

Intersection of Society and the Arts

The Soviet Circus in the 1920s-1930s



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Circus Culture in the Soviet Union

The Soviet circus in the 1920s-1930s existed in a unique situation.



The circus is a familiar venue for physical and artistic expression, popular throughout Europe and much of the rest of the world. The circus has a reputation for entertainment value and humor. These qualities were not readily identified with early Soviet society. However, rather than eschewing the circus, Soviet society at all levels embraced it. The circus became an essential part of the Soviet state, with stable circus venues constructed at a rapid rate throughout the Soviet Union. Circus audiences continued to grow throughout the interwar years.

Circus work became serious and well-respected, with circus performers of the era readily identified, even today, as some of the country's most famous and iconic names.



During the transition into the Soviet era, the circus became a location for popular gathering, a testing arena for political interpretation, and a training ground for performers.

During unstable years, the circus became a point of unexpected stability and independence, while retaining its reputation for unfiltered and awe-inspiring human expression.



The circus was given equal status to theater, film, ballet, and opera at the beginning of the Soviet era.

Attendance was always very high and numerous standing circus venues were constructed.

In 1929, the Moscow Circus School became the first state-run circus training facility, ensuring high-quality performances coupled with government oversight.

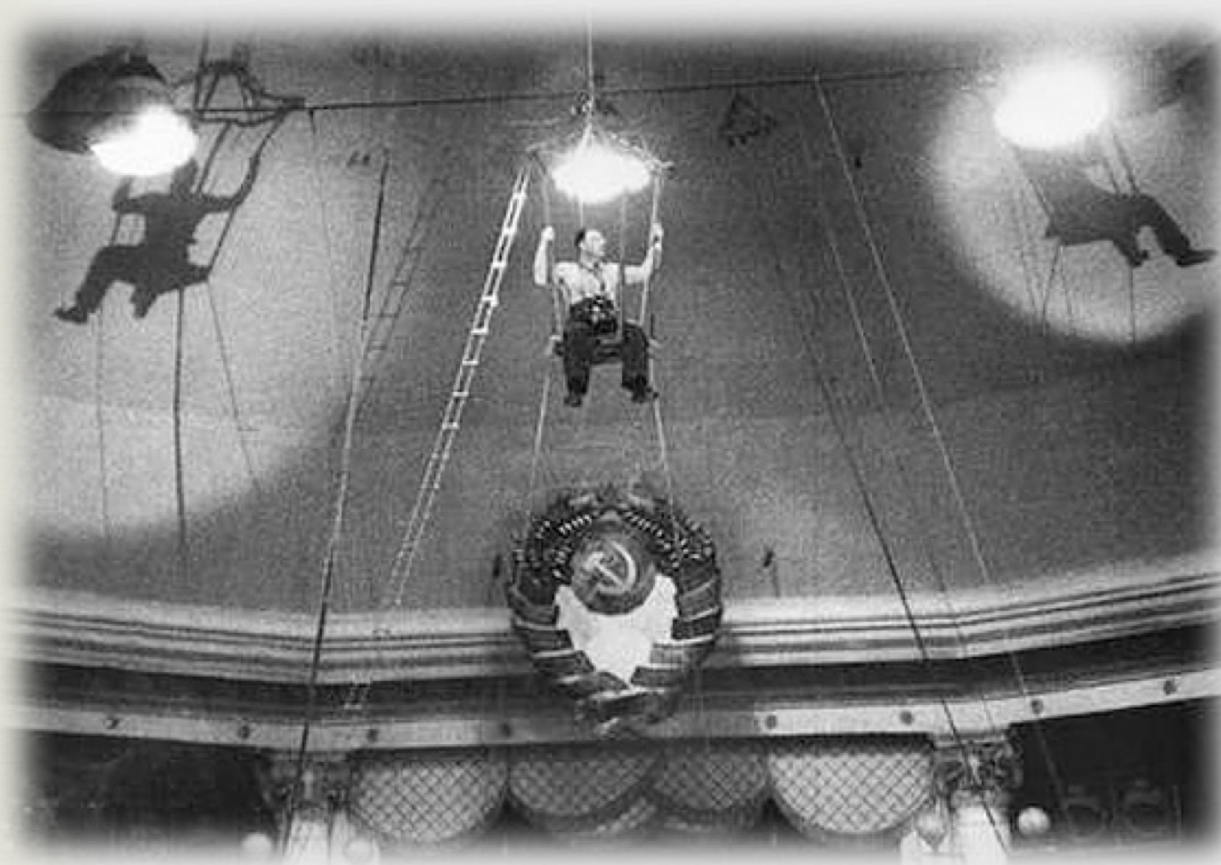


The Political Circus



The political value of the circus was realized early in the twentieth century. As places suited to mass gatherings and large audiences, circus venues were utilized for demonstrations and planning by many groups.

After the February Revolution, the circus arena became the site of crowded political meetings, where speakers included Lenin, Trotsky, and other important figures.



In 1919, Lenin mandated the state appropriation of private circuses.

