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Alexandra Smith

The Transgressive Capacity of the Comic: *A Merry Death* as an Embodiment of Nikolai Evreinov's Vision of Theatricality

Introduction

Comedy, being associated with low art, is usually described as a genre inferior to tragedy. Yet the conception of laughter became significantly reconfigured in the works of European and Russian twentieth-century thinkers, writers and playwrights, including Anton Chekhov, the most influential Russian playwright of the 1890s-1900s. Chekhov resisted the label 'tragic' in relation to his plays and defined them as comedies that could produce a healing effect upon his audience. 'He presented the human predicament,' writes Rose Whyman, 'as comical in many ways – in its triviality and in the human propensity for self-delusion – and also seriously, in the imperative to search for meaning in life in order to live fully'.¹ Likewise, Henri Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900) discusses laughter as an important tool of existential-spiritual growth that enables individuals to push back against habit and the monotonous aspects of industrial life and cliché. According to Bergson, 'the laughable element' is created when people encounter a certain 'mechanical inelasticity' where one would expect to find the 'wide-awake adaptability [...] of a human being'.² In *Machine-Age Comedy*, Michael North suggests that

I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers at *MLR* for their comments on an early version of this article.

¹ Rose Whyman, *Anton Chekhov* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p.42.

² Henri Bergson, Henri. *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Kobenhavn and Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1999), p.10.

Bergsonian humour promotes human freedom by repressing, 'through harsh comic punishment, all that is inorganic, repetitive, or habitual in human life'.³ The notion of theatrical instinct developed by Nikolai Evreinov (1879-1953) in the 1910s-1920s stands close to Bergson's vision of laughter as an activity that breaks the rigidity of everyday life and triggers imagination.

Evreinov's philosophy of the 'theatre for oneself' is based on his belief in the existence of man's theatrical instincts. As children, humans tend to create roles for themselves and, with the use of their imaginations, they transform their surroundings into whatever they wish. In *The Theatre in Life* (1926) Evreinov writes: 'The art of the "theatre for oneself" is simply [...] an artistically improved edition of that practice in which each of us indulges (for the theatrical instinct is common to all of us) and which is usually defined by rather vague and sometimes not very complimentary expressions, as, for instance, "to play the fool", "to play comedies", "to feign this or that", "to play this or that role", "to watch the fight of two fools, or the quarrel of two lovers".'⁴ Evreinov's play *A Merry Death* both celebrates his notion of theatrical instinct and highlights the transgressive and healing powers of laughter that could enable individuals to overcome their fear of death and embrace creativity.

The present article will analyse the transgressive aspects of Evreinov's vision of laughter embedded in *A Merry Death*. It will be argued that Evreinov's philosophy of the theatre for oneself, as manifested in his plays and essays, treats laughter as an activity that should be experienced and practiced with others. It will be also demonstrated that Evreinov's portrayal of laughter as an antidote to the fear of death in *A Merry Death* foreshadows George Bataille's juxtaposition of the laughter and the

³ Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.15.

⁴ Nicholas Evreinoff, *The Theatre in Life* (London, Calcutta, Sydney: George G. Harrap & Company Ltd., 1927), p.191.

unknowable articulated in his essay 'Un-knowing: Laughter and Tears' in which the formula 'the unknown makes it laugh' suggests that the unknowable lies beyond the grasp of our sensory experiences. The unknowable and the otherworldly are invoked in Evreinov's play with the help of the female image of Death whose dances and theatrical gestures are portrayed in comical and familiarised manner.

Evreinov and Russian anti-realist theatre

As early as 1920, the American theatre critic and writer Oliver Martin Saylor named Nikolai Evreinov, together with Konstantin Stanislavskii and Vsevolod Meierkhol'd, as major forces in Russian avant-garde theatre.⁵ Evreinov was well known among his contemporaries as a playwright, director, theorist, artist, anthropologist, historian, musician, teacher, composer and philosopher. His most famous play *The Chief Thing* (Samoe glavnoe, 1921) was translated into twenty-seven languages and staged in twenty-five countries. Following the 1928 production in Spain of *The Chief Thing* in the Azarín translation, Victor Ruiz Iriarte (1912-82) and Alejandro Casona (1903-65) identified Evreinov's vision of theatricalised life as a powerful influence on their own experiments with metaplays.⁶ In Italy, Evreinov's works were highly praised by Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936). Pirandello wrote enthusiastically about a collection of Evreinov's essays published in the Italian as *Il Teatro Nella Vita* in 1929 and directed two of Evreinov's plays in 1922 and 1925 – *A Merry Death* (Veselaia smert') and *The*

⁵ Oliver Saylor, 'Russian Theories of Theatre', *The Russian Theatre Under the Revolution*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1920), pp. 245-262 (p.247).

⁶ See Phyllis Zatlin, 'López Rubio and the Well-Made Metaplay,' *Modern Drama*, 32, 4 (December 1989), 512-520 (p.514); and Phyllis Zatlin, 'Alejando Casona and Nikolai Evreinov: Life as Theater,' *Modern Drama*, 22, 1 (Spring, 1979), 79-88.

Chief Thing.⁷ Both plays incorporate the characters and techniques from commedia dell'arte but they ignore the main tenets of commedia such as spontaneity, improvisation and farcical slapstick. 'At the heart of commedia dell'arte,' writes Robert Henke, 'was the structural tension between the linear, well-constructed plot based on a literary model and the centrifugal improvisations of the stand-up performer'.⁸ Evreinov's plays do not follow these conventions: instead, they display an eclectic blend of low-brow and middle-brow forms of artistic expression.

Evreinov's first collection of plays written in the anti-realist mode was published in 1907. In 1908 Vera Komissarzhevskaja invited him to follow Vsevolod Meierkhol'd as principal director at her theatre. With the appointment of Evreinov, Komissarzhevskaja hoped to provide her actors with more freedom in showcasing their skills. For her theatre's 1908-09 season Evreinov directed such plays as *Francesca da Rimini* by D'Annunzio and *Van'ka Kliuchnik i pazh Zhean* (Van'ka the Servant and Jean the Page) by the Russian Symbolist poet and playwright Fedor Sologub; and *Salomé* by Oscar Wilde. The latter show was cancelled by censors after the dress rehearsal: the Church Synod raised serious objections to *Salomé* because of its blasphemous nature. Since Komissarzhevskaja offered long-term use of her theatre, Evreinov and Fedor Komissarzhevskii, the actress's brother, created 'Veselyi teatr dlia pozhilykh detei' (The Merry Theatre for Grown-Up Children). Evreinov's *A Merry Death* was written in 1908 for that theatre.

The parodic element in *A Merry Death* sets it outside the Symbolist canon and gestures towards a new modernist aesthetic. The image of Death in the play, presented playfully, invokes European and Russian mysteries. It stands close to

⁷ Olle Hilderbrand, 'Pirandello's Theatre and The Influence of Nicolai Evreinov,' *Italica*, 60, 2 (Summer, 1983), 107-139.

⁸ Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.1.

