

## Constructivism in Ukrainian Theater

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CONSTRUCTIVISM, like other avant-garde movements, was viewed by its creators as an international art. It is no accident that the multitude of manifestoes and programmatic articles, slogans, and appeals always used terms like “human being,” “world,” and “universe”—although they did so without defining them more precisely or concretely, or with even the slightest mention of a particular territory where the art was expected to carry out its transformative mission. Nevertheless, some specificity was implied, although directed at features of a different order and expressed, as a rule, by the adjective “new”: new person, new world, new art. However, theory is one thing and practice is something else altogether. In reality, constructivism, especially constructivism in the theater, proved to be an art that was powerfully rooted in tradition—above all, in national tradition.

The art historian Nikolai Punin, reflecting on Russian art of the 1910s, perceptively noted: “Thus indeed...cubism, which had appeared to be an international art form of a new generation, was broken by national, and then by individual traditions.”<sup>1</sup> The same may be said of Ukrainian constructivist theater design, albeit tempering the verb a bit: perhaps not broken, but rather colored, reorganized, and transformed by the traditions of Ukrainian art.

Of course, the formula that Liubov’ Popova presented in her set design for Vsevolod Meyerhold’s production *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (premiered 1922) (fig. 1, below) may also be applied in a general way to describe the works of Ukrainian constructivist theater, but only insofar

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1. “Таким образом...форма—...т.е. кубизм,—казавшаяся интернациональной формой нового поколения, сломана национальными, а затем и индивидуальными традициями.” N. Punin, “Obzor novykh techenii v iskusstve Peterburga,” *Russkoe iskusstvo*, 1923, no. 1, 18, accessed 6 October 2017, <http://www.pv-gallery.ru/information/8914/?PAGE=1&lang=ru>.

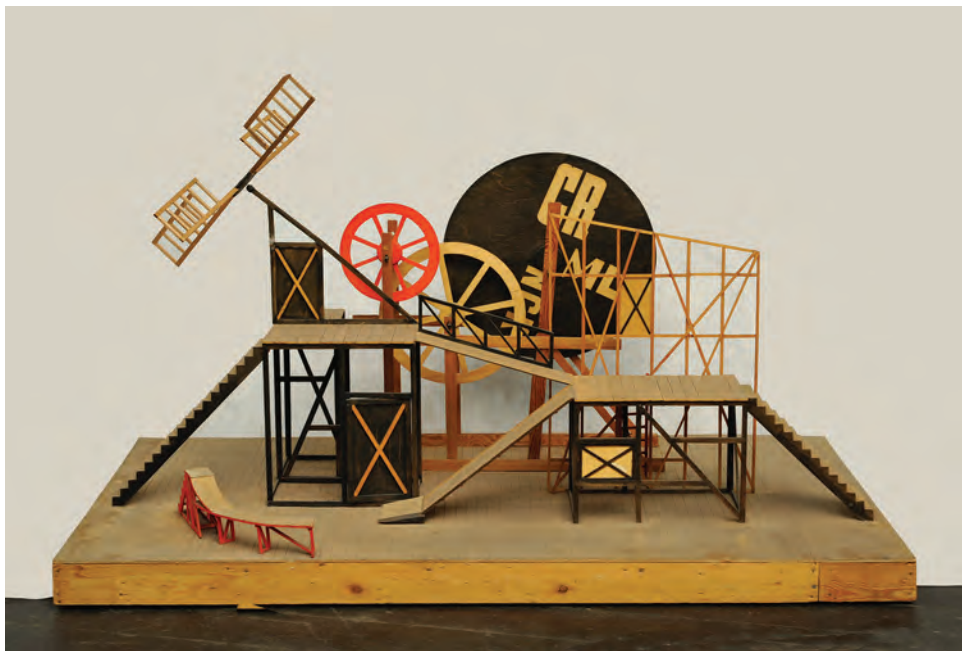


Figure 1. Liubov' Popova. Set design for Vsevolod Meyerhold's production of Fernand Crommelynck's play *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. State Higher Theatre Workshops, V. E. Meyerhold's Free Workshop, Moscow. 1922. Reconstruction of 1967. Wood, plywood, metal, gouache. 73.5 x 135.5 x 61.5 cm. Collection of the A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, Moscow. Inv. no. HB 2244.

as it characterizes the main idea of that theater: the idea of construction. Regarding everything else, the Ukrainian version of constructivist stage design appears to be—particularly with the distance of time—uniquely original and, indeed, national in the fullest sense of that word.

Undoubtedly, much in Ukrainian constructivist design can be explained by its genesis, in part by those endeavors and presentiments that directly preceded constructivism. Equally important were the initial experiments of those who were destined before long to become the creators of the new Ukrainian scenography. It would not be an exaggeration to say that by virtue of its originality—or, to be more precise, the direction of its explorations—the new Ukrainian scenography was indebted in many respects to the art of Alexandra Exter. It so happened that the main heroes of Ukrainian constructivist stage design—Anatol' Petryts'kyi, Vadym Meller, and Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov—were all connected with her in one way or another. The director Les' Kurbas also considered Exter his friend.

Alexandra Exter and her relationship to the Ukrainian avant-garde is an extraordinarily important topic that has not been fully considered to this day or studied in detail. The following article will focus on only one of its aspects.

In postrevolutionary Kyiv, Alexandra Exter's studio was a kind of laboratory for new art—new painting and new scenography. What is important here is that during this period, the artist devoted herself almost completely to the problems of abstract painting. Constructivist ideas were still being intuited and would not become a permanent feature of her art until two or three years later. For the time being, Exter was painting abstracts exclusively, calling them “color structures,” “color dynamics,” and “color constructions.” Without going into a review of those works now, I will merely note that according to their pictorial qualities, they differ fundamentally from everything that can be observed in similar types of explorations pursued, for example, by Liubov' Popova, Nadezhda Udal'tsova, and Alexander Rodchenko, who were also focused on abstract art at this time. The differences lie, above all, in the area of color content. The foundation for Exter's color was the canons of Ukrainian folk art: its color patterns and compositional principles. Moreover, she used them consciously and programmatically: in Exter's view, the new painting was not at all an “international style” but rather art that logically developed the national traditions of art of the preceding epochs. What is more, it was precisely in that kind of continuity that she saw both the viability of the new forms and prospects for their development.

