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Maxim Gorky
Russian Dramatist

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Prologue
Putting on the style: Gorky as playwright

Conflict is the central recurring feature of Gorky's dramatic style. It marks the form as much as the content of what he wrote. Gorky employs a clash of performance styles, most markedly between naturalism and melodrama. Out of this unusual clash he draws his political points. Similarly his comedy is rarely only for entertainment but veers constantly to the grotesque, which in the manner of a cartoon becomes a vehicle for political comment. In content his plays are about conflict between classes, between generations, between urban and rural, and between the establishment and the dispossessed. Furthermore, his plays set stage and auditorium at odds. As the innovative articulator of the popular voice he confronted the comfortable theatre-going public of his day. He chose the middle-class institution of the Moscow Art Theatre (*MAT*) to launch his theatre career, mounting an aggressive challenge to the expectations of its audience. At the same time he brought a radical audience to this theatre, creating a situation of confrontation within the theatre audience itself. Gorky set all his plays recognisably in Russia. Their subjects are the social, political and historical issues of Gorky's own lifetime. Although he became an internationally renowned figure, living abroad for more years in the twentieth century than he lived at home, he never abandoned this Russian focus. When change came, it showed itself in his increasing use of metaphor to discuss Russia and, during his last years, in a preference for writing about the past.

The clashes in the form of Gorky's plays are between naturalism and melodrama, in themselves two theatrical extremes. At the same time Gorky wrote in a period when realism was the dominant mode in theatre. Leaving aside melodrama for a moment, and focusing on realism and naturalism, we confront a morass of definitions. These two concepts, not initially very helpfully, can be seen as both polarised and contiguous. The reason is that the difference between them is best described as one of intensity. Differences of intensity begin with proximity but end in

polarity. Both movements shift; their thrusts are unstable and change with the preoccupations of the moment, making definition a difficult exercise. Realism is the all-embracing movement encapsulating attention to life as it is, regarding art not as an exotic idealised expression but as a recognisable representation of the concrete reality that human beings share. Naturalism intensifies the sense of the real, seeking an exact imitation of reality. For Gorky's plays our prime interest is the late nineteenth century modes in which each was adopted in the theatre. A major difference between them was that realism rested content within a recognisable theatrical frame, while naturalism sought to mask its utilisation of such an artificial means as theatre. Verisimilitude was important to both sets of ideas but is key to the intense forms of naturalism. Naturalism shows us what is, the ordinary.[1]

In distinction to realism, moreover, naturalism was driven by an ideology. Theories of deterministic influence of environment on human behaviour, deriving from Darwin's theory of evolution, among others, in the mid-nineteenth century undoubtedly played their part. In 1873 Emile Zola wrote a preface on naturalism to his novel *Thérèse Raquin*, which he then transposed into a treatise on theatre.[2] Naturalism transformed the theatre affecting not only the content of plays written under its banner but also the way they were designed and acted, and the relationship between stage and audience. Out of this grew the precise standards of authenticity in stage design and the theories about acting, which were the hallmark of the 'new' drama in performance. Other outcomes of naturalism were political and aesthetic. Both these aspects directly affected Gorky's style of writing and choice of material. Examination of the effects of environment on human behaviour led naturalism to a concentration, in the wake of Marx, on the poor conditions endured by the lower classes. This development was seen, on one side, as a degradation of the subject-matter of art, and on the other, as a response to what rightly demanded attention. Focus on human behaviour meant focus on

1 Simon Shepherd, 'Playing It Straight: Proper Drama', in Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack (eds.), *English Drama. A Cultural History*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p.277.

2 E. Zola, *Thérèse Raquin* (1873); *Le Naturalisme au Théâtre* (1878).

excess, usually on crime or decadent lifestyles, also contributing to changes in taste and effect. The emphasis in naturalism, particularly during the early phase, was on recording and presenting rather than stirring to action. In the later phase, attention was drawn more to the fact that deprived, degrading environments could be overcome by political action: the underclasses could triumph by rising up against the poor conditions they were forced to endure. Issues of heredity became shockingly real, dictating behaviour from generation to generation. Middle-class theatre-goers were confronted with the shock of sexually transmitted disease and with degenerating psyches fostered by oppressive environments.

