 (1932): 2–8; "K itogam olimpiady," *Trud*, 17 August 1932; A. Gladkov, "Luchshie sily professional'nogo iskusstva na pomoshch' khudozhestvennoi samodeiatel'nosti," *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 15 August 1932.

to autonomous theater groups was everywhere the same: go back and learn from theatrical professionals in order to diversify repertoires and improve the quality of work on the stage. Classical repertoires, including the work of Ostrovsky and the eighteenth century Italian playwright, Carlo Goldoni, should no longer be shunned. When addressing contemporary political themes, workers' theaters had to learn to do this "artistically," which was only possible with the intervention of those trained in technique and familiar with the long history of Russian and world theater.⁷⁴

Although the Communist Party's attack on proletarian cultural organizations did not refer specifically to *TRAM*, ultimately the reassessment of Soviet cultural forms that began in earnest in 1932 profoundly affected the *TRAM* movement. At the height of the first Five-Year Plan, there had been at least 300 *TRAM* circles but after the Party's assault on proletarian cultural groups the number rapidly declined. Some *TRAM* circles were integrated into union cultural networks and others simply shut down altogether. Those that remained were radically transformed: the Moscow Central *TRAM* embraced the training methods of Stanislavsky, whose ideas had been ridiculed and rejected by earlier leaders; the Leningrad *TRAM*, founded by a man who had insisted on "liquidating the classics as a class,"⁷⁵ began performing plays by the eighteenth century Russian playwright Denis Fonvizin and Molière. By the second half of the 1930s even the name *TRAM* had disappeared, as the remaining groups rechristened themselves as Komsomol theaters.⁷⁶

At a union cultural conference devoted to a discussion of *TRAM* in December 1934, the artistic director of the Moscow Central *TRAM* Theater, I. F. Beletskii, conceded that the once popular movement had lost its leading role.⁷⁷ He argued that *TRAM* had gained an enthusiastic audience by insisting on contemporary Soviet themes in its repertoire. But then its influence began to wane because it could not keep up with the increasingly sophisticated tastes of Soviet viewers who demanded excellent acting skills and polished scripts which the old *TRAM* could not provide. This explanation is echoed in the memoirs of some *TRAM* participants and in many studies by Soviet theater historians. By the early 1930s *TRAM* theaters had reached an impasse; their training

74. For the clearest expression of these views, see "Pervye itogi," *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 21 August 1932; A. Kasatkina, "Iskusstvo millionov," *Izvestiia*, 22 August 1932.

75. Mikhail Sokolovskii cited in G. Nedoshivin and N. Chushkin, "Na povestke ovladenie khudozhestvennym nasledstvom," *Za agitpropbrigadu i TRAM* 3/4 (1932): 17.

76. The Leningrad and Moscow *TRAMs* assumed the name of Komsomol theaters (*teatry imeni Leninskogo Komsomola*). The Sverdlovsk *TRAM* became the Theater of *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*. The Kuibyshev *TRAM* was renamed the Theater of the Komsomol's Twentieth Anniversary. See *Teatral'naiia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia, 1967), 5: 264.

77. "Stenogramma seminarasoveshcheniia rukovoditelei teatrov Rabochei Molodezhi (*TRAM*) pri klubnoi inspektsiia VTsSPS," *TsGAOR*, f. 5451 (VTsSPS), op. 18, d. 510, 11. 49–50.

programs did not give young participants enough skills to portray characters other than themselves, a weakness that was already apparent when TRAM theaters attempted to depict young peasants in the countryside, let alone characters that were even further removed from their experience.⁷⁸

Some contemporary western research in the culture of the 1930s confirms at least part of this sociological analysis. Scholars like Régine Robin have argued that the taste of audiences was becoming not more sophisticated but rather more plebeian, as peasants began to assert their influence on Soviet cultural production. The demands of this audience for simple narrative structures and positive heroes profoundly affected the development of socialist realism.⁷⁹ It is hardly necessary to add that factory youth, the very constituency whom TRAM claimed as its own, radically changed its social composition in the 1930s with a massive influx of peasants into industrial jobs.⁸⁰

However, I would like to suggest an alternative explanation for TRAM's ultimate demise. TRAM's crisis began when it started to alter its presentational style first in response to RAPP's critique and then in an attempt to adapt to the emerging aesthetic of socialist realism. During NEP and the early years of the first Five-Year Plan, TRAM productions addressed difficult problems and offered complex solutions. But then TRAM simplified both its medium and its message: complicated staging and conflicted protagonists were abandoned; the enemies were obvious, the solutions were simple. Even when TRAM began to follow the acting methods and repertoires of established professional theaters, it did not reverse its losses. "We can no longer say that TRAM is the most important form of autonomous artistic development," admitted Beletskii in 1934.⁸¹

The new cultural system of the 1930s left no room for a "theater of manifestoes, meetings and barricades." The principles that had initially inspired TRAM—a belief that art was a participatory project emerging from and integrated into daily life—fared particularly poorly as the cultural unions taking shape endorsed rigorous training and professionalism. Rather than generating their own repertoires, auton-

78. See the memoirs of Pavel Marinchik from the Leningrad TRAM, 239–47; and those of the Sverdlovsk TRAM participant K. Gur'eva, "Ya vyrosla s teatrom," in *Desiat' let Sverdlovskogo TRAMa* (Sverdlovsk: Ural'skii Rabochii, 1936), 51–52. For a representative account in Soviet theater history, see N. G. Zograf et al., *Ocherki istorii russkogo sovetskogo dramaticheskogo teatra* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1954), 751–53, 757.

79. Régine Robin, "Popular Literature of the 1920s: Russian Peasants as Readers," in *Russia in the Era of NEP*, 253–67, esp. 263–65.

80. Kuromiya, 214–15; David L. Hoffman, "Moving to Moscow: Patterns of Peasant In-Migration during the First Five-Year Plan," *Slavic Review* 50 (Winter 1991): 847–57.

81. TsGAOR, f. 5451, op. 18, d. 510, l. 63. Indeed Beletskii was at a loss to describe what distinguished TRAM from other theaters except the fact that the participants were young.

omous theaters performed a limited range of classical plays and works by Soviet authors that had already been staged by professional theaters, thus undermining any claims to originality. Very few people were willing to come see Leningrad *TRAM* actors dressed up in the fancy clothes of the eighteenth century nobility. As Adrian Piotrovskii's wife, Alisa Akimova, herself a *TRAM* member, recalled in the 1960s, the Leningrad *TRAM*'s efforts to function like a conventional professional theater were hopeless. "Fonvizin was done much better by academic theaters, but no one else could perform *The Days Are Melting* or *The Pensive Dandy*."⁸² In its attempt to shed its history as a rowdy youth theater, *TRAM* was left without a purpose or a following.

82. Alisa Akimova, "Chelovek dal'nikh plavanii," in *Adrian Piotrovskii*, 364.