Exter's ideas had a great impact: it was impossible not to yield to them; it was impossible not to share them. They found a special resonance among young artists. Again, from the distance of time, an “Exter period” can be clearly discerned in the creative work of all those who were linked to her. (Incidentally, nearly all critics and contemporaries noted this.) Furthermore, many people who visited her studio were caught up by the idea of creating a new Ukrainian art, one that would be at once absolutely European and naturally included in universal artistic processes and, at the same time, genuinely national, retaining its uniqueness. An art that would speak the language of the latest trends, but would also speak about what was its own, what was national.

Here, another circumstance must be mentioned. In Kyiv in 1918 Exter did little work for the theater, only occasionally designing for Bronislava Nijinska's ballet performances. To be sure, together with the future world-renowned choreographer Exter was in the process of developing the theory of the movement of color in space and testing several of its theses in Nijinska's Kyiv School of Movement. However, by that time



Figure 2. Production scene from Innokenty Annensky's play *Famira Kifared*. Director Alexander Tairov. Set design Alexandra Exter. State Kamernyi Theater, Moscow. 1916. Photographic paper, gelatin silver print. 17.2 x 23.2 cm. Collection of the A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, Moscow. Inv. no. КП 322731/2 ФСА 104540.

Exter had already designed sets for two productions at the Kamernyi Theater (figs. 2 and 3, above and at right), in which it was impossible not to feel a certain threshold, the threshold of cubist phraseology. This scenography was but a step away from constructivist scenography (see fig. 4, at right, for her stage setting created in 1924). Exter took the final step in 1922 with the architectonics marking her set design for *Ballet satanique*—Kas'ian Goleizovskii's unrealized production set to the music of Alexander Scriabin (fig. 5, below).

These facts are mentioned here in order to outline, if only briefly, the range of ideas inspiring Exter's studio in Kyiv. These ideas lay at the origins of and served as a point of departure for the new Ukrainian scenography, and perhaps allowed it to make itself known so confidently and so clearly from the start.

From its earliest appearances, Ukrainian scenography declared that it understood construction not to be a mere "apparatus for the actor's performance" (Ivan Aksenov), not at all as some sort of spatial structure



Figure 3. Alexandra Exter. Set design sketch for Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé*. Jochanaan and Salome's scene. Director Alexander Tairov. State Kamernyi Theater, Moscow. 1917. Gouache and pencil on paper. 22.6 x 31 cm. Collection of the A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, Moscow. Inv. no. КП 238272/1539.

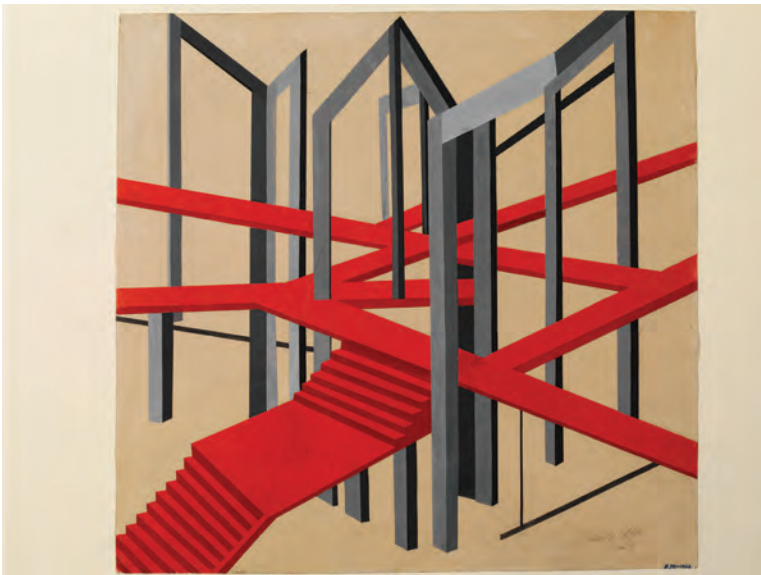


Figure 4. Alexandra Exter. Design for a constructivist stage setting. 1924. Gouache on paper. 50.5 x 53 cm. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 5. Alexandra Exter. Set design sketch for an unrealized production of *Ballet satanique* based on Alexander Scriabin's *Poème satanique*. Created for Kas'ian Goleizovskii's Moscow Chamber Ballet. 1922. Gouache, pencil and India ink on paper. 48.1 x 55.1 cm. Collection of the A. A. Bakhrushin State Theatre Museum, Moscow. Inv. no. КП 93635.

bereft of any visual meaning apart from the action. For Ukrainian artists, construction on the stage was a rather independent object, invested not only with possibilities of functionality, but also emotional and visual expression. To be sure, the scenography revealed itself most fully and powerfully during performance, in the interplay of scenery and actor. However, it had an effect even apart from the action; one could not dismiss it or not take it into account.

In contrast to the ascetic, formulaic nature of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, Anatol' Petryts'kyi's design for Gogol's *Vii* (adapted by Ostap Vyshnia, Ivan Franko Theater, 1924) (figs. 6, at right; 7–8, below) presents a construction that was developed no less constructively than Liubov' Popova's installation, but that also seemed to explode, blazing with color, giving birth to color. In Petryts'kyi's set design, constructivism (or, if you wish, the engineering element) emerged on equal terms