The shifting ground between realism and naturalism in this period is exemplified in the work of Ibsen, Hauptmann and Strindberg, Gorky's immediate predecessors. Ibsen, whose work veered in a number of directions depending on the stage in his career under discussion, shocked Europe with his plays. The 'new' drama caused disruption to conventional understanding of theatre-going. These are plays where components of environment, such as heredity or events in the past, were seen to determine the behaviour of characters in the present. The outcome frequently broke with social conventions. It could be socially damaging (Nora's departure from her family in *The Doll's House* (1879)) or tragic (Hedda's suicide in *Hedda Gabler* (1890)). Idealistically, Ibsen wished to unmask the contradictions of the unjust world he saw about him, but his protagonists, mostly the educated middle class, ended in pessimism and defeat rather than active demands for change. Hauptmann intensified the debate with his depiction of the exploited classes and their potential for violent action, showing sexual abuse and depravity to be characteristic of the demoralised bourgeoisie. Strindberg went inside the middle-class individual to show the degenerative processes at work undermining the normal personality. The doomed bourgeois of his plays demonstrated the individual's inability to confront adversity and make changes for the better. In all these cases the theatre audience was invited to observe, and was confronted with problems, collisions and clashes to which resolutions were not provided.

The awareness of time in this type of play also influenced Gorky's dramatic style. While realism tended to accept theatrical convention and the artificiality of time within the medium, naturalism's deployment of

time was shaped by at least two closely related considerations. Naturalism was, on the one hand, directed against such concepts as the well-made-play but, on the other, was an imitation of real life. The well-made-play conformed to a pattern of expectation in the audience's mind. Aesthetic pleasure, of a kind, derived from watching the working out of the plot to an archetypal pattern. A consequence was the manipulation of narrative time to fit into the constraints of an evening session in the theatre. Naturalism broke the hold of the well-made-play, gradually dispensing with the constrictions of time imposed by the plot. It moved towards the playing out of events in 'real' time in the sense that awareness of the actual passing of time is crucial, or events take up the same amount of time as in real life: for example, meals, tea drinking, use of songs and other musical forms, board games, performances-within-performances and so on, are often to be found in naturalist plays and in Gorky's work.

Naturalism is also fraught with paradoxes. A major aim was the creation of verisimilitude. In the theatre this led to the masking of the normal theatrical signs which indicate that what was being watched was indeed a theatrical performance. The multi-locational settings of Hauptmann's plays gradually gave way in the later examples of naturalist drama to one place for the action and to the playing of the action in the present. Ibsen had begun this process by introducing means for conveying accounts of the past, important to the present situation of the characters, in his opening acts.

All these aspects permeate Gorky's plays and therefore make the discussion of naturalism important to a consideration of his drama as a whole. Gorky adopted the style of realism interlaced with naturalism. His plays generally have implied detailed sets. Gorky was at pains to indicate the concrete details of setting in almost all his plays, but particularly so in his earlier ones. Look, for example, at the details of setting for *Philistines* or *The Lower Depths*. Already in these early plays his naturalism is on the turn towards politics. The ideological link whereby environment determines character and behaviour is turned to his political advantage. In *The Lower Depths*, for example, Satin breaks the link between hopelessness and the doss-house and stakes his claim for membership of the human race:

> Man – there's the truth! What is man? [...] It's not you or I or them. No! [...] it's you and I and them and the old man, and Napoleon and Mahomet [...] all of us, together (*The Lower Depths*, Act 4).[3]

How does melodrama figure in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century theatrical context? Melodrama and Gorky shared a similar fate: both received a bad press. Melodrama has been consistently sidelined from 'real' art as popular, sensational and dependent upon effects. Simon Shepherd's discussion of melodrama sees the cause of this discredit as a class issue since melodrama grew in theatres which drew their audiences from among the poorer sections of society and appealed to the non-intellectual sides of theatrical appreciation.[4]

Born in the aftermath of the French Revolution, melodrama expressed the triumph of the weak over the oppressive, where villains are punished and the virtuous conquer and where home and family are cherished. The message is simple and unambiguous.[5] Melodrama and oppositional politics come together in their need to unmask social villains who oppress others by their greed for possession of wealth. While much of the political purity of the early form had been lost by the late nineteenth century in favour of a melodrama designed to provide mystery, thrills and spectacle, still the exposure of villainy, if not the conquering of it, remained a driving force.

Melodrama relied principally on the non-verbal languages of the stage: on the visual achieved through its gestural traditions of acting, through spectacular stage sets and machinery; on audience response

3 M. Gor'kii, 'Na dne', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Kudozhestvennye proizvediniia v 25-i tomakh*, Moscow, 1968–1976 (hereafter *PSS*), 7, p.177. 'Chelovek – *vot pravda! Chto takoe chelovek? [...] Eto ne ty, ne ia, ne oni [...] net! – Eto ty, ia, oni, starik, Napoleon, Magomet [...] v odnom!'* Translations into English in the text are my own, except when indicated otherwise. To help locate passages in the play, references to published translations are also given, where possible. See, *Gorky. Five Plays*, trans. Kitty Hunter Blair, Jeremy Brooks, London: Methuen, 1999, p.84.