In 1922, all circuses in the Soviet Union came under the centralized control of the Central Administration of State Circuses (Tsentral'noe upravlenie gosudarstvennykh tsirkov, TsUGTs).

The nationalization of the circus gave the state direct control over the trajectory of the circus's message to the public.

Multiple meanings could be embedded in a circus performance. When paired with the bravery and strength needed for the daring feats, the circus maintained a wide appeal, both for viewers and political participants. The Soviet government was able to embed layers of meaning within a performance, while audiences in their turn were able to provide their own interpretation.



Literary Circus

The circus appears in a number of literary works in the 1920s-1930s.

Anton Chekhov's short story "Kashtanka" (1887) gives an episodic account of the circus from the perspective of a lost dog. The dog leaves the circus behind as "a long, confusing, disturbing dream" after her reunion with her former master.



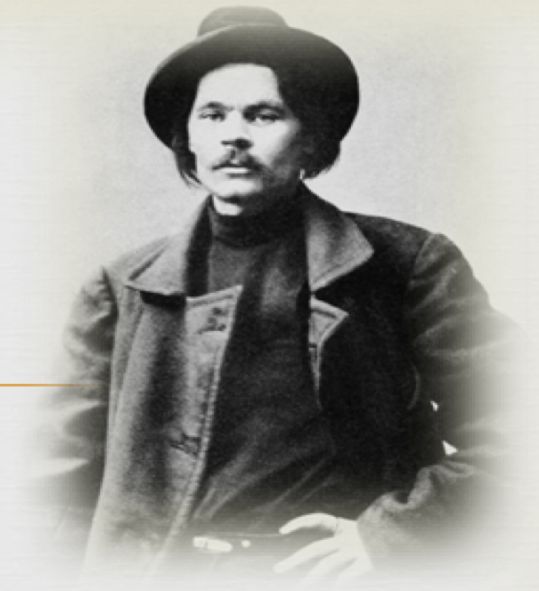
Another author, Aleksandr Kuprin, gives a description of the modern circus in his short story "The White Poodle", in which a young acrobat dreams of joining the circus and seeing "lamps thick as stars, all electric". For many writers of the 1920s-1930s, the experience of the circus shaped their artistic outlook and creative methods.



Yury Olesha expressed in his notebooks his boyhood desire to become an acrobat: “To be able to do somersaults was the object of my dreams... Perhaps the dream of being able to do somersaults was the first stirring in me of the artist, the first sign that my attention would be directed toward the world of imagination, toward the creation of things new and out of the ordinary, toward brightness and beauty” (Olesha, *No Day*, 72).

In his novella *The Three Fat Men* (1927), Olesha presents a fairy tale in which the high-wire performer Tibul takes part in a revolution against the oppressive control of an immoral aristocracy.

Maxim Gorky also expressed an interest in becoming a circus performer, an experience he wrote about in his autobiographical story "In the Theatre and at the Circus". He made use of this interest in the circus to create "The Hard Worker Wordflow", in which he planned to utilize circus performers and acrobatics for the production.