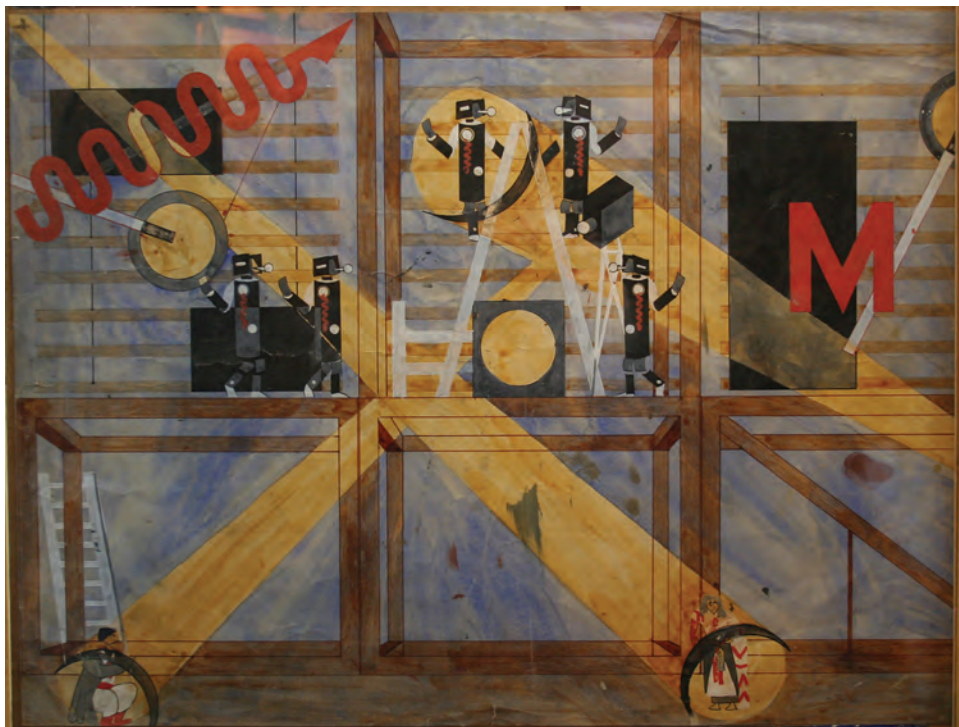


Figure 6. Anatol' Petryts'kyi. Set design for Gogol's *Vii*, as adapted by Ostap Vyshnia. Act 2, "On Mars." Director Hnat Iura. Ivan Franko Theater, Kharkiv. 1924. Watercolor and gouache on paper. 47 x 68 cm. Collection of the Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinema of Ukraine, Kyiv.

with an unstoppable striving toward a self-actualization of the coloristic world. It even seemed at times that the construction existed only in order to allow that world a maximum freedom of expression.

After *Vii*, the principle of uniting strong constructive elements and intense color accents would become the defining characteristic in other set designers' works. Although different artists realized it differently, it was present in practically all the works of Ukrainian constructivist scenography.

Critics in the 1920s understandably called Petryts'kyi's constructivism a "compromise"; at that time it was not possible to call it by any other name. Today, when the postulates of the movement are already part of history, it is more correct to speak not about this or that degree of conformity to the line of orthodox constructivism, but about the artists' search for their own way amid general explorations and programs.



Figures 7–8. Production scenes from Gogol's *Vii*, as adapted by Ostap Vyshnia. Director Hnat Iura. Set design Anatol' Petryts'kyi. Ivan Franko Theater, Kharkiv. 1924. Collection of the Central State Archive-Museum of Literature and Art of Ukraine, Kyiv. Fond 237, op. 2, spr. 139, ark. 3 (fig. 7) and ark. 2 (fig. 8).

Indeed, much of Petryts'kyi's work goes beyond the bounds of the constructivist aesthetic. One gets the impression that he did not even strive for purity or strict implementation. On the contrary: in every possible way he blurred and supplemented this aesthetic, and included in the constructivist image elements of a completely nonconstructivist nature. What is curious is that, all the while, the constructivist foundation of his works never collapsed; it never became something secondary, a purely utilitarian device, or simply a tribute to the ideas of the time.

In discussing Petryts'kyi's constructivism, one should mention that a surprising game was always being revealed in the artist's designs: the construction in them would appear as something extraordinarily important—as the basis and principle of everything—and then at certain moments, seeming to reject its dominant role, it would part with it without the slightest regret. This did not at all mean that the functions of construction were purely utilitarian or subordinate. Construction always found an opportunity to assert itself and to demonstrate its aesthetic value in the artist's productions. Petryts'kyi's connecting of verticals and horizontals was always so striking, and the angles and diagonals so explicit and precise. His latticed structures were highly resonant, as if pierced by bright and pure sounds. Space asserted itself triumphantly, and it seemed as though the artist gave it the chance to show itself in all its fullness. It was precisely this kind of construction that would suddenly seem to forget about the strictures of constructivism for a time. It would yield, becoming an unbridled whirlwind of paints and colors, a whirlwind that was perceived as elemental, unrestrained in any way or by anything, and subordinated to one thing alone: its own freedom and power.

Anatol' Petryts'kyi was not generally inclined to fetishize any one artistic trend, style, or device. In the words of the critic Vasyl' Khmuryi, Petryts'kyi

was never a constructivist in the theater for the sake of constructivism for two reasons. First, he did not deal with purely experimental theater in his line of work; consequently, he was never faced with an assignment where construction was given primacy in the resolution of a stage design problem. Never having found himself in this position, but encountering constructivism as the slogan of the time, the artist, of course, took a critical stance toward it from the standpoint of his own specific tasks. He did not avoid using the principle of constructivity in solving one specific problem or another, but neither did he adopt it without reservation. Rather, he conducted experiments with constructivist design principles inasmuch as he needed them in

order to master the cube of the stage in all its dimensions and reveal the emotional power of various materials. Second, in his enthusiasm for these experiments he did not overlook the axiom that the theater is a synthesized composite with three categories of emotionally affecting material: acoustic, movement-related, and visual.<sup>2</sup>

There is much in this statement one can agree with—above all, with the fact that Petryts'kyi truly was not a “constructivist for the sake of constructivism.” However, it is impossible to concur with Khmuryi's view that the artist had a critical attitude toward constructivism. The principles of constructivism were not subject to any kind of critical reassessment in his scenography; they were never discredited. The artist simply had a very broad understanding of constructivism, mainly as a phenomenon that was organically linked to other artistic systems, none of which he gave preference to. It is no accident that during the period of his “constructivist scenography,” shows were staged in which he seemed to have forgotten that the constructivist aesthetic was dominant, that it was the identifying marker of the time.

At the same time as he was working on the constructivist set designs for Adolphe Adam's ballet *Le Corsaire* (1926) (figs. 9, at right; 10–11, below), Petryts'kyi designed the set for Alexander Borodin's *Prince Igor* (1926/1927) (figs. 12–13, below, 1929 production), in which constructivist principles are barely perceptible, overshadowed as they are by the powerful architectural phrasing of twelfth-century Kyivan Rus'. Soon after *Le Corsaire*, Petryts'kyi constructed the stage installation for Rossini's *William Tell* (1927) (fig. 14, below), a set that seemed to resurrect the canons of expressionist theater and call to mind many spatial decisions

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2. Петрицький ніколи не виступав на театрі конструктивістом для конструктивізму, і то з двох причин. По-перше, він не мав діла з театром суто експериментальною системою роботи, отже ніколи не стояв перед конструктивним завданням, піднесеним до вихідної точки розв'язання сценічного завдання. Не будиши ні разу поставленим в таке становище, а зіткнувшись з конструктивізмом, як з гаслом часу, художник, цілком зрозуміло, критично поставився до нього з погляду своїх конкретних завдань. Він не уникав користуватися принципом конструктивності в розв'язанні того чи того конкретного завдання, але й не ставив “жени Цезаря вище підозрення.” Він робив експерименти з конструктивними принципами оформлення, оскільки вони йому самому були потрібні, щоб опанувати сценічний куб у всіх помірах і виявити емоціональну силу різних матеріалів. По-друге, в захваті цими експериментами він не забув однієї аксіоми, не забув, що театр—синтезований комплекс з трьома категоріями емоціонально-впливового матеріалу: акустичного, моторного, і зорового. V. Khmuryi, “Anatol' Petryts'kyi,” *Zhyttia i revoliutsiia*, 1928, no. 7, 153–54, accessed 6 October 2017, <http://elib.nplu.org/view.html?id=1168>.