4 Simon Shepherd, 'Melodrama', in Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack, op. cit., pp.200–1.

5 Peter Brook, 'Melodrama, Body, Revolution', *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, London: British Film Institute, 1994, p.16.

whether emotional or vocal or both; on appealing to and satisfying mass desires. All these characteristics are exploited by Gorky. His use of these discredited forms within the illustrious Art Theatre addressed to its particular audience was an act of aggression directed as much towards class considerations as aesthetic ones. He manages, therefore, to add melodrama to his political arsenal, refusing to allow the middle class to sideline this form and in fact using it to do the very opposite: to undermine their comfortable insularity.

On the one hand, Gorky's plays are rife with melodramatic situation: impossibly overbearing fathers and mothers prevent some marriages and engineer others; husbands treat their wives as chattels, abuse them, conduct affairs, or are openly debauched; tragic heroines attempt suicide; voracious and predatory mothers protect their grotesque children whatever the odds and whoever the victims. On the other hand, Gorky manipulated the genre to suit his needs. In Gorky's time theatrical melodrama was reassuringly schematic. Characters were obliged to face sometimes appalling destinies, but in doing so not only provided models of courage and heroism, but also implied there was a better world of morality and justice worth aspiring to. Whereas the influence on Gorky's naturalism came mostly from Europe, many of these characteristics of melodrama were attributable to Ostrovsky, Russia's most successful and prolific dramatist of the nineteenth century (see 'Debut'). Gorky's manipulation of this schema was to challenge his audience not simply to aspire to this implied world but to struggle to achieve it. He invested his melodrama with an anti-bourgeois politics. Watching the clearly middle-class villains abuse their powers, theirs only by virtue of birth or exploitation, the audience's consciousness of the inequity of the situation was raised.

However, Gorky went even further. He capitalised upon the largely middle class composition of theatre audiences, especially those in the early days at *MAT*. He knew they would be inclined to sympathise with the middle class characters in his play and to consider the positive working class or radical intelligentsia heroes a threat, so he engaged in a game. He would reverse the audience perception of characters by suddenly confronting them with the threatening characters as potential saviours (e.g. Nil in *Philistines*). He was not always able to achieve this aim in an artistically credible manner, but this tactic contributed to his confrontational politics and ensured his plays a controversial reputation.

Gorky's main strategy was deliberately to juxtapose these two very different genres of naturalism and melodrama. The jarring of the two genres opened up the paradoxes of the theatrical illusion, exposing the gap between the play as reality and as mimesis of reality. This breaking of the theatrical illusion encouraged distanciation in the audience from the spectating role and engagement with the implied politics of the play. Such conflict of genres can be found throughout his dramatic works (see, for example, the crowd which gathers to gaze at Tatiana's suicide in *Philistines* (1901) and the family which gloats over Egor in the last agonies of cancer confronted by the grotesque antics of a raving Prokopii in *Egor Bulychev* (1931)).

It is possible that Gorky recognised the transparency of the melodramatic form and its tiredness as a genre for the beginning of the twentieth century. Stanislavsky visited Gorky on Capri in 1911 during his first period of exile and reported Gorky was toying with a new form of melodrama to regain the original power of this style and possibly to harness it more directly to his political agenda. Although he never openly debated his proposal, his play begun in 1912/1913, *Counterfeit Coin*, is regarded as an attempt to capture this new form (see Part II: 'Off-stage').

Cartoon-like, Gorky's grotesque humour also encourages political engagement with the text. His comedy is one of exaggeration and satire which often sits incongruously with the naturalism and melodrama adding further to the clash of styles characteristic of his dramatic texts. Gorky's characters challenge their often unprepossessing destinies by means of this grotesque. This comic response is not submissive nor designed to intensify the sense of their tragedy, but is rather a means to escape from the grimness of existence for a few blissful moments much as such doomed characters might lose themselves in alcohol, in daydreaming or other short-term diversions. This comedy also provides the audience with an access point to the artificiality of the theatrical enterprise. It is used along with other devices such as quotation of poetry and songs and story-telling, which bring mini performances-within-performances to the texts. Gorky is an engaging story-teller. Not only do his plays provide colourful narratives set in socially and situationally exotic (to the contemporary audience) locales such as doss-houses, summer homes, provincial businesses in provincial towns, and landscapes bordered by vast forests extending into the monumental geo-

graphy of Russia, they also borrow directly from the story-teller's performative art. Characters tell stories about themselves and their experiences, sometimes as parables, sometimes as simple escapism. They transport audiences well beyond the confines of the darkened auditorium, also distancing them from the play as reality and making them aware of the play as play (see discussion of *The Lower Depths*, in 'Debut').

