

(Re)constructing Aeschylus:  
a story of two unsuccessful productions in Moscow Art Theatre

This paper is dedicated to a creative history of 1926/1927 productions of *Prometheus* and *Oresteia* in Moscow Art Theatre and Moscow Art Theatre Studio 2. In this paper, I examine aspects of the creative history of these productions within the wider context of ideological and aesthetic confrontations that took place in MAT and MAT 2 during the 1920-s. Originally founded in 1898 by Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko as an “open” theater company promoting innovative theatrical techniques and contemporary Russian literary culture to the wider public, after the Russian Revolution of 1917 Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) and its experimental branch Moscow Art Theatre Studio 2 (MAT2) continued their mission to educate new Soviet audiences (Banham 1995: 762–763; Solovyova 2007). Although the company was focused mostly on producing plays by canonical and contemporary Russian writers, during the 1920-s, the repertoire of MAT and MAT 2 included several Ancient Greek plays that had revolutionary appeal: Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata* in 1923, Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, and restored *Prometheus* in 1926/1927.

Whereas *Lysistrata* directed by Nemirovich-Danchenko gained great success not only in the Soviet Union but also abroad (Kotzamani 2014), *Prometheus* and *Oresteia* directed by Valentin Smyshlyaev, a student of Stanislavsky, were not accepted favorably either by theatre professionals or theatre audiences. By theatre critics and practitioners, it was considered a mishap of MAT’s repertoire. Eventually, MAT 2 performed *Oresteia* only 16 times, and the premiere of *Prometheus* at MAT was postponed indefinitely. Focusing on the rehearsal process and audience response to both productions in MAT and MAT 2, I address a combination of factors that led to the productions’ failure. In conclusion, I briefly discuss MAT productions in

comparison with contemporary adaptations of Aeschylean tragedies on an international stage, in particular, *Prometheus Bound* produced by Eva Palmer and Angelos Sikelianos at Delphi in 1927.

For this study of MAT and MAT 2 productions, I extensively use archival materials. To trace their rehearsal history, I combine a study of theatre's historical archives (Solovyeva et al. 2010; Solovyeva et al. 2012) as well as correspondence of theatre employees (Bokshanskaya 2005) and testimonies of the director Smyshliaev in his diaries and interviews with the local newspapers (Smyshliaev 1996). Together with these materials, I analyze contemporary reviews of the plays and Russian theater studies (Markov 1968; Cherkasskii 2004) to outline important tendencies in the critical reception of both productions. With my research, I conceptualize unsuccessful MAT and MAT 2 productions of Ancient Greek tragic trilogies as representative examples of the disbalance between theatre practitioners' aspirations to re-enact "authentic" performative practices, newly developed directions in early Soviet theatre, and constraints imposed by the official ideology.

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