Figure 9. Anatol' Petryts'kyi. Set design for Adolphe Adam's ballet *Le Corsaire*. Director M. Moiseev. State Opera Theater, Kharkiv. 1926. Collection of the Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinema of Ukraine, Kyiv.

in the productions of Emil Pirchan and Leopold Jessner. The fact that these designs appeared within the span of a year is extraordinarily important, not only in light of the development of Petryts'kyi's own spatial ideas, but also from the standpoint of Ukrainian productions of the 1920s in general. At this time, the Ukrainian stage was frequently the site of clashes or, rather, the simultaneous coexistence of two diametrically opposed aesthetics: the aesthetic of expressionist performance and the aesthetic of constructivist performance, with the second serving, as a rule, as a sort of foundation for the first.

An entry from Les' Kurbas's diary demonstrates this:

Expressionism is the only art of our age. Only someone who has no room left for deep feelings, that is, a relativist who is forever cut off from life and from the universe, can everywhere discern only form and be struck by its repetition...

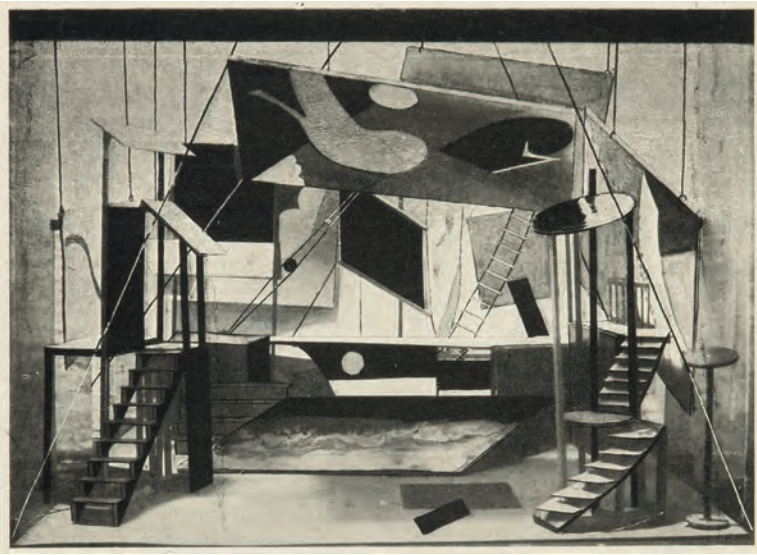


Figure 10. Anatol' Petryts'kyi. Set design for Adolphe Adam's ballet *Le Corsaire*. Act 1. Director M. Moiseev. State Opera Theater, Kharkiv. 1926. Reproduced from Anatol' Petryts'kyi, *Teatral'ni stroï*, text by V. Khmuryi (Kharkiv: DVU, 1929), 8. Theatre collection, f TS 239.328, Houghton library, Harvard University.

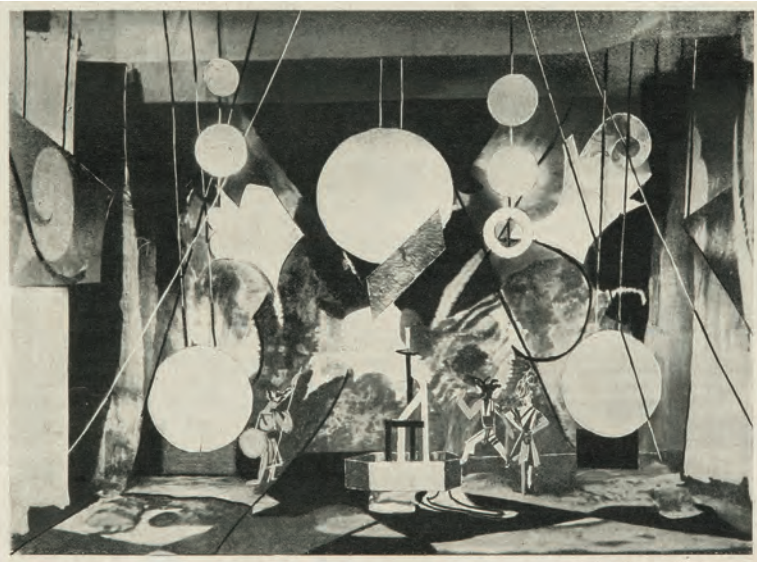


Figure 11. Anatol' Petryts'kyi. Set design for Adolphe Adam's ballet *Le Corsaire*. Act 3, scene 1. Director M. Moiseev. State Opera Theater, Kharkiv. 1926. Reproduced from Anatol' Petryts'kyi, *Teatral'ni stroï*, text by V. Khmuryi (Kharkiv: DVU, 1929), 9. Theatre collection, f TS 239.328, Houghton library, Harvard University.



Figure 12.  
Production scene  
from Alexander  
Borodin's opera  
*Prince Igor*. Director  
Serhii Karhal's 'kyi.  
Set design Anatol'  
Petryts 'kyi. State  
Opera Theater,  
Kharkiv. 1929  
production.  
Collection of the  
Central State  
Archive-Museum of  
Literature and Art  
of Ukraine, Kyiv.  
Fond 237, op. 2, spr.  
141, ark. 4.



Figure 13. Production scene from Alexander Borodin's opera *Prince Igor*. Director Serhii Karhal's'kyi. Set design Anatol' Petryts'kyi. State Opera Theater, Kharkiv. 1929 production. Collection of the Central State Archive-Museum of Literature and Art of Ukraine, Kyiv. Fond 237, op. 2, spr. 141, ark. 1.