Two further aspects of Gorky's plays which fuel the political impetus are his representation of women and his treatment of dramatic language. Gorky changed the status and role of women characters. In contrast to their contemporary treatment in film melodrama, the status of women in the theatre in this period underwent some major changes. Gorky, along with Chekhov, with whom he conducted a substantial dialogue in his plays (see 'Debut: The Theatrical Context'), responded to this development by allotting women a much higher status in the social hierarchy and in the performance hierarchy than had hitherto been the case. Both these writers had long-lasting liaisons with famous actresses but neither would have bowed simply to whims for more substantial roles from their partners. For both Chekhov and Gorky the elevation of women, though for different reasons, grew from their awareness of women's changing role in society. Traditionally the victims of melodrama, women in Gorky's plays supply the migratory characters, who attempt, but usually fail, to bridge the social divides they observe (for example, Tatiana in *Philistines*, Elena (*Summerfolk*) or Nadia (*Enemies*)). Occasionally and shockingly for the time, they articulate the radical voice (for example, Mari'a L'vovna (*Summerfolk*)).

When set against the general structure of Gorky's range of characters, this representation of women illustrates two important aspects. Firstly, in Gorky's work the characters break into a number of distinct social types. There is the merchant class (house painters, builders merchants, timber merchants, shipping company owners), then the professional and educated classes among whose ranks are members of the medical profession, the law, the police and other state institutions as well as those who might be classed as intelligentsia (writers, teachers). Finally, there are the destitute who inhabit the doss-house of *The Lower Depths*, or the wanderers who choose the freedom and inevitable poverty of the open road. Secondly, an important linking characteristic between all these groups is the extended family, often with two or more gener-

ations living together, and frequently offering shelter to impoverished relations. Not uncommon for the time, such extended families feature in many theatrical and literary representations of Russian life in this period, for example, in the work of Chekhov, Tolstoy and Turgenev and the long heritage of nineteenth century gentry literature and drama. In Gorky's work, wherever the action is not set in one extended family, the structure is replicated by a complementary unifying grouping, of which the most famous and the most shocking is his doss-house of *The Lower Depths*. However, there are several variations on this theme: either lodgers also live in the house (*Counterfeit Coin*), or the action is set in a close-knit provincial town (*Barbarians, Somov*), or in a small summer colony (*Summerfolk*, *Chudaki* (*Eccentrics*, 1910)). Among the merchants, the women are generally mothers, daughters and daughters-in-law, rarely educated and not financially independent. In the professional classes they tend to be youngish, childless married women or impoverished relatives, usually educated; and in the third group, the women are prostitutes and street-sellers, but none opt for the open road. Thus generally the women are the underclass in terms of status, wealth, education and aspiration, though there are successful business women in the merchant group. The ones who migrate politically tend not to be the merchant women but come from the middle, professional category. They have little to lose in adopting the radical voice or being the agents of exposure of the ills of Russian society since their actions take place within the family group. Nevertheless, such women are seen to be potent agents for change.

Analysis of this character range also supplies an insight into Gorky's complexity as a writer. Gorky adopted a popular voice which he raised against the injustice of wealth and status, and used his creative work to enhance political awareness and expose the ills of a predominantly capitalist society. And yet those very characters he cast as villains have a fascination for the reader and spectator. The source lies in Gorky's own frequent but covert admiration for their strength and achievements. Prime among these characters in his plays are some of his capitalist villains, such as Bessemenov (*Philistines*), Antipa (*The Zykovs*), and criminals such as Satin (*The Lower Depths*) and Ptirim (*The Old Man*). One way of explaining this captivation is to link these characters to Gorky's admiration for Nietzsche and his apotheosis of the 'strong' man. Gorky's public antipathy to Dostoevsky, both to his ethics

of humility and to his negative attitude to Nietzsche, is used as a persuasive argument. However, this view would contradict Gorky's evident faith in a popular revolution. Gorky's revolutionary commitment was also a commitment to Russia. His plays recognise this fact, especially the plays written in exile, and if he found strength, which he knew Russia needed, then his examination of it was bound to be close and positive. This argument is legitimised by his last powerful hero, Egor Bulychev, who is brought to the point of acceptance of the Revolution, but too late, on his deathbed. Instinctively, Gorky saw that in Stalin's Russia he could go no further. However, this streak of admiration for strength introduces notes of ambivalence into his reputation as a committed socialist and revolutionary who would seek only the eradication of the former exploiting classes. Equally, the revolutionary, Marxist, Bolshevik, and latterly, Stalinist purposes are not constant themes in the plays. As there is conflict in the form of the plays so there is conflict within Gorky, the writer. This conflict was brushed aside in the presentation of Gorky as the father of socialist realism: anything inconvenient, his ambivalence, his humanism, his admiration for his villains, was left without comment.