Aleksandr Blok's description of the contemporary mystery as a play that has some qualities of the marionette theatre. In Blok's view, it is permeated with laughter and 'turns somersaults'.⁹ The aim of Evreinov's somersaulting humour is twofold: it strives to negate the influence of Wagner on Russian performance¹⁰ and to undermine the overblown naturalism of Stanislavskii's theatre. Evreinov's emphasis on humour makes his play very different from Wagner's philosophical operas and Stanislavskii's highly serious productions. In *A Merry Death* Evreinov uses music and songs that he himself composed to parody Symbolist theatre and emulate the abstractionist approach found in the new mystical dramas written by such influential writers as Maurice Maeterlinck.

Evreinov's conception of theatricality

While acknowledging Evreinov's attempt to intellectualise low-brow popular forms of entertainment, including commedia dell'arte, Sharon Marie Carnicke highlights Evreinov's personal identification with Harlequin.¹¹ In her view, Evreinov had his own vision of commedia dell'arte which he understood as buffoonery rather than 'art in the aesthetic sense of the word'.¹² Carnicke sees Evreinov's plays as the epitome of his notion of theatricality imbued with the spirit of commedia dell'arte. She does not explain, though, how Evreinov's use of theatricality relates to Russian theatrical experiments in the 1900s-10s and how it enables him to construct the actor

⁹ Blok's letter to Briusov is cited in English in: Avril Pyman, *The Life of Aleksandr Blok*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 1, p.235.

¹⁰ The influence of Wagner on Russian culture is examined in: Rosamund Bartlett, *Wagner in Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹¹ Sharon Marie Carnicke, *The Theatrical Instinct: Nikolai Evreinov and the Russian Theatre of the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Peter Lang 1989), pp.95-96.

¹² Carnicke, *The Theatrical Instinct*, p.104.

and the audience. The present article will illustrate how Evreinov's *A Merry Death* promotes laughter and theatricality as antidotes to positivism, conformity, over-rationalised view of physical reality and a fear of death.

The performance that Evreinov had in mind presupposes the will to cognise daily activities as something evolving, meaningful and full of theatrical potential. The phenomenon of theatricality as an important tenet of the transformation of life was manifested in the works of many Russian avant-garde artists, including Evreinov, Meierkhol'd and Aleksandr Tairov. It influenced the Russian Formalist School of literary criticism, especially such concepts as literariness and estrangement. As Silvia Jestrovic points out, 'whenever theatre's conventions and processes become its own topic, *theatricality* turns into a conceptual approach, often expressing its potential to make the familiar strange'.¹³ She describes Evreinov, together with Tairov and Meierkhol'd, as the directors whose strategy of distancing the familiar with the help of theatricality stands closer to the idea of estrangement elaborated by Russian Formalists than to Brecht's concept of *Verfremdung*.¹⁴

Unlike Jestrovic, who links Evreinov's idea of theatricality to the effect of estrangement, Carnicke defines it as theatrical instinct. The latter invokes Pirandello's explanation of Evreinov's belief in the formula that 'the whole world is theatre' as something that includes plants and animals, not just human beings.¹⁵ Pirandello's commentary notwithstanding, such an interpretation of Evreinov's idea is misleading because it overlooks the relational aspect of theatricality. As Anne-Britt Gran aptly demonstrates, theatricality cannot exist by itself but is created inside

¹³ Silvija Jestrovic, 'Theatricality as Estrangement of Art and Life In the Russian Avant-Garde,' *SubStance*, 31, No.2/3 (2002), 42-56 (p.42).

¹⁴ Jestrovic, 'Theatricality', 42.

¹⁵ Quoted in: Mary Ann Frese Witt, *Metatheatre and Modernity: Baroque and neo-Baroque* (Lanham, Maryland: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2013), p.91.

certain relations, including 'the relation between spectator and performance', 'the relation between two spaces', 'the actor's relation to the space', and 'the relation between two worlds'.¹⁶ Josette Féral's study also asserts that theatricality is located between a real space and a fictional space. Any imagined space can be created either by the actor or by the spectator. Likewise, laughter is often experienced and practiced in the company of other individuals. More importantly, by utilising theatrical space as a space for collective invention and unbound creativity, Evreinov challenges the assertion of individual will as the only criterion of judgement.

Evreinov's *A Merry Death* illustrates well how theatricality occurs when the spectator sees the real, physical world through a fictional framing that offers a different perspective on that space. Féral mentions the manipulation of space as one of the essential foundations of all performance. 'Carving out imaginary or real spaces', she elucidates, '[...] one moment in one place, and the next moment in the other, the performer never settles within these simultaneously physical and imaginary spaces, but instead traverses, explores and measures them, effecting displacements and minute variations within them'.¹⁷ Taking a cue from the thesis that performance 'does not aim at a meaning but rather *makes* meaning insofar as it works right in those extremely blurred junctures out of which the subject eventually emerges',¹⁸ I will discuss below how Evreinov's *A Merry Death* lends itself to be read as an intellectual exercise which presents the subject simultaneously as a constituted subject and as a social subject. The aim of this exercise is to dislocate and demystify

¹⁶ Anne-Britt Gran, 'Et spørsmål om teatralitet?', *Bunt*, 9 (1992), 31-44. Quoted in English in: Ragnhild Tronstad, 'Could the World become a Stage? Theatricality and Metaphorical Structures,' *SubStance*, 31 (2002), 216-224 (p.217).

¹⁷ Josette Féral, 'Performance and Theatricality,' trans.by Terese Lyons, *Modern Drama*, 25, 1 (Spring 1982), 170-181 (p.172).

¹⁸ Féral, 'Performance and Theatricality', 173.

the subject being constructed. This is achieved with the help of the notion of theatricality that relies on fictional framing of reality.

According to Joseph Childers, the term 'theatricality' is also used by Michael Fried¹⁹ to denote an interaction which is different from absorption: 'Unlike absorption, which describes an interaction in which the viewer's experience of a work is not dependent on an awareness of his or her position in time and space,' explains Childers, 'theatricality is linked to a heightened awareness of just those qualities'.²⁰ Evreinov's interplay between the real and the imaginary, between the literal and the metaphorical is achieved in *A Merry Death* by constant interruption of the linear narration with dance, musical performance, laughter, physical action and visual effects presented in a grotesque way, including a loud heartbeat resembling a steam engine and a thermometer on fire from contact with Harlequin's feverish body.

Given Féral's suggestion that during performance the process of demystification makes the constructed subject freeze and die, the title of Evreinov's play can be understood as a metaphorical description of the paradox that characterises performance: while performance wants to escape representation, it unavoidably 'marks both its fulfilment and its end'.²¹ The message of Evreinov's play is reassuring, because the death of the author during the performance gives way to the unbound creativity of the actor and the spectator. That is why in the prologue the allusion to the author of the play is mocking: he is talked about in an estranged way as if the success of performance depends solely on the actors and the spectators.

¹⁹ Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in The Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

²⁰ Joseph Childers, 'Theatricality,' in Joseph Childers; Gary Hentzi, eds. *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p.304.

²¹ Féral, 'Performance and Theatricality', 173.

While the character of Harlequin in *A Merry Death* is associated with a daring and creative mind, Pierrot describes himself as a person who has failed to become a true Harlequin due to his cowardly nature and stupidity. While he feels jealous of Harlequin's ability to be completely free from existing conventions, he also admires Harlequin for his courage to pursue his dreams. By juxtaposing these characters who reveal themselves as being actors throughout the play as well as characters borrowed from commedia dell'arte, Evreinov encourages the audience to be more creative and more receptive to new ideas in their everyday life by breaking out of their moral inertia.