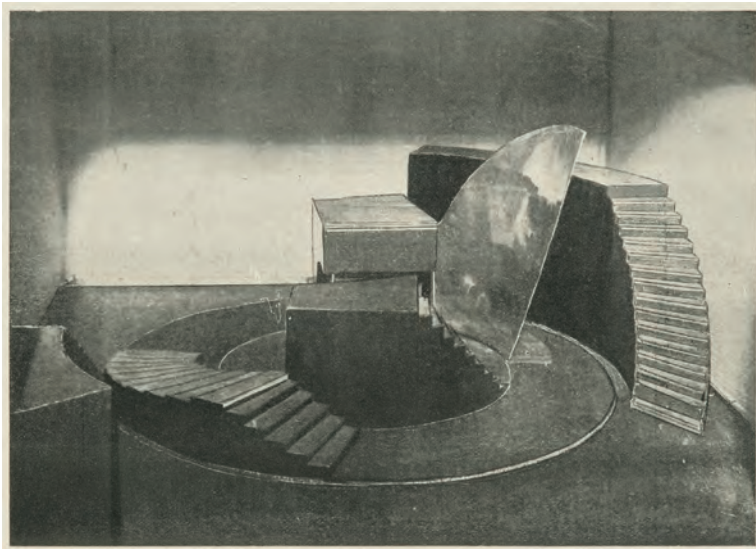


Figure 14. Anatol' Petryts'kyi. Set design for Gioachino Rossini's opera *William Tell*. Act 2, scene 3. Kharkiv. 1927. Reproduced from Anatol' Petryts'kyi, *Teatral'ni stroï*, text by V. Khmuryi (Kharkiv: DVU, 1929), 13. Theatre collection, f TS 239.328, Houghton library, Harvard University.

Inasmuch as constructivism is of an intellectual order and origin, it is the latest, unnecessary phase of academism in art.

Art is creative trembling in the face of the unknown. One must realize: I know that I don't know anything.<sup>3</sup>

Kurbas recorded this entry on 4 April 1923, and on April 27 he would put on a production of Georg Kaiser's *Gas* featuring a set design that may be regarded in a sense as the Berezil' Theater's first constructivist experience (figs. 15–16, below). I say “in a sense” because Vadym Meller's set presented a certain intermediate plasticity. It featured distinctly expressionistic elements (such explicit and dynamic volumes and masses), but, at the same time, these elements seemed to disintegrate within the boundaries of the set, exposing the carcasses of the volumes, the skeletons of the masses. This was still far from the construction that was being asserted by constructivism, but it was a construction that was already becoming liberated, one that already had a presentiment of its new role and sensed its future life on the stage.

For the time being, Kurbas was still resisting constructivism, even though he was aware of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, a convincing masterpiece of the constructivist theater. Strictly speaking, he was not so much resisting as simply wanting to find his own path to constructivism—through expressionistic productions. He was put off by the rationality of constructivism, the “intellectualism of its origins,” its “academism,” all the more so because, in his conception, *Gas* was to be a production suffused with utmost emotionality and utmost metaphor and symbolism. It is possible that Kurbas was wary that constructivism had declared a decisive break with the art of the past, proclaiming itself an utterly new art connected to nothing and indebted to nothing. Be that as it may, from this point onward the constructivist aesthetic increasingly found a foothold in the Berezil' Theater, and theater artists competed in ever-newer realizations on its stage, opening up truly limitless possibilities and promise. At the same time, as far as Kurbas's designers were concerned, this aesthetic did not become an end in itself but something supplementary. Meller's constructivism was a refined

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3. Експресіонізм—єдине мистецтво нашого віку. Тільки той, у кого не зосталось [місця] для переживань, тобто релятивіст, відірваний і від життя, і від космосу назавжди, може скрізь вбачати тільки форму і вражатися її повтореннями...

Конструктивізм, оскільки він чисто інтелектуального порядку і походження,—остання непотрібна фаза ученості в мистецтві.

Мистецтво—це творчий трепет перед невідомим. Треба пізнати: знаю, що нічого не знаю. “Nabrynili bolem akordy: Z rezhysers'koho shchodennyka Lesia Kur-basa,” ed. Mykola Shudria and Mykola Labins'kyi, *Ukraina*, 1986, no. 3, 18.

Figure 15.  
Production scene  
from Georg  
Kaiser's play *Gás*.  
Act I. Director  
Les' Kurbas.  
Set design  
Vadym Meller.  
Berezil' Theater,  
Kharkiv. 1923.  
Collection of  
the Museum of  
Theatre, Music  
and Cinema of  
Ukraine, Kyiv.