Other authors, notably Vladimir Mayakovsky, drew from the circus in order to experiment with literary form and technique. Mayakovsky's poetry makes extensive use of a ladder-effect by spacing words apart from one another in a progressive movement. Reading Mayakovsky's poetry at times resembles acrobatic circus leaps, as the reader jumps from one word to the next across a variety of distances.



The émigré author Vladimir Nabokov draws attention to acrobatics in one of his poems, "Shade" (1925), which focuses on the shadows that are cast on the wall at a height above the performers. Such connections between word and movement formed a basis for later experiments in literary form.



Circusization of Theatre

The circus was seen as a diverse and eclectic community that allowed for new ideas.

The term “circusization” was coined by Eisenstein to describe the infection of the venerable tradition of theatre by the more whimsical realm of circus tricks.

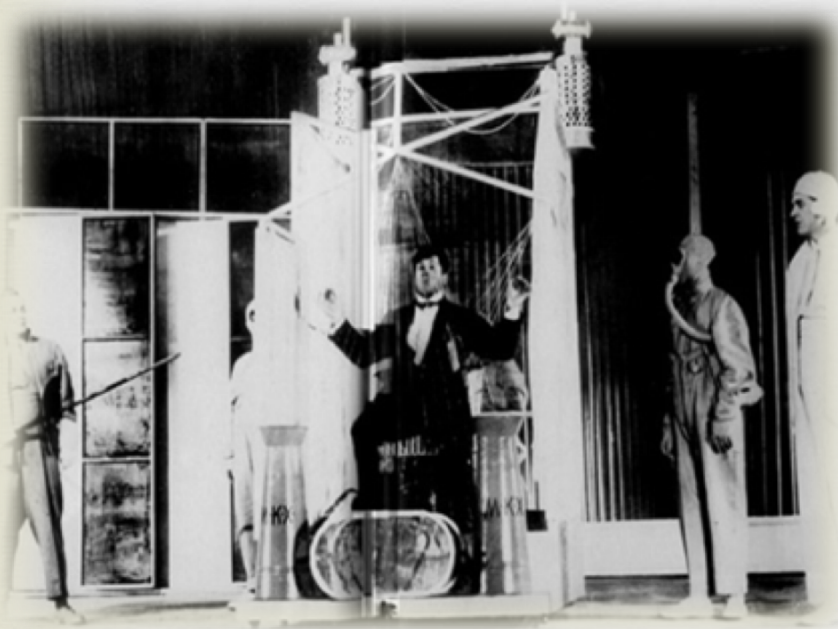


Theatrical productions by Meyerhold, Tairov, Okhlopkov, and others made frequent use of circus stunts and circus props.

Mayakovsky invented his own term to describe his melding of pantomime and dialogue: “*Melomime*”.

Moskva Gorit [*Moscow is Burning*], which premiered in 1930 in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the 1905 revolution, followed in the tradition of *Mystery-Bouffe*'s combination of circus atmosphere and political pageantry.

Other directors adapted classic plays using acrobatics, clowning, and illusions, thus reforming them to suit the modern era. Experiments in circusization formed the basis for the influential 20th century aesthetic principles of constructivism, biomechanics, and montage.



There is a mutual relationship between circus and theatre rooted in a shared method of production and presentation. Both depend on live performance and the immediate reaction of an audience. In the 1900s and 1910s, the traditional boundaries separating artistic genres began to be blurred, combined, and removed.



By the 1920s and 1930s, the interrelationship between the theatre and the circus resulted in crossover genres. Large-scale pantomime productions at circus arenas began to include singing and dialogue while maintaining a dependence on circus equipment and feats of circus performers. In 1921, FEKS (*Fabrika Ektsentricheskogo Aktera* [*Factory of the Eccentric Actor*]) called in its manifesto for “new forms of theatricality based on... ‘circusization’, music-hall variety, and fairground attractions”. Arguments about the validity of combining circus and theatrical models continued throughout the interwar period.



Film and The Circus Ring



Film as a popular art form readily adopted circus stunts and performances into its scenarios and plots. Many iconic clown routines of the Soviet circus trace their roots to early foreign film comedies featuring Pat and Patachon and Charlie Chaplin.