In addition to Evreinov's aforementioned desire to use laughter in order to subvert realist and Symbolist conventions, Evreinov's concept of theatricality can be better understood in the light of Valerii Briusov's 1902 article 'Unnecessary Truth'. Its insistence on the superiority of the performance over the text inspired many theatrical experiments in Russia. Tairov, for example, in his 1921 book *Director's Notes* (*Zapiski rezhissera*),²² used similar language for criticising Stanislavskii's realism and outmoded theatrical conventions. Unlike Stanislavskii, Tairov, Briusov and Evreinov were interested in the Diderotian tradition of *acting as representation* as opposed to the act of experiencing that forces the audience to forget about theatrical conventions.²³ Criticising Stanislavskii's productions as vulgar realism, Briusov wanted Russian theatre to be more imaginative and more appreciative of the actor's

²² Aleksandr Iakovlevich Tairov, *Zapiski rezhissera* (Moscow: Izdanie Kamernogo teatra, 1921).

²³ According to Tatiana Smoliarova, there was an increased interest in Diderot in Russia in the 1910s-20s. It was marked by the appearance of new translations and new editions of his works, including his 1773 book *Paradox of Acting* (*Paradoxe sur le comédien*). See: Tatiana Smoliarova, 'Distortion and Theatricality: Estrangement in Diderot and Shklovsky,' *Poetics Today*, 27,1 (2006), 3-33 (p.6).

skill to represent and interpret life rather than impersonate and mimic it. His view that 'the stage in its very essence is conventional' ('uslovnyi teatr')²⁴ echoes Denis Diderot's statement that 'nothing happens on the stage exactly how it happens in nature'.²⁵

Briusov's belief that the main task of the theatre is to enable the actor to 'display his soul in front of the audience' ('pomoch' akteru raskryt' svoiu dushu pered zriteliami')²⁶ anticipated the experiments of Russian cabaret artists known for the effective visual presentation of their bodies. To avoid a strong dependence on verbal language, many actors aspired to imitate puppets, marionettes, and dolls in the hope that the visual appeal of the living doll would attract the audience to their skills.

Nikita Baliev's cabaret *The Bat* (Letuchaia mysh'), which opened in Moscow in February 1908, exemplifies this trend and showcases the skills of actors to act in a mechanical way, so that movements of mechanical toys and marionettes could be invoked in the imagination of the audience. Baliev's cabaret featured many shows in which live actors had to alternate tableau scenes presenting them as puppets or dolls with lively scenes comprising dance, singing or dialogues accompanied by music. Harold Segel writes: 'Since the "living doll" numbers owed their success as much to their visual appeal as to the skill of the performers in effecting the transition from dolls to living actors and back again, more emphasis came to be placed on colourful

²⁴ Valerii Briusov, 'Nenuzhnaia pravda. Po povodu Moskovskogo Khudozhestvennogo teatra,' *Mir iskusstva*, 4 (1902), 67-74 (p.71).

²⁵ Denis Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*, trans. by Henry Irving (London: Chatto and Windus, Piccadilly, 1883), p.5.

²⁶ Briusov, 'Nenuzhnaia pravda,' 70.

settings and brilliant costuming'.²⁷ Segel points out that the use of outfits based on the traditional masks of the commedia dell'arte, including Harlequin, Pierrot and Columbine, together with visual images invoking the rococo style of late-eighteenth-century France, was especially popular among Russian and foreign spectators.²⁸ Evreinov's *A Merry Death* is representative of this fashionable trend that associated theatrical performances with highly stylised spaces.

Demystifying the process of performance

Evreinov's allegorical representation of the death of the author in *A Merry Death* aspired to demystify the process of performance and to lay the device bare, so that the audience could appreciate the skill of the actor in switching from the 'living doll' mode of acting to displaying a lively mood and emotional outbursts. The physical type of acting was meant to engage the audience in the process of cognising the conventions that make the performance fully theatrical and free of the excess of realist detail criticised in Briusov's aforementioned article. By borrowing commedia dell'arte techniques, Evreinov does not revive the popular Italian theatrical form in order to affirm the superiority of art over life, as Douglas Clayton suggests,²⁹ but rather invokes the ambiguity embedded in this genre. He succeeds in presenting actors both as real people and as characters, so that the interplay between reality and art can be articulated as an essence of modern creative thinking. In this respect,

²⁷ Harold B. Segel, *Pinocchio's Progeny. Puppets, Marionettes, Automats, and Robots in Modernist and Avant-Garde Drama* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), p.73.

²⁸ Harold B. Segel, *Pinocchio's Progeny*, p.73.

²⁹ Douglas J. Clayton, *Pierrot in Petrograd:Commedia dell'Arte/Balgan in Twentieth-Century Russian Theatre and Drama* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), p.169.

Evreinov could be added to the list of those theatrical innovators such as Eisenstein and Meierkhol'd who, according to Annette Michelson, were committed to analytical modes of performance oriented towards objectification.³⁰

In addition to his analytical approaches to performance, Evreinov's understanding of theatrical conventions, as manifested in *A Merry Death*, corresponds to Féral's description of theatricality comprising two different parts: 'one highlights performance and is made up of the *realities of the imaginary*; and the other highlights the theatrical and is made up of *specific symbolic structures*'.³¹ While one part of theatricality is inseparable from the subject's desire to speak, the second part situates the subject within theatrical codes associated with the symbolic. Féral elucidates: 'Theatricality arises from the play between these two realities. [...] Theatricality cannot *be*, it must be *for* someone. In other words, it is *for the Other*'.³² Since Evreinov turns the principle of baring the device into a spectacle in its own right, it would be wrong to classify him as a Symbolist playwright drawn to the movement's mystical and transcendental aspect in the style of Fedor Sologub's play *The Triumph of Death*. Unlike Sologub's play, that presents love and death as symbolic twins, Evreinov's *A Merry Death* highlights the interplay between the fictional space and the real space.

Evreinov's play borrows from Briusov's model of a new theatre – as expressed in his article 'Unnecessary Truth' – the idea that the actor should be responsible for engaging the spectator either with his own skilful performance or with physical acting. Like Briusov before him, Evreinov makes the case for stripping the stage of excessive realistic detail that could detract from the performance of the

³⁰ Annette Michelson, 'Yvonne Rainer, Part One: The Dancer and the Dance', *Artforum*, 12 (January 1974), 57-63 (p.57).

³¹ Féral, 'Theatricality and Performance', 178.

³² Féral, 'Theatricality and Performance', 178.

actor. *A Merry Death* embodies Briusov's idea that all means of the theatre should be at the service of the actor, so that he can control the spectator. According to this model, the author becomes a servant of the actor. Evreinov's play demonstrates Briusov's belief that the aesthetic enjoyment derives not from the text but from the performers' virtuosity and stunning displays of set and costumes.