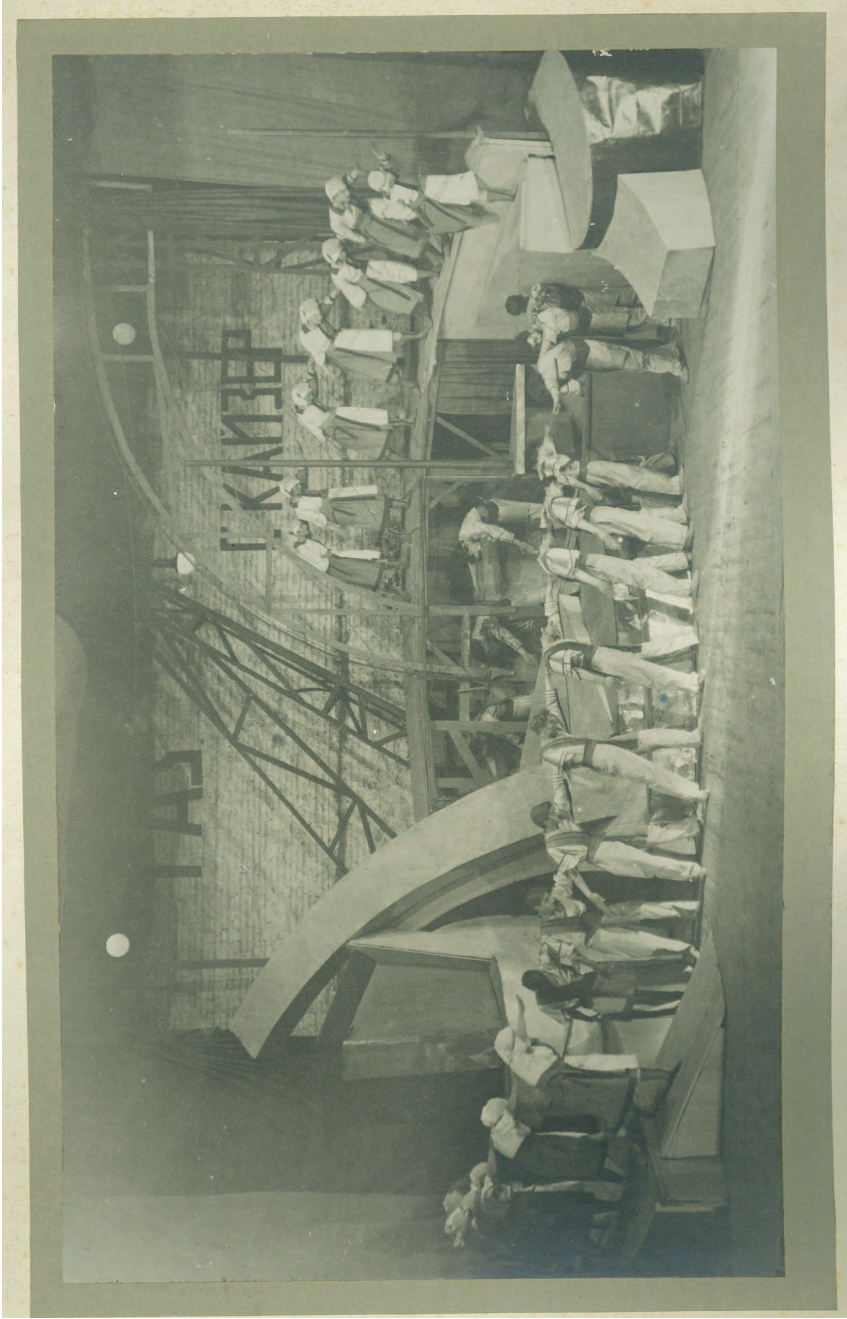




Figure 16.  
Production scene  
from Georg  
Kaiser's play  
*Gaas*. Director  
Les' Kurbas. Set  
design Vadym  
Meller. Berezil'  
Theater, Kharkiv.  
1923. Collection  
of the Museum  
of Theatre, Music  
and Cinema of  
Ukraine, Kyiv.

and virtuoso art, ready to surrender itself wholly to the action on stage, but always with the feeling that it was the foundation, the core of this action—even its driving gear.

In Meller's work, the construction accumulated within itself the rhythms of the production and did not allow those rhythms ever to be disrupted or stray off course. Moreover, the artist often programmed complex, whimsical, and very emotional rhythms—for example, the unified powerful rhythms in the production of *Here Come the New* (*Novi idut'*, based on the prose of Efim [Iukhym] Zozulia, dir. Favst Lopantys'kyi, 1923); the clashing, small-scale rhythms in *Jimmie Higgins* (Kurbas's adaptation of Upton Sinclair's novel, 1923) (figs. 17, below; 18–19, at right), which seem to roll over each other; and the expressive, spatial syncopation in Ernst Toller's *The Machine Wreckers* (1924) (figs. 20–21, below).

In contrast to Petryts'kyi's constructions, Meller's constructions were never, even for the briefest period, eclipsed by elements of a different nature. Storms and whirlwinds often reigned supreme on Kurbas's

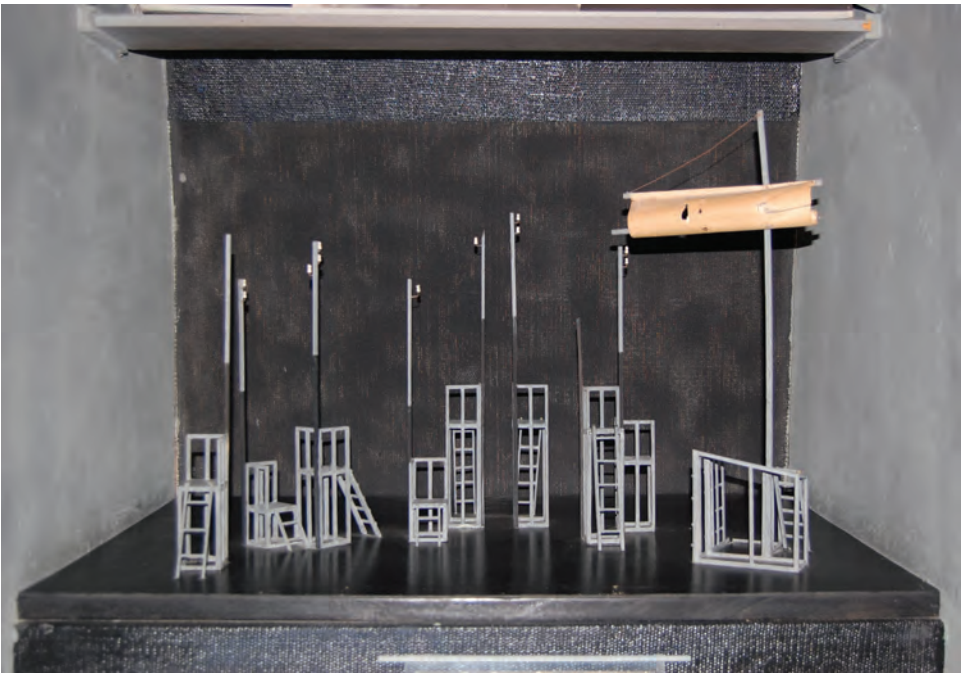


Figure 17. Vadym Meller. Model of set for *Jimmie Higgins*, adapted from the novel by Upton Sinclair. Director Les' Kurbas. Berezil' Theater, Kharkiv. 1923. Collection of the Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinema of Ukraine, Kyiv.



Figures 18–19. Production scenes from *Jimmie Higgins*, adapted from the novel by Upton Sinclair. Director Les' Kurbas. Set design Vadym Meller. Berezil' Theater, Kharkiv. 1923. Collection of the Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinema of Ukraine, Kyiv.

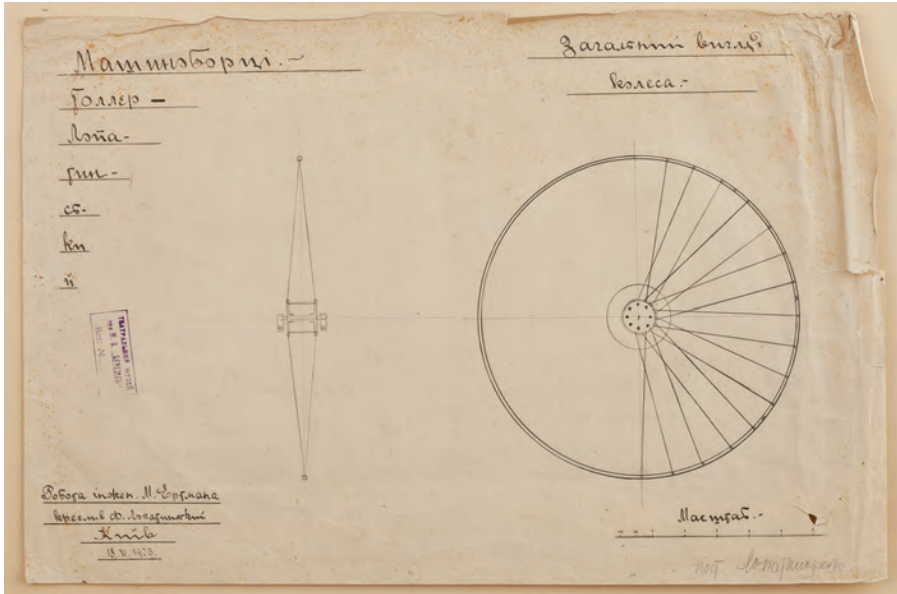


Figure 20. Favst Lopatyns'kyi. Sketch for set of Ernst Toller's *The Machine Wreckers*. 1923. Director Favst Lopatyns'kyi. Set design Vadym Meller. Berezil' Theater, Kharkiv. Staged 1924. India ink on paper. 35 x 53 cm. Collection of the Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinema of Ukraine, Kyiv.