The most well-known performer to emerge from this milieu was Mikhail Rumyantsev, who was one of the first pupils of the Moscow Circus School upon its opening in 1927. Under his stage name, Karandash, Rumyantsev revolutionized the portrayal of the clown for the Soviet circus.



His persona became an everyman rather than a buffoon, taking his cue from Chaplin's mustache, hat, and baggy pants.



By removing the typical mask of the clown, Karandash allowed for the audience to relate to him, forming a unique dynamic between the clown's successful clumsiness and the rehearsed feats of the other performers.

Throughout the 1920s-30s, the circus served as the backdrop for ideological portrayals of society. Film directors made use of the populism of the circus in order to provide social commentary and support socialist ideals.



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The Literary Circus

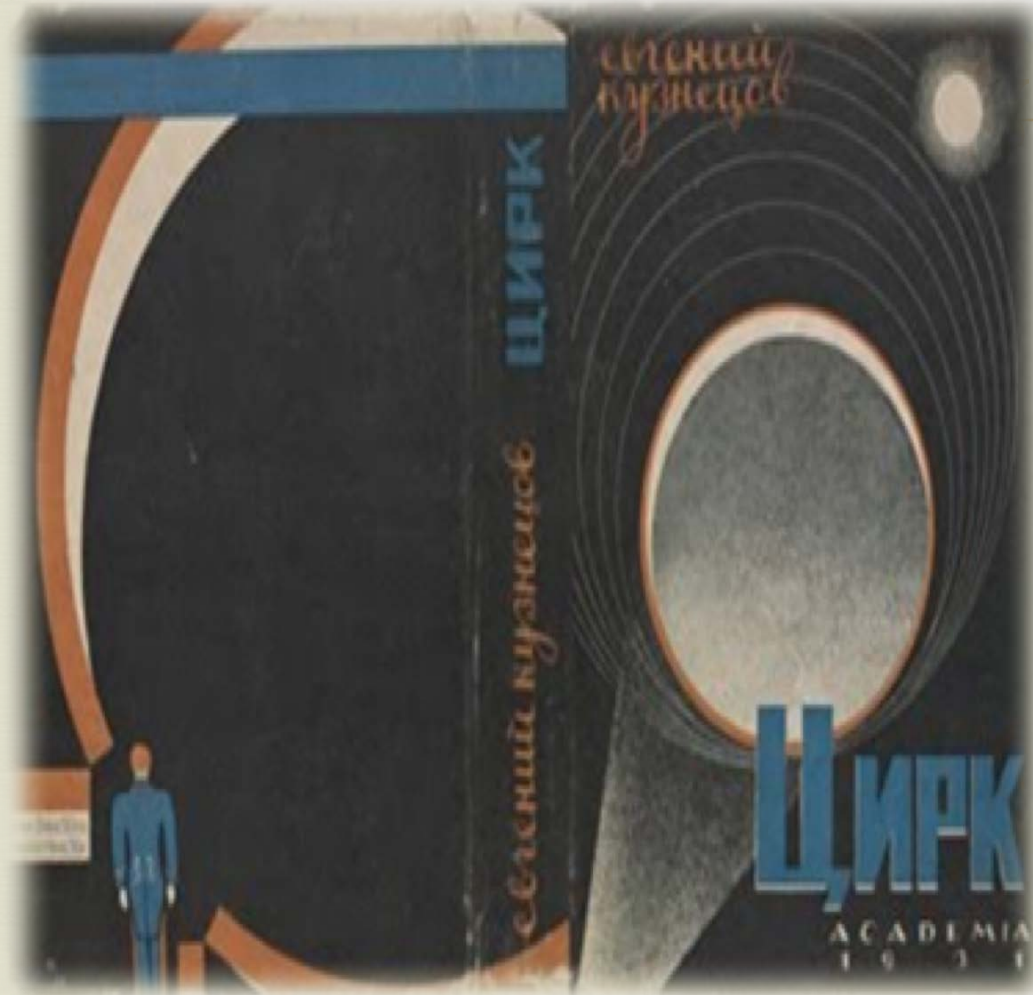
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