At the beginning of the play Evreinov describes Harlequin's room in such a way as to suggest that it reflects his eccentric, neurotic and hedonistic nature. The room contains a bed, a clock, and a wall featuring two hanging objects: a lute and a large thermometer. The forestage comprises one table with two stools and a lamp on the table. It also includes a cabinet containing wine bottles, glasses, bread and fruit. A third stool is located besides the bed of the dying Harlequin. The use of furniture reinforces the static effect, especially because the first thing that the audience was supposed to see was Harlequin's motionless body, resembling a marionette. He is sleeping on top of his bed, his face turned to the ceiling, his arms alongside his body. Evreinov describes him as being a typical Harlequin, apart from his grey hair: 'При поднятии занавеса Арлекин спит на кровати лицом кверху, руки по швам; у него седые волосы; в остальном Арлекин как Арлекин'.³³ ('As the curtain rises, Harlequin is sleeping. He lies in his bed facing the ceiling. His arms are straight; his hair is grey; otherwise he looks exactly as Harlequin is supposed to look').³⁴ Although he is depicted on his deathbed expecting to die at midnight, the reference to grey hair can be seen as a symbolic detail alluding to the metatextual nature of the play. It suggests that Harlequin's enduring popularity does not wither away. This character was invented during the Renaissance: thus, the grey hair featured in

³³ N.N. Evreinov, *Veselaia smert'* (St Petersburg: Biblioteka teatra i iskusstva, XI, 1909), pp.11-12 (p.1).

³⁴ This description is omitted from the English translation published in 1916.

Translation is mine. – A.S.

Evreinov's play indicates to the audience that the character is old – both literally and figuratively. By describing Pierrot in the introductory scene as waving flies away from Harlequin's face, Evreinov plays down the tragic overtones of the plot. The image of flies creates the atmosphere of something banal despite the death theme alluded to in the title.

On the surface, *A Merry Death* appears as a quite simple entertaining play, subtitled harlequinade. It is based on the traditional love triangle, featuring Harlequin, Pierrot, and Columbine. Being determined to enjoy his life to the end, Harlequin flirts with Columbine and kisses her passionately shortly before his death. The play finishes with a love scene between them but it is interrupted by the arrival of Death. A large part of the play concerns the Doctor who visits Harlequin and swindles money from him. Harlequin teaches the Doctor a lesson and offers him a spectacle depicting his would-be death. Harlequin despises and mocks him. The Doctor is depicted in the play as a greedy and mediocre person who enjoys making money out of other people's misery. Being a liar who does not believe in the ability of his profession to cure people, he is portrayed as an actor in his own right. Unlike Harlequin, though, he lacks the ability to understand metaphorical language and be open-minded. The central role of the play is assigned to Harlequin whose moral victory over Doctor is portrayed as part of Harlequin's ability to laugh and be imaginative.

Performance as a collective salvation

Evreinov's play also alludes to the popular modernist theme of overcoming death. According to Irina Paperno, who examined the influence of Vladimir Solov'ev and Nikolai Fedorov on modernist aesthetic experiments in the 1900s-1910s, Russian artists sought to create a new world by fusing life and art. Human life was meant to be regulated by human reason in hope of freeing it from the forces of 'blind nature' (most importantly, matter and death). 'For Solov'ev, as for Fedorov, the key to salvation lies in the creative potential of human beings, manifested in two areas of

human activity, art and love'.³⁵ It is no coincidence that love and art are celebrated in Harlequin's speeches throughout the whole play. Given that commedia dell'arte inscribes existing power structures, Harlequin's exposure of the Doctor's inability to neither cure people, experience true love, nor change his habitual behaviour, can be seen as a semi-veiled homage to the original productions of commedia dell'arte. 'The commedia constructs each character,' affirms Scott McGehee, 'by delineating the difference between the socially constructed body [...] to the natural body that one is, in order to "uncrown" any and all symbolic order that imposes submission to what is natural, universal and joyous in man.'³⁶ Likewise, in Evreinov's play this vitality is entwined with the creation of the self that is liberated from social restrictions and conventions.

In addition to appropriating the commedia dell'arte characters in a parodic way, Evreinov goes further than many of his contemporaries preoccupied with the role of the director as a co-author of the play. He is interested in the role of the spectator as a co-creator of the play whose perspective on reality constructed through performance should be informed by his own imagination. Evreinov's notion of theatricality presupposes the interaction between actor and spectator. It stands close to Meierkhol'd's vision of a theatrical dialogue captured in this observation: '[...] having assimilated the author's creation, the actor is left alone, face to face with the spectator, and from the friction between these two unadulterated elements, the

³⁵ Irina Paperno, 'Introduction,' in Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman, eds. *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp.1-12 (p.7).

³⁶ Scott McGehee, 'The Pre-Eminence of the Actor in Renaissance Context: Subverting the Social Order', in Judith Chaffee and Olly Crick, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Commedia Dell'arte* (London and New York, 2015), pp. 9-20 (p.15).

actor's creativity and the spectator's imagination, a clear flame kindles'.³⁷

Meierkhol'd thinks that spectators should be encouraged to follow the allusions embedded in the play and use their imagination to fill the gaps through the whole performance ('зрителю приходится своим воображением *творчески дорисовывать* данные сценой намеки') ['the spectator needs to use his imagination to reconstruct the scenes alluded to in the play'].³⁸ Throughout the play, both Harlequin and Pierrot speak directly to the audience in order to encourage its members' imaginative engagement with the action on stage. Undoubtedly, Evreinov's idea of theatrical communication as a creative dialogue between the spectator and the actor highlights the relational nature of theatricality.

Bearing in mind that *A Merry Death* was praised for its universal quality, it is unsurprising that Evreinov's eclectic mixture of different traditions, including a cosmopolitan visual language and a stylised Russian folksiness, made it easy to perform the play in different contexts. In 1909 Evreinov presented it at the Theatre for Grown-Up Children in St Petersburg. The theatre produced many short plays in the style of cabaret performances, hence Evreinov's harlequinade was accompanied by Evreinov's own music and featured dances. The play was also staged twice in the famous cabaret theatre *The Mummies' Halt* (*Prival komediantov*) which opened in Petrograd on 16 April 1916 in the house built by Domenico Adamini located at the corner of the Fontanka river and The Field of Mars³⁹, in January 1917 and December 1918. The roles of Columbine and of Death were performed by the same actress – Olga Glebova-Sudeikina. She was especially praised by her contemporaries for her

³⁷ Vsevolod Meierkhol'd, 'K istorii i tekhnike teatra', *Stat'i, pis'ma, rechi, besedy v dvukh chastakh* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968), 1, pp.105-142 (p.141).

³⁸ Meierkhol'd, 'K istorii i tekhnike teatra', p.142.

³⁹ Liudmila Khmel'nitskaia, '*Prival komediantov: pervyi teatral'nyi opyt Marka Shagala*,' <http://www.chagal-vitebsk.com/node/216> [date of access: 3.07.2015].

exquisite dancing. The costumes and decorations were designed by Sergei Sudeikin, her husband. The second production was directed by the theatrical director and critic Konstantin Kuz'min-Karavaev (known also as K. Tverskoi). One spectator wrote that in *A Merry Death* Sudeikina danced something in the style of the *Danse Macabre* on a table decorated with burning candles.⁴⁰ Given that the same actress performed the two roles of Columbine and Death, the audience could easily recognise the duality of the image of Columbine, which alluded to the popular fin-de-siècle theme of theatricalising death triggered by a strong interest in illness and unhealthy bodies.

Such performances made a fetish of sick and hysterical young women as artistic subjects. According to Sophie Duncan, the representation of the female corpse in Victorian visual culture and theatre epitomised femininity and death. The French actress Sarah Bernhardt – who was hugely popular in Russia – was photographed dead in her coffin in 1882.⁴¹ Undoubtedly, Evreinov's play parodies the fin de siècle's fascination with those actresses whose volatile, unhealthy female bodies represented the popular association between modernity and pain.