stage, but they were forces of awakened space in which everything was subjected to maximum tension—and especially construction. To put it another way, these were elemental forces of endlessly swelling rhythms of construction, reinforced by the action on stage.

In one of his lectures, Meller emphasized the following: “The line is endowed with spatiality, just as is sound. It certainly resonates, just as sound does.” Meller’s constructivism was the constructivism of lines that truly resounded and were truly endowed with their own melody. His constructions are an entire orchestra, music that does not fall silent for a second. Thus, the geometric nature of his modeling never resulted in dry schematism. His most functional structures, even when purposely underscoring their kinship with scaffolding—or, for example, with mechanisms or machines—always resounded with a refined spatial harmony.

Meller’s constructions always blended into the surrounding space in an extraordinarily fascinating way. Even when they filled only part of the space of the stage, they structured that space and revealed its configuration. On Meller’s stage, there was never simply emptiness

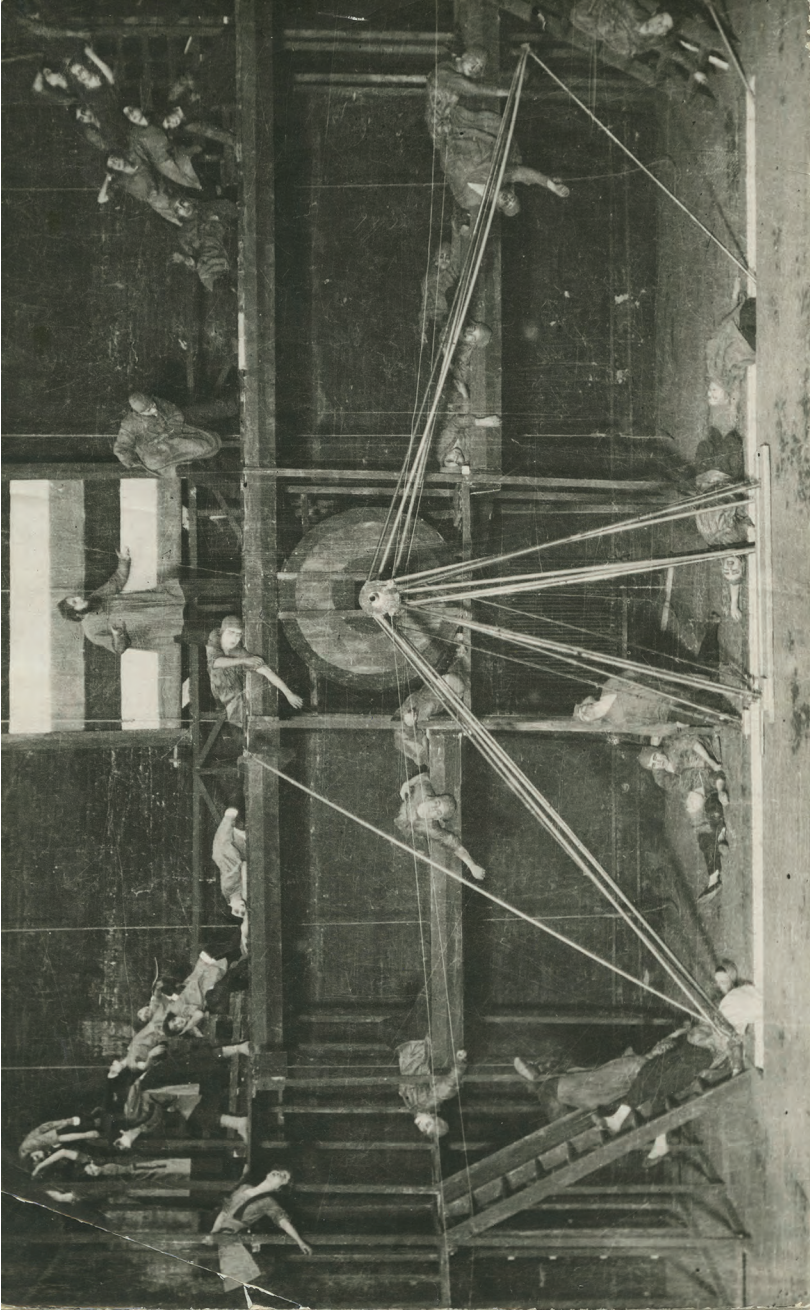


Figure 21.  
Production scene from Ernst  
Toller's *The  
Machine Wreckers*.  
"Catastrophe."  
Director Favst  
Lopatyns'kyi. Set  
design Vadym  
Meller. Berezil'  
Theater, Kharkiv.  
1924. Collection  
of the Museum of  
Theatre, Music and  
Cinema of Ukraine,  
Kyiv.

or amorphous space. Space was permeated with the sounds of construction; it was unusually active even where, seemingly, there were no material manifestations. In this sense, the artist was the follower and devoted pupil of Alexandra Exter. Just like Exter, Meller knew that not much was required for space to open up its structure; it simply needed some help. Thus, space and construction in Meller's designs were never united mechanically. The construction seemed to divine the laws of space and make them evident, visible, and irrefutable.

The constructivism of Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov was absolutely distinctive and almost without parallel in scenographic practice. With considerably greater justification than Petryts'kyi's constructivism, Khvostenko-Khvostov's version may be called the constructivism of compromise or even eclectic constructivism. This can be said without any negative connotations, but merely to note the combination of seemingly irreconcilable elements of different origins.

Khvostenko-Khvostov was an artist who knew how (and loved) to introduce into his artistic creations everything that caught his fancy. He did this with supreme finesse and an astonishing lightness and artistry. He knew how to combine constructive precision with liberated, spontaneous painting. This is evident in practically every one of his sketches (see fig. 22, at right). His linear rhythms are simultaneously serpentine, spiraling, and twisting. His geometrical installations made out of light planks naturally develop into the construction of masses; they do not seem alien against the backdrop of large bulks and soft, flowing panels.