Gorky's use of language is another response to the theatre contemporary to him, particularly in the early period. Through his language he introduced change and controversy into the theatre. It is immediately clear from the earliest plays that Gorky was venturing into new social groups, previously unrepresented on the Russian stage, though Ostrovsky had begun to move along this route. The adjectives 'realistic', 'earthy', 'contemporary', 'aphoristic', 'coarse' and 'colloquial' are usually applied to the kind of authentic language Gorky introduced from his earliest play. This use of language is especially marked in *The Lower Depths*, which is also the play most frequently quoted as an example of naturalism where one might reasonably expect the language to be suited to the environment. However, Gorky's language went well beyond the conventions of authenticity. Like any other form of media, language can be a political weapon. Counterpointing coarse, everyday speech to the language conventions of the contemporary stage, and even of *MAT*, made a political statement. Language out of its environment is either seen as inappropriate or threatening. Such language used on the stage to a predominantly middle-

class audience began by alienating them, then became threatening as it appeared to be laying claim to the very essence of art. It is to Gorky's undying credit that he made this claim on behalf of those who previously had little or no voice. In *The Lower Depths*, for example, his tramps, murderers, drunkards and thieves laid claim to areas of culture which had been exclusively colonised by the middle classes and above, including literature, philosophy and the stage. His plays made a mockery of the kind of elitist sentiments at the heart of the intelligentsia's attitudes to the mass of the Russian people and the kind of culture they should or should not have. Socially, *The Lower Depths* also proclaimed the human dignity of the 'have-nots' in the face of their exploitation by the 'haves', and this claim was chiefly made through the language Gorky adopted.

Authenticity is not the dominant factor when we examine, for example, the rhetoric of Satin's speeches in *The Lower Depths*. The reason lies in the fact that, despite all the authentic aspects, Gorky still produced a stage language and still bowed to many of its remaining conventions. Stage language cannot be a pure imitation of everyday speech patterns. Language has other functions in the construction of a play, which is subject to constraints of space and time, and which is just one of the many 'languages' with which the stage operates.[6] Gorky's language is also marked by less unconventional characteristics of the stage culture of his time. He frequently quotes poetry and song, and is a story-teller and speech-maker.

The fact that Gorky was also laying claim to areas previously owned by the elite should not escape our notice. Such use of language offended, but language in political texts as those produced by Gorky in his early years is not limited to offending the sense of decorum of the contemporary theatre-goer. Gorky's language articulated the ideology expressed by voices from hitherto unrepresented groups. His awareness of the need for change led him not simply to the articulation of radical political points of view but also to the attempt to transform the politics of his spectators. As a result, the claims on space written into his play texts

6 Patrice Pavis, *The Languages of the Stage*, New York, Performing Arts Journal Publications, 25, 1982; and Elaine Aston and George Savona, *Theatre as Sign System*, op. cit., are key works in this area.

are aggressive and confrontational. They ensure that in their potential performances his texts seek to colonise important notional spaces on behalf of these new users. This aggression is especially marked in *The Lower Depths* in the early period and in *Enemies* in the succeeding one.

The notional spaces inhabited by the theatrical stage space are crucial ones. In recent years, theatrical and dramatic space has been the focus of considerable analysis.[7] When placed in this context, Gorky is not exceptionally original in the way that space is written into his dramatic text to be realised in performance. What is special about Gorky's plays are the claims they assert on behalf of his new constituents. His plays take up a new standpoint in that vulnerable relationship, between the performance and the audience. Gorky turned the threshold between spectator and performance into a place of confrontation rather than a place of shared experience. Unlike many other texts in the naturalist/realist period his plays do not fall into the category of providing meat for a reader. It is part of their nature that their potential to achieve political transformation can only be truly realised in performance.

Theatrical space is a highly public space and, especially in the period and culture in which Gorky was writing, was vulnerable to colonisation by whichever political power sought the upper hand. Before the 1917 revolution Gorky's plays battled against establishment theatre to exert a claim on that space in different ways, often ensuring themselves a controversial reception. In Gorky's case there is another element crucial to his sensitivity to space, exile.[8] Gorky's experience of exile

7 As well as Patrice Pavis (*The Languages of the Stage*; *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*) an important work is Ann Ubersfeld, *Lire le Théâtre* for her indications of how to ascertain performance aspects within the written text. Gay McAuley, in her *Space in Performance. Making Meaning in Theatre*, has clarified the theoretical terminology of space through her studies of performance and the relationship between the written text and performance. I am particularly indebted to her explanations and definitions of 'theatre space' (pp.24–5), 'performance space' (p.26) and 'thematic space' (pp.32–3). Henri Lefebvre's seminal work, *The Production of Space*, elucidates the many different types of public space.