Evreinov wrote favourably about the first production of his play in the cabaret *The Mummies' Halt*. He explained that the goal of his play was to subvert the influence of positivism on modern society and to assure the audience that every human being was capable of developing his creative vision of life. The description of Harlequin supplied by Evreinov presents him as an archetype of the creative self that everyone should use as a model for imitation: 'Ведь Арлекин как понятие – это же шут, красивый, дерзкий шут, вечно живущий, идеализированный в душе

⁴⁰ Quoted in A.M. Konechnyi, V.Ia. Morderer, A.E. Parnis, R.D. Timenchik, 'Artisticheskoe kabare *Prival komediantov*,' *Pamiatniki kul'tury. Novye otkrytiia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1988), pp.96-154 (p.147).

⁴¹ Sophie Duncan, *Shakespeare's Women and the Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.102.

каждого человека, с большой буквы Шут, не изменяющий своей позиции даже перед ликом смерти... Так будем шутить! Будем шутами!' ('The image of the Harlequin is symbolic. It signifies the beautiful, daring, immortal poker-of-fun who lives in the soul of every human being. It is an idealistic image of the clown with a capital C who does not give up his beliefs even at his deathbed... Let's laugh! Let's become harlequins!'⁴²) Bearing in mind that laughter in fin-de-siècle culture was often portrayed as the epitome of hysteria and anarchy, Evreinov's ideal of the laughing body stands out as an expression of biological vitality.

Laughter and non-representational forms of experience

Commenting on the growing interest in laughter in the 1880s-1900s in Europe, Julian Brigstocke points out that in the 1880s, 'laughter had been thoroughly incorporated into biopolitical discourses through which laughter became associated with an increase in life, health and vitality through non-representational forms of experience'.⁴³ In his attempt to forge a new, non-representational biopolitics of sensation, Evreinov offered to his contemporaries a performance space in which art forms could interact in a new way of thinking. It offered a new lived experience superior to the experience of the modern city rigidly controlled and organised to the point of being lifeless. By producing stylised new forms of urban vitality, Evreinov points to the possibility of experiencing novel forms of life, beyond the limits of natural perception, with the help of laughter as an elemental and irrational force located within the invisible but still perceptible layers of bodily experience.

⁴² Nikolai Evreinov, 'Shut i smert': *Veselaia smert'* v Privale komediantov,' *Iskusstvo*, 5/6 (1917), 17-18.

⁴³ Julian Brigstocke, *The Life of the City: Space, Humour, and the Experience of Truth in Fin-de-siècle Montmartre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp.82-85.

Since *A Merry Death* appeals to different sensual experiences and combines visual images with sound effects, it can be seen as an example of the synaesthetic theatre in the style of the Chat Noir performances known as shadow shows.⁴⁴ At the end of the play, the heart of Harlequin beats like a sledge-hammer and his breathing resembles an engine. These sound effects create an impression that the actor playing the role of Harlequin is a mechanical doll rather than a human being. Likewise, the dance of Death that follows Harlequin's loud breathing evokes something beyond natural life: it strengthens the connection between laughter and otherworldly experiences. Furthermore, Death is presented in the play as an actress used to playing characters from Russian popular theatre (balagan): 'Смерть с ухватками балаганной героини приближается к часам и простирает к ним руку' ('Death points at the clock with a theatrical gesture resembling the heroine of the festive popular show'.⁴⁵)

Subsequently, Death obstructs the audience from seeing a love scene between Harlequin and Columbine. This action is followed by the disappearance of light and the music that resembles the tune of Harlequin: for a few seconds, the stage remains dark and silent. The image of the pale moon resembling a dead person appears shortly afterwards, revealing the clock indicating midnight and the dead body of Harlequin as well as the grieving Columbine kneeling by Harlequin's bed. Such a gothic-like atmosphere adds surreal overtones to the portrayal of Harlequin's death and confuses the audience's senses. The confusion is intensified after the appearance of Pierrot who tells the audience that he is unsure whether to mourn the death of Harlequin, the loss of Columbine, his own sad destiny, or the fact that the audience has wasted its time by watching a play written by such a frivolous

⁴⁴ Segel, *Pinocchio's Progeny*, pp.66-69.

⁴⁵ Evreinov, 'Veselaia smert', p.12.

author ('predstavlenie takogo n eser'eznogo avtora').⁴⁶

The use of humour at the end of the play points to the non-representational aspects of human experiences. The play suggests the presence of the unknowable that resists representation. Georges Bataille's observation that 'the unknown makes us laugh'⁴⁷ provides an important link between the unknowable and the laughable. His idea to approach laughter through the prism of a philosophy of un-knowing indicates that 'the sudden invasion of the unknown' produces different responses, including the effect of anguish, the feeling of ecstasy or the experience of terror.⁴⁸

Likewise, Julia Kristeva describes children's laughter in somatic terms as a response either to something unknown (that cannot yet be verbalised) or something terrifying. She talks about laughter in relation to children: 'During the period of indistinction between "same" and "other", infant and mother, as well as between "subject" and "object", while no space has yet been delineated [...], the semiotic *chora* that arrests and absorbs the motility of the anacletic facilitations relieves and produces laughter'.⁴⁹ Kristeva affirms that children lack a sense of humour, but they laugh easily 'when motor tension is linked to vision (a caricature is a visualization of bodily distortion), of an extreme, exaggerated movement, or of an unmastered movement; when a child's body is too rapidly set in motion by the adult [...]; when a sudden stop follows a movement'.⁵⁰ Evreinov's play also uses laughter in situations that are linked to terror and the unknown in order to make the audience experience

⁴⁶ Evreinov, 'Veselaia smert', p.12.

⁴⁷ Georges Bataille. 'Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears,' trans. by Michelson, Annette *October*, 36 (Spring 1986), 89-102 (90).

⁴⁸ Bataille, 'Un-knowing', p.92.

⁴⁹ Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. by Margaret Waller (New York, Columbia University Press, 1984) p.284.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

novel sensations and estrange its members from the habitualised perception of death and decay portrayed in Russian newspapers in association with the crisis of modernity. Evreinov's use of laughter in *A Merry Death* is also linked to the experience of the poetic because the play juxtaposes different life styles and different modes of thinking: the literal and the metaphorical.

Bearing in mind Clayton's observation that 'commedia dell'arte in Russia was primary an intellectual, poetic, and literary phenomenon',⁵¹ it is not surprising that the image of Harlequin in *A Merry Death* is hybridised. While his childish behaviour characterised by Harlequin's actions of sticking out his tongue at the Doctor several times resembles the character Petrushka from Russian puppet shows, references to Harlequin's skilful lute-playing bring to mind European productions of commedia dell'arte. Harlequin resembles a fin-de-siècle artist, too. He prefers death to the bourgeois regulated lifestyle prescribed by the Doctor. It includes going to bed early; avoiding food that is very spicy, salty, bitter, milky, sweet or filling; enjoying a quiet life and avoiding excitement; keeping away from frivolity and a noisy life ('жить вдали от суетни'). In response to the Doctor's advice, Harlequin questions whether such a life is worth living: 'Но стоит ли жить, чтобы так жить?'⁵² The Doctor's reply 'That's your affair' ('А это уж ваше дело'⁵³) shows his complete indifference to Harlequin's well-being.