The gamut of his artistic renditions is strikingly broad, ranging from the purely engineering construction for the production of *Mob* (adapted from Upton Sinclair's novel *They Call Me Carpenter*, Ivan Franko Theater, 1924–1925) (fig. 23, below) to his dazzling, motley pictorial fantasy in Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* (1925).

Despite its mixture of styles and methods and its turning to the most diverse principles concerning the use of space, the constructivist understanding of the stage is nevertheless expressed quite distinctly and convincingly in Khvostenko-Khvostov's work. But only in a very specific sense: Khvostenko-Khvostov viewed constructivism not as a new step in the evolution of the art of stage design, but only as one of the manifestations of this art—one that did not at all transcend other styles and other systems in terms of its possibilities, and moreover, it interacted with them easily and simply. Whereas orthodox constructivism proclaimed in its manifestoes the indispensable need for an economical, expedient, and functional plasticity thoroughly stripped of any kind of decorative features whatsoever, Khvostenko-Khvostov quite intentionally violated these requirements with his constructivism. His constructions were

Figure 22. Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov. Curtain design for Vladimir Mayakovsky's play *Mystery-Bouffe*. Heroichnyi Theater, Kharkiv. 1921. Gouache and pencil on cardboard, collage. 58 x 78.2 cm. Collection of the A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, Moscow. Inv. no. КП 310777.



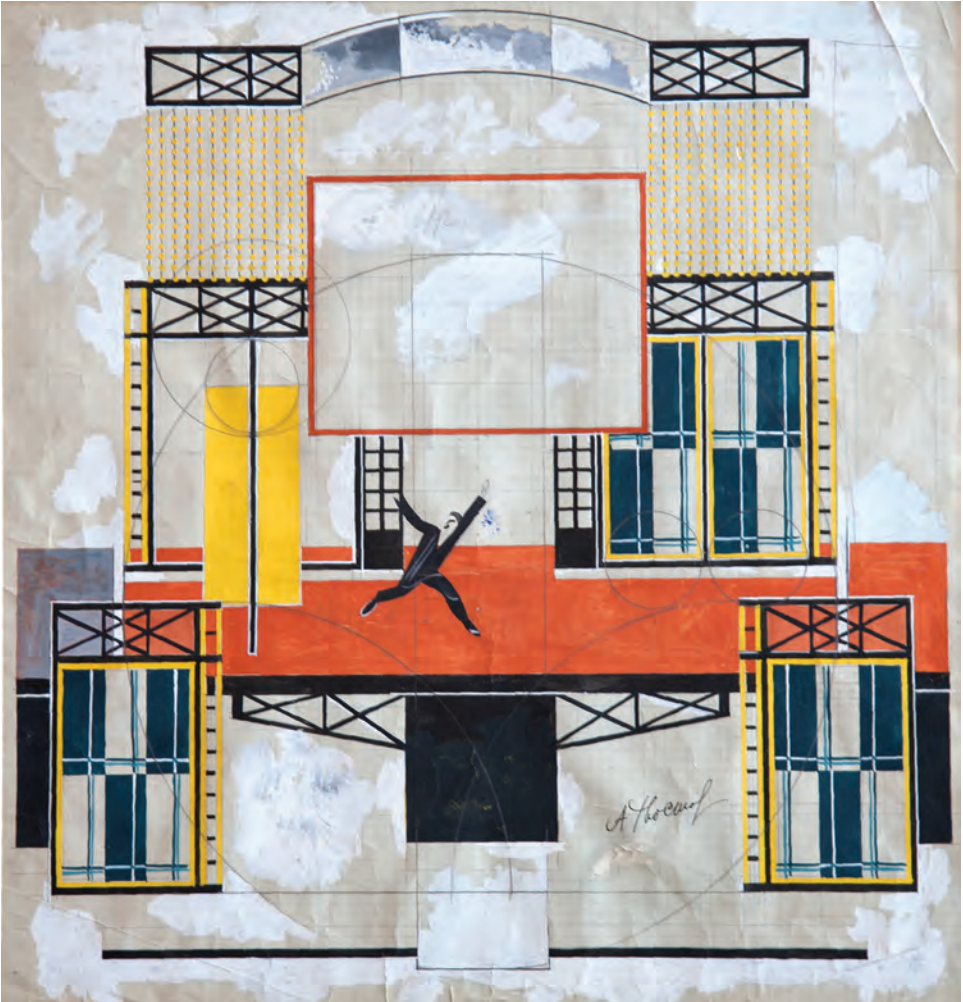


Figure 23. Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov. Set design for *Mob*, adapted from Upton Sinclair's novel *They Call Me Carpenter*. Ivan Franko Theater, Kharkiv. 1924. Guache, India ink, and pen on paper. 46 x 44 cm. Collection of the National Art and Culture Museum Complex "Mystetskyi Arsenal," Kyiv.

always colored; along with their natural functionality and primary purpose of supporting the action on stage, they were always decorative. As regards the economy of expression, it is certainly difficult to name another artist who was so generous in his means, so extravagant, and so indefatigable in his strivings to create an endless world of forms and colors on the stage.

Let us refer once again to Alexandra Exter in order to note another general quality that appears in many works of the above-mentioned artists. Just as the visual register of Ukrainian folk art was always present in Exter's abstract painting and purely experimental artistic explorations, so too did the world of peasant festivals, fairs, folk rites, and, finally, the very "aestheticism of Ukrainian folk life,"<sup>4</sup> sooner or later make itself known in Ukrainian constructivism. It was impossible not to sense this even in the most rational constructions, as it burst through all the constructivist prohibitions and invested this art with high emotionality, a lack of inhibition, and freedom.

Ukrainian theatrical constructivism is not limited to the works of the three artists discussed above. In the 1920s it literally flooded the theater. We have yet to fully apprehend this phenomenon, which was crushed and destroyed at the moment of its ascendance, its bloom, at the moment of triumph of its ideas, and, most importantly, at the very moment that Ukrainian constructivism was becoming a truly national style.

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4. "Поперше, безумовною рисою психічного укладу українця є—емоціоналізм і сентименталізм, чутливість та ліризм; найяскравіше виявляються ці риси в естетизмі українського народного життя і обрядовості." Dmytro Chyzhevs'kyi, *Narysy z istorii filosofii na Ukraïni* (Prague: Ukraïns'kyi hromads'kyi vydavnychy fond, 1931), 17.