8 The implications of exile for the creative artist are extensively explored in Susan Rubin Suleiman (ed.), *Exile and Creativity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998. Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Places*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1995, provides a

sensitised him to the issues of ownership and occupation. The plays written during his two major periods of exile, 1906–1913 and 1921–1932 frequently conduct a colonising campaign within their performance texts. From exile, Gorky examined the status of various social groups in Russia during the pre-revolutionary period, including the bourgeoisie, the workers, the intelligentsia, the merchant and trading classes, the institutionalised powers such as the law, the uniformed police and the secret police and their rights and control over public space. His subject matter is unerringly Russia and Russian affairs.

The one establishment authority he was unable to confront was the Russian Orthodox Church since on-stage reference to the church, representation of religious characters or debate of church practices were forbidden until the Revolution. He perceived that the notional space occupied in the people's minds by religion was a valuable and fertile one. References to its power surface in a number of ways especially in the plays written between 1907 and 1916. His view of this religious capacity of the Russian people was essentially positive; he regarded it as a sign of strength, if a misapplication of strength. His references to religion take predominantly spatial forms. Plays of this middle period toyed with images of the Madonna and of the pietà (especially *The Last Ones*, *Eccentrics*, *Vassa Zheleznova*), as Gorky tried to demonstrate his mistrust of the path religion has taken under the Orthodox Church. His reaction to the staging of Dostoevsky's novels in this period stemmed from his fear that re-viewing Dostoevsky within the powerful medium of the stage could only act as a return to all that was in his view dangerously negative to his revolutionary purpose (suffering, submission, humility) in traditional Orthodoxy (for discussion of these points see introductory section to 'Off-stage' and material on individual plays).

Gorky's revolutionary involvement implied, perhaps, that he was not a believer, but the structures of religion nonetheless engaged him deeply. He saw that the unifying power of religion was needed by the revolutionary movement. Religion's mythology of resurrection and new life encapsulated his own revolutionary goals. In the early years of his

very insightful account into the issues of geographical location and performance in modern drama.

first exile he joined with his Marxist and Bolshevik colleagues Aleksandr Bogdanov and Anatoly Lunacharsky in the articulation of a new set of principles entitled *bogostroitel'stvo* or 'god building'. Appropriating the mythology of religion he argued that the people liberated by revolution from the class structures which privileged wealth and birth should become like gods themselves and acquire the power to work miracles and sustain a new life. Gorky was forced by Lenin to retract these ideas, but only after he had published a novel describing how the people might rise to these heights (*Confession*, 1908).

The ideas were retracted but Gorky's sense of the religiosity of the Russian people is refracted through his plays. This religiosity could lead to narrow-mindedness and bigotry but at its best showed that the Russian people were capable of great potential. In his later plays when debate of religion became possible Gorky satirised the established church and showed that if Russia's deep spirituality could be colonised to the political cause then nothing could stand in her way (*Egor Bulychev and the Others*).

An extension of the religious images mentioned above is Gorky's consistent tendency to metaphorise his material. This tendency has further consequences for the dialogue over space conducted by his plays. This use of metaphor began with the choice of early titles or early settings, possibly induced by the fierce censorship of the period. A glance at the titles of his early plays is revealing. It is not difficult to grasp the duality of *Philistines*, *The Lower Depths* (literally, 'at the bottom'), *Summerfolk*, *Children of the Sun* and *Barbarians*. The settings are symbolic and in dialogue with contemporary stage fashion. For example, the comfortable bourgeois home of much drama of this period becomes the battleground for family, generational and class conflict in *Philistines*. Furthermore this setting is, as Ubersfeld argues,[9] also a socio-political comment on the nature of this locus in bourgeois society as a whole. The relative comfort of *Philistines* is exchanged for the degradation of the doss-house in *The Lower Depths*, but here the dossers to some extent parody the patterns of the extended family. In later plays written from exile, the power of metaphor became even more evident. In *Enemies*, the