The satirical depiction of the Doctor appealed to the audience in Russia and in Europe after the Russo-Japanese war, the 1905 Revolution and during World War I when there was a severe shortage of psychiatrists who could deal with mental problems and trauma. In his insightful book *Petersburg Fin-de-Siècle*, Mark Steinberg reports on the wave of suicides after 1905 that was discussed by

⁵¹ Clayton, *Pierrot in Petrograd*, p.4.

⁵² Evreinov, 'Veselaia smert', p.4.

⁵³ Evreinov, 'Veselaia smert', p.4.

physicians and psychiatrists as a 'modern epidemic of suicide in Russia' at special meetings and sessions of national congresses.⁵⁴ In 1912 the suicide rate in St Petersburg was the highest in the world.⁵⁵ Subsequently, as Steinberg elucidates, many residents of St Petersburg in the 1900s-10s found numerous news reports on suicide disturbing, especially because the proliferation of stories of violence accustomed readers to tragic events. Their minds became bored with such stories and grew indifferent to the horror of suicide.⁵⁶ Likewise, other reports about tragic events lost their sensationalist appeal to readers.

While Harlequin's illness is never properly explained in Evreinov's play (apart from the Doctor's references to the old age), it can be seen as a result of Harlequin's reckless and suicidal behaviour. Yet the play makes the audience see Harlequin as a hero who has lived a happy life. He explains to Columbine that he wishes to die with a smile on his face because he has sung all his songs and revelled in all his merriment. He advises Columbine to follow his example to feel merry and sorrowless, to be content with her fate and her conduct. Most importantly, he would like Columbine to feel happy for him because he had not wasted his life as had other people, and had enjoyed his hedonistic life style: 'Порадуйся лучше, что я умираю не так, как другие, а сытый наслаждением, довольный судьбой и своим поведением'.⁵⁷ ('Rather be glad that I'm dying, not like others, but full of delight,

⁵⁴ Mark D. Steinberg, *Petersburg Fin de Siècle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), p.133.

⁵⁵ Steinberg, *Petersburg*, pp.134-135.

⁵⁶ Steinberg, *Petersburg*, p.135.

⁵⁷ Evreinov, 'Veselaia smert', p.11.

content with fate and my conduct'.)⁵⁸ This advice reflects Harlequin's secular worldview and alludes to the crisis of Christian values in Russia in the 1900s.

When Harlequin produces a list of his sins including womanising, bullying others, composing satirical songs, drinking wine excessively, indulging in erotic pleasures and enjoying every moment of his life to the full, he presents them as highly positive experiences, confirming thereby his condemnation of Russian Orthodoxy's scornful attitudes to laughter. Harlequin's list of his achievements illustrates the popular Russian proverb that laughter goes hand in hand with sin.⁵⁹ The transgressive quality of laughter enabled Evreinov to use parody as a tool in exploring novel ways of perception in the context of the considerable popularity in Russia of Wagner's totalising idea that art was supposed to enjoy a privileged access to life. The parodic quality of *A Merry Death* enabled Evreinov to downplay this Romanticist idea of unifying the world into a singular and endlessly evolving organic artwork.

The use of rhymes and obscene language found usually in the Russian carnival puppet theatre of Petrushka and fairground theatre (balagan) turns Evreinov's play into a linguistic spectacle, too. Columbine, for example, calls her husband Pierrot thick-headed (dubina), creating a rhyme with his address to her 'Kolombina'. The effect becomes twofold since the utterance 'Kolombina-dubina' (Columbine, the log) could also be applied to Columbine and might be seen as self-

⁵⁸ Nikolai Evreinov, 'A Merry Death,' in Anton Chekhov, Nikolai Evreinov Denis Fonvizin, Lesya. *Ukrainka. Five Russian Plays with One from the Ukranian*, trans. by C.E. Bechhover Roberts (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1916), pp.1-34 (p.28).

⁵⁹ S.S. Averintsev, 'Bakhtin i russkoe otnoshenie k smekhu,' in S.I. Nekliudov and E.S. Novik, eds. *Ot mifa k literature: Sbornik v chest' 75-letiiia E.M. Meletinskogo* (Moscow: Rossiiskii universitet, 1993), pp.341-345 (p.341).

irony.⁶⁰ The laughter is triggered in this case from the incongruity between sublime language and offensive language. While Columbine in the eyes of Pierrot and Harlequin epitomises beauty, her use of violent language makes her sound primitive and uncivilised.

Evreinov's play was enthusiastically received outside Russia, despite some linguistic games and puns being lost in translation. When the play was translated into English in 1916, it was included in a collection of plays written by Denis Fonvizin and Anton Chekhov.⁶¹ Carl Roberts, the translator of the play, in his Introduction to the collection, defines it as 'the best Russian play since *Woe from Wit*'. Roberts thinks that the play looks European. In London *A Merry Death* was directed by Edith Craig at the Pioneer Players theatre in April 1916. It was staged again in London in 1927, and on 9 June 1929 it was performed in Dublin at the Peacock Theatre (the play was directed by Hilton Edwards). It was successfully performed in Paris in 1916 and in 1922. The 1922 performance was directed by Jacques Copeau, an influential French director, producer and actor, at his famous Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in Paris.⁶² In August-September 1916 it was performed by the Washington Square Players in New York, where it received enthusiastic reviews and was referred to as a masterpiece. Yet after its production in London in 1927 a critic wrote that *A Merry Death* 'has for theme a profound truth worked out in terms of whimsicality and artificiality'.⁶³ The

⁶⁰ The structure and comic devices of the *Petrushka* show are analysed extensively in: Catriona Kelly. *Petrushka: The Russian Carnival Puppet Theatre*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

⁶¹ Evreinov, 'A Merry Death'.

⁶² Suzanne Moisson-Franckhauser, 'Evreinov et la musique,' *Revue des études slaves*, 53, 1 (1981), 27-38 (30).

⁶³ Quoted in: Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1969), pp.43-44.

latter comment indicates that the play was written in the style of platform theatre 'based on the use of conventions or rules to suggest rather than to portray reality'.⁶⁴

Evreinov's criticism of positivism and bourgeois values

The contemporary aspect of the play is manifested in Evreinov's contempt for bourgeois society. In turn-of-the-century literature and drama, many Russian and European intellectuals saw bourgeois society as being vulgar, conservative, materialistic, self-protective and spiritually bankrupt. In *A Merry Death* it is exemplified by the Doctor. He could be seen as a typical ageing provincial doctor similar to the Russian officials depicted in Nikolai Gogol's play *The Inspector General*. As with Gogol's characters, he cares more about money than about the well-being of his patients. By virtue of his profession as a mediator between life and death, the Doctor generates several of the play's most memorable moments. When he enters the stage, he pauses to sing to the audience. Yet the Doctor behaves like a living doll because his song is totally devoid of any empathy for his patients. It states cheerfully that he does not cure anyone. The song is based on the repetition that highlights the Doctor's indifference to his patients. Evreinov describes him as a bold person with a big red nose in huge spectacles with a large syringe that looks like a pump in his bag. Harlequin finds him laughable: in reply to Doctor's question about his health, Harlequin replies that he feels an attack of laughing, rather than of coughing.⁶⁵ The humorous aspect of their dialogue derives from the ambiguity of the word *attack* (*pristup*) that could be used for signifying both coughing and laughing: 'Доктор. Что же вы чувствуете? – Арлекин. Приступ. – Доктор. Кашля? –

⁶⁴ Sharon M. Carnicke, 'Naturalism to Theatricalism: The Role of Symbolism,' *Ulbandus Review*, 1, 1 (Fall 1977), 41-58 (45).