9 Ubersfeld, *Lire le Théâtre*, p.154.

classes faced one another across the fictional and locational battlefield of the stage space, while the political moral high ground of the radical intelligentsia seems to have been ceded to aesthetics by 1910 (*Eccentrics*). A poetics formed by his experiences of exile became a powerful frame: key motifs are the stranger (*Counterfeit Coin*), the journey and the return home (*The Zykovs* and *The Old Man*). In the final plays this 'spatial' symbolism focused on the heroic era of the revolutionary struggle. A key result is that Gorky produced a model of space utilisation for the theatre of socialist realism. He projected the heroics of revolution on an overwhelming and monumental scale (*Egor Bulychev and the Others*, *Dostigaev and the Others*). In so doing he incorporated the 1917 revolution's massive victory over all forms of public space, both physical and notional (political, social, cultural), into the all-embracing spatial effects that were to become the hallmark of Stalinist culture. The fact that Gorky chose to write about 1917 in his last plays retreating, as it were, from Stalinist Russia is particularly ironic in view of the fact of his becoming a style model.

Gorky's own writing on theatre as an art form, sparse as it is, was aware of the potency of performance. Gorky reviewed professional theatre productions when working as a journalist in the 1880s and 1890s, wrote memoirs about individual playwrights and made many individual comments in his letters. However, despite his early and continuing success as a dramatist Gorky wrote little directly about the theatre within the vast spread of his collected works. There are articles on individual writers such as Chekhov and Tolstoy but not focused on them as writers for the theatre.[10] However, there are two passages directly about Gorky's own experience of theatre. The later one is an edited version of the earlier, evidently written for his autobiography but not included in the published version.[11] The material was intended for inclusion in *V liudiakh* (*In the World*), the second volume of his autobiography.[12] The

10 M. Gor'kii, 'A. P. Chekhov' (1904, 1923), *PSS*, 6, pp.43–62; 'Lev Tolstoi' (1919, 1923), ibid., 16, pp.260–312.

11 'O teatre i tsirke' (1914) and 'Teatral'noe' (1914/1915), M. Gor'kii, ibid., 15, 1972, pp.554–66.

12 See note, ibid., p.634.

articles indicate that Gorky's first experience of theatre happened between 1882 and 1883.

Bearing in mind the unreliability of confessional, autobiographical material, we can nevertheless deduce three important points from these passages which are directly important to Gorky's approach to theatre. These three points concern the stage-audience relationship, repertoire and the power of theatre. Gorky describes the auditorium in graphic terms from his vantage point as an extra in the provincial theatre in Nizhnii Novgorod. Experiencing a state between dreaming and reality, he saw the auditorium as 'a great black bag stuffed full of people's heads as if they were melons', with an odd eye glinting here and there, and emitting a warm damp smell and the odd cough, shuffle or squeak.[13] The monstrous characteristics of this description perhaps underlie the general hostility to be found in Gorky's plays between stage and audience. Secondly, this material and the remaining short reference to the theatre of *In the World*,[14] belie the kind of theatre and repertoire the young Gorky experienced. Nizhnii Novgorod was a regular touring venue for provincial theatre companies, especially in the summer months. The repertoire consisted of popular contemporary Russian and European plays, mostly melodramas, laced with the odd Shakespeare or Schiller. Thus Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831) or a play by Dumas about the English actor Edmund Kean (*Kean, ou Désordre et Génie*, 1836) rubbed shoulders with *King Lear* or Schiller's *The Robbers* (1782) and with N. N. Kulikov's *Iudushka* adapted from M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin's novel *Gospoda Golov'evy* (*The Golovevs*, 1875–1880). In addition, we find references to long-forgotten plays by minor writers picked for their ability to rise to the demand for sensation and melodrama (and presumably supply good parts for the performers) as well as plays by Ostrovsky and the ever popular Gogol.[15]

What is surprising is that Gorky claimed that he was a spectator only once (he must mean in these early years, and this is where this type

13 'Teatral'noe', ibid., p.562.

14 Translated as *My Apprenticeship*, trans. Ronald Wilks, London: Penguin, 1974, Chapter 14, pp.264–6.

15 *PSS*, vol.15, p.637 (fnn to pp.563–5).

of source can be misleading). He found the experience of watching a well-known actor play an evil character so terrifying that he never returned:

> I experienced something indescribable: I wanted to run on to the stage and kill this incarnation of evil. I was nearly crying in my fury, but around me people were laughing, shouting, making me feel afraid and desperately confused.[16]

He thought this reaction of the people around him was linked to the 'dark, confused, morbidly cruel soul of Russian life' (p.566)[17] and compared his feelings to those he felt at his first acquaintance with Fedor Karamazov, the father of the family in Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the earlier version of this piece, 'In the Theatre and in the Circus',[18] Gorky had commented wryly in the paragraph following the above quotation that he stopped going to the theatre either because he was afraid of experiencing something similar again or because he wanted to preserve this experience in all its power. These comments were written in 1914 and were probably affected as much by Gorky's contemporary concerns as they were by memories of 30 years before.