⁶⁵ Evreinov, 'A Merry Death,' p.8.

*Арлекин. Смеха. – Доктор. Что же вам смешно? – Арлекин. Вы!*⁶⁶ (Doctor: How do you feel?/ Harlequin: An attack./Doctor: Of coughing?/Harlequin: Of laughing./Doctor: What are you laughing at?/Harlequin: You! (*Bursts with laughter.*)).⁶⁷

Prior to the appearance of the Doctor, the audience is told that Harlequin's temperature was so high that his thermometer has begun to burn. Pierrot had to rescue it and extinguish the flame. The aforementioned use of the grotesque in the play points to the striking difference between the stage and the real world, thereby creating theatricality. The actor playing Pierrot has to construct an imaginary space in which it would be possible to see thermometers being burnt by the human body. During this scene Harlequin starts giggling in response to Pierrot's suggestion to call for a doctor. His giggle derives from thinking of the possibility of being cured by the Doctor. However, the visual image of a burning thermometer and laughter distract the audience from the language of the play. The metaphorical meaning of the expression 'an attack of laughter' (*pristup smekha*) transcends the literality of the language and invites the audience to appreciate the use of metaphors for poetical hyperbolic thinking. Viewed through the prism of common sense, the visual image of the fire caused by the feverish body of Harlequin invokes the reality of the absurd. This device enables Evreinov to locate theatricality between the real and the imaginary worlds. Throughout the whole play, he highlights how the space of theatre is based on fiction while reality functions in accordance with natural laws.

The ongoing clash between literal and metaphorical meanings in the play suggests that the phrase 'all the world is theatre' should not be taken at face value. The logic of Evreinov's play implies that the use of the imagination is crucial for finding a resemblance between the fictional universe and the real one. In other words, the aesthetic pleasure in the play derives from the act of discovery of the

⁶⁶ Evreinov, 'Veselaia smert', p.3.

⁶⁷ Evreinov, "A Merry Death", p.9.

similarities and the differences between the real and the imaginary. The thrust of the performance is oriented towards an intellectual game that prohibits the substitution of the real world with the staged version of it. Thus, for example, the play presents the state of medical care as inferior to the therapeutic qualities of theatrical performance, implying thereby that a good dose of laughter could be more effective in curing patients than drugs. Yet Evreinov makes the audience question the reality of the Doctor, too. He is portrayed as a character who acts and talks like a marionette. His habitualised behaviour prevents him from engaging emotionally with other people and expressing any critical views. He talks to Harlequin and Pierrot in a mechanical manner. He repeats clichés without showing sympathy to a dying person. He also refers to Harlequin's body as a machine, suggesting thereby that Harlequin is not a real person but a marionette-like urban character.

It is implied therefore that Harlequin resembles a mechanical doll whose problems might be fixed mechanically: '(Арлекину) Да, да, вы очень больны, но, будем надеяться, скоро поправитесь. (К Пьеро) Надежды никакой, машина испортилась. (Арлекину) Вы еще долго проживете. (К Пьеро) Он умрет очень скоро. (Арлекину) Вы прекрасно сделали, что послали за мной. (К Пьеро) Лучше бы послали за гробовщиком'.⁶⁸ ('Doctor: He's got a strong fever. If my ears aren't burned, it'll be a piece of luck. Yes, yes, you're very ill; but let's hope you'll soon be well. (To Pierrot.) There's no hope; the machine is spoiled. (To Harlequin.) You'll live a long time yet. (To Pierrot.) He'll die very soon. (To Harlequin.) You did very well to send for me. (To Pierrot.) You'd better have sent for a coffin-maker.')⁶⁹

Such a perspective on Harlequin as a living doll has a twofold function: it suggests that acting represents the same kind of theatricality as shaving, cleaning, curing people, and doing other everyday chores, and it also exposes other people as liars. While the aforementioned perspective on reality belongs to the Doctor,

⁶⁸ Evreinov, "Veselaia smert', p.4.

⁶⁹ Evreinov, Nikolai. "A Merry Death', p.10.

Harlequin advocates anarchy and laughter as an important liberating force. Certainly, he does not view theatricality as something akin to a theatrical instinct as the Doctor does. He is more concerned with the will to theatricalise and to see things differently as the essential quality for the construction of the creative self and for mastering one's life.

In addition to the Doctor, Columbine is also exposed in the play, as a bad actress. By analysing Columbine's behaviour in relation to her husband Pierrot, we can see that *A Merry Death* features another spectacle. Columbine is depicted as a clever trickster who can switch from a romantic mode of behaviour to uncivilised bullying. Columbine's public beating of her submissive husband before the audience invokes the violent scenes found in Russian popular theatre. It provides an illustration to Evreinov's 1918 lecture on theatre and execution on the scaffold 'Theatre and Execution on the Scaffold' ('Teatr i eshafot'). In this lecture, he talks about violence and public executions as a form of primitive spectacle which revolves around a power struggle. In another paper on public execution and theatre, Evreinov discusses crowd psychology and attests that people become attracted to violence when they see some signs of drama and tension provoked by the wilful actions of the individual who resists the violent treatment inflicted upon him.⁷⁰ It should be noted here that Evreinov's strong interest in the role of institutions in perpetrating violence as a form of social justice is inseparable from his vision of theatricality oriented towards estrangement from habitual behaviour and social values. For him, theatre should simulate the violence of real life in order to become estranged from it through a new collective experience of life that leads to the transformation of everyday life.

⁷⁰ Nikolai Evreinov, 'Za kulisami kulis. Teatr tozh. Eshafot kak teatr,' *Tainye pruzhiny iskusstva. Stat'i po filosofii iskusstva, etike i kul'turologii; 1920-50gg.*, I.M. Chubarov, ed. (Moscow: Logos-al'tera, 2004), p.191.

The denouncement of violence as habitualised behaviour in A Merry Death

It is worth mentioning here that Evreinov received his initial training at the Imperial Law College in 1892-1901 where he wrote a dissertation on corporal punishment, executions and public flogging in Russia from the middle ages to the end of the 19th century. One chapter of his dissertation exposes Russian life as barbaric. It depicts Russian enlightened monarchs as autocratic and sadistic. Thus, Peter the Great is presented as a cruel and despotic figure who enjoyed inflicting violence upon women and men alike, in both private and public life. The revised version of the dissertation was published as a book in St Petersburg in 1913 under the title *The History of Corporal Punishment in Russia (Istoriia telesnykh nakazanii v Rossii)* in which punitive government actions and violence in everyday life both among peasants and aristocrats are criticised as part of the inherent violence of law in Russia. It appears that, in *A Merry Death*, written one year after the First Russian Revolution (1905-07) and four years after the abolition of corporal punishment (in 1904) Evreinov alludes to the widespread of violence in everyday life, including the administrative punishment involving birch rods and the deployment of whips by police and Cossack detachments to disperse crowds of protesters in 1905-07. In his play, Columbine beats Pierrot several times because she thinks that her husband should show some signs of jealousy towards her in relation to Harlequin's infatuation with her. She is presented as a tyrant who oppresses her husband. Her actions seem to be totally irrational and hypocritical. When Columbine enters the room for the first time Harlequin tells her that Pierrot knows about his feelings for her and he does not mind having a love triangle. Subsequently, we see Columbine's violent attack on her husband. She sounds hysterical: 'Колумбина (Входит, сверкая глазами, и набрасывается на Пьеро.) Согласился?! Вот как! Согласился! Как, негодный, ты так мало дорожишь своей женой! Тебе ее измена нипочем! Нипочем? Отвечай!