Despite these early episodes, Gorky gained some experience of directing during a brief involvement in amateur theatre with his first wife Ekaterina Pavlova Peshkova (Peshkov was Gorky's real name) in the village of Manuilovka, near Poltava in the Ukraine. Two visits in 1897 and 1900 differed considerably in their repertoire, as Gary Thurston indicates. The first summer was entirely Russian and Ukrainian, the second was foreign: an adaptation of Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* and Hauptmann's *Fűhrmann Henschel* (*Drayman Henschel* (1898)).[19]

In the custom of his times, as a performed dramatist Gorky would give initial readings of his plays, attend rehearsals and was very much in dialogue with contemporary theatre. He visited the theatres of the capital cities whenever possible. His close involvement in *MAT* after 1902 led to

16 'Teatral'noe', ibid., p.566.
17 Ibid., p.566.
18 'O teatre i tsirke', ibid., p.556.
19 Gary Thurston, *The Popular Theatre Movement in Russia*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998, pp.189–90.

his liaison with one of its leading actresses Mariia Andreeva, who accompanied him into his first period of exile in America and Italy.

Given all these characteristics of his dramatic style and evidence of his theatrical experience, it is hard to remain satisfied with the accepted classification of Gorky's works as socialist realism or politically committed writing. One important outcome of the infiltration of melodrama, for example, is that it prevents his plays from being conceived only as exercises in bourgeois pessimism or critical realism. The plays retain the popular voice of melodrama. However, the presence of this popular voice also facilitates the misleading and anachronistic application of the term socialist realism. Both bourgeois pessimism and critical realism are politically defensive terms in the Stalinist period chosen to explain why Gorky focused on the bourgeoisie in his works, and why he chose a middle-class institution (*MAT*), rather than a popular theatre, to stage them. This choice of arena was dictated, surely, by the important need of the time, that if you were a Marxist, you chose to hasten the decline of the bourgeoisie rather than seek popularity among the lower classes. The irony for Gorky was, of course, that at first his plays did not reach that popular audience at all. So seeking socialist realist aspects in the early plays is misleading. Socialist realism belongs to the politicised 1930s, not this early period. Socialist realism is directed towards embracing a mass audience, offers positive models, carries an explicit political ideology and is utopian. Where Gorky set up his socialist models in the early plays, they were there to terrify the bourgeoisie. That is why these heroes are larger than life, more upright than god himself, and aggressive to boot and, in the eyes of the bourgeoisie, the villains of the piece (see discussions of Nil (*Philistines*), Satin (*Lower Depths*) and Maria L'vovna (*Summerfolk*), among others). Ultimately, the presence of melodrama made his plays widely accessible. They spoke to the masses whilst also debating with the bourgeoisie. The greatest irony was that Gorky exploited melodrama to undermine the middle class including the ineffective intelligentsia, the very social groups which had chosen to sideline melodrama as inferior to 'real art'.

As implied in what has preceded, the major dramatic influences on Gorky's work came from Ostrovsky, Chekhov and the creators of the new drama of the mid- to late-nineteenth century in Europe: Ibsen, Hauptmann and Strindberg. Reference is made to Gorky's relations with

these figures in 'Debut' and 'Off-Stage' and in discussions of individual plays. There was, however, a marked change in response as Gorky developed his style as a dramatist through the three designated periods. By his final phase (see 'Peripeteia'), he had indeed come through a 'turning point'. He was now very much his own master to the extent of rewriting some earlier work as if to deny the presence of that earlier Gorky, responsive to other dramatists. He redirected his dramatic style, restricting himself in period, aiming himself to become a model but in the process appearing retrenched and defensive.

Through this study of the plays as a complete body of work, all these colourful aspects will be examined in their source contexts and their ribbons of development traced. These aspects often clash and produce surprising moments of revelation of both Gorky's political purpose and his frequent ambivalence toward it. His style does not encourage reconciliation or compromise. He is a complex and sardonic dramatist whose sensitivity to the needs of performance makes his plays unexpectedly, given their dour reputation, entertaining. My hope is to return some of the warts to Gorky's image and 'remove the make-up' (as the recent biographer aptly put it)[20] so that his complexity and his ambivalence can be better appreciated. Then his plays can take their rightful, unsanitised place in the history of Russian theatre and on the international stage.

20 V. I. Baranov, *Gor'kii bez grima* (Gorky without the make-up), op. cit.