(Бьет Пьеро).⁷¹ (Columbine (*enters*): Consented?! Here's a fine thing! Consented! What, you little beast, that's all you think of your wife! You don't care if she betrays you? You don't care? Answer! (*Beats Pierrot.*)).⁷² This scene of violence featuring Columbine and Pierrot alludes to everyday urban life where violent actions and obscene language became habitualised. Yet the drama of life is ridiculed in the play as a meaningless spectacle that should be laughed away.

In his 1908 Evreinov delivered a lecture based on his essay 'Apology for the Theatre' ('Apologija teatra') in which he said that: 'It is not enough to do away with the footlights and Stanislavsky's mythical fourth wall. The theatre must destroy the footlights which prevent the spectator from completely entering the drama on stage'.⁷³ In his seminal study *The Theatre in Life* (*Teatr kak takovoi*) published in Russian in Berlin in 1923, Evreinov asserted that all people should be seen as essentially theatrical beings. He explains in this study that theatrically is pre-aesthetic, more primitive and more fundamental than our aesthetic feeling. He refers to transformation as 'the essence of all theatrical'.⁷⁴ In *A Merry Death* transformation is achieved both by Doctor and by Columbine. During her supper with Pierrot and Harlequin, Columbine reports that she was late because she was distracted by the Doctor who was also flirting with the women outside Harlequin's house. He was drunk and merry. The Doctor told Columbine that he had wasted his life by staying healthy, sensible and believing in modern science. The Doctor's conversation with Harlequin about the superiority of a hedonistic lifestyle over a boring life made the

⁷¹ Evreinov, 'Veselaia smert', p.8.

⁷² Evreinov, 'A Merry Death', p.20.

⁷³ Quoted in: Golub Spencer, *Evreinov: The Theatre of Paradox and Transformation* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1977), p.35.

⁷⁴ Nicholas Evreinoff, *The Theatre in Life*, tr. by Alexander I. Nazaroff (New York: Brentano's Publishers, 1927), p.24.

Doctor realise that he knew nothing about the art of living. Columbine's description of the Doctor is empathetic. Her story implies that the Doctor might have changed his worldview. By listening to this story, the audience was meant to be assured that Harlequin was not a selfish person: he was destined to act as a catalyst of change. At the end of the play Columbine is transformed into a silent mournful figure showing signs of true love for Harlequin.

The will to approach reality creatively provides Harlequin with the opportunity to overcome his fear of death. Harlequin meets Death, personified by a woman, and asks her for a dance, reminding the audience that in the good old days the figure of Death took part in mass entertainment and ritualised performances. Bearing in mind that Harlequin's motto is to catch the moment, the audience could see that he dies gracefully and feels true to himself until the very end. In the prologue, Pierrot comments on the death of Harlequin and proclaims it analogous to the death of Rabelais who, during the last moments of his life, was surrounded by monks wishing him to do penance for his sins. As Pierrot reports to the audience, Rabelais smiled in response to the monks' call to follow the Christian ritual and, when the end came, he said mockingly: 'Let down the curtain; the farce is over'. Pierrot appears to lack imagination and admits to the audience that he is good at imitating but not at thinking. He tells the spectators that he does not understand the meaning of the play but, being a respectable actor who follows the text obediently, he should shout mockingly 'Let down the curtain; the farce is over' (*fars sygran*).⁷⁵ He is acting as a marionette-like person who submits to the will of the author and of the director. He lacks the desire to see reality creatively and to master his own life. He lacks spontaneity, too. Pierrot's cowardliness, conformity and fear of death are presented in the play as a result of his suppression of the theatrical instinct that could have provided him with an ability to reinvent himself in different circumstances.

⁷⁵ Evreinov, 'Veselaia smert', p.13.

According to Hildebrand, the prologue of *A Merry Death* establishes two levels of reality, including 'the level of the characters' and the level of 'the supposed actors or pseudo-reality'.⁷⁶ Hildebrand thinks that Pierrot is characterised not only by his inability to distinguish between the fictional world and the real one, but also by the lack of any awareness that he belongs to two different worlds at the same time: the world of the spectator and the world of Harlequin. She states: 'The behaviour of the spectator – in Evreinov's thinking the new bourgeoisie – is expressed through Pierrot in immediate opposition to Harlequin "for whom laws don't exist"'.⁷⁷ Harlequin is portrayed as being superior to Pierrot because he does not experience a division between life and theatre due to his principle of play-acting and his ability to approach reality creatively.

To some extent, Evreinov's Harlequin is an embodiment of Henri Bergson's notion of laughter that transforms the mechanical rigidity of everyday life. In the aforementioned essay *Laughter*, Bergson writes that: 'Laughter is, above all, corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed'.⁷⁸ In *A Merry Death* the corrective laughter is aimed at the Doctor and Pierrot because of their rigid way of thinking. By contrast, Harlequin in Evreinov's play strongly resembles the comic character described in Bergson's essay as a person who abandons social conventions and logic and 'no longer tries to be ceaselessly adapting and readapting himself to the society of which

⁷⁶ Olle Hildebrand, 'The Theatrical Theatre – Evreinov's Contribution to Russian Modernism. An Analysis of *Vesielaja smert'*,' in Herta Schmid and Aloysius Van Kesteren, *Semiotics of Drama and Theatre. New Perspectives in the Theory of Drama and Theatre* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984), pp.235-253 (p.241).

⁷⁷ Hildebrand, 'The Theatrical Theatre', p.242.

⁷⁸ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.176.

he is a member'.⁷⁹ Bergson defines such a character as absentminded and compares him to a child who invites his father to join him in some prank: 'The sympathy that is capable of entering into the impression of the comic is a very fleeting one. [...] Thus, a stern father at times forgets himself and joins in some prank his child is playing, only to check himself at once in order to correct it'.⁸⁰ For Evreinov, theatre provides such a space in which the audience could 'check itself' and become relieved for a short time from the strain of living.

Evreinov's concept of theatricality is akin to Bergson's notion of laughter that 'punishes certain failings somewhat as disease punishes certain forms of excess'.⁸¹ Viewed in this light, in *A Merry Death* the Doctor becomes cured by Harlequin because his worldview has been mocked and laughed away. By contrast, Rabelais is celebrated in the prologue as a great comic writer who mastered the art of life as well as the art of writing.

The transgressive power of laughter and performance

Evreinov recreates symbolically the relationship between the actor and his role as embedded in the commedia dell'arte and foregrounds the figure of Harlequin as a pedagogic tool. As Hildebrand points out, 'role-playing as such is presented in the play as a new and better way of life'.⁸² Such an assessment of Harlequin corresponds to modern sensibilities, which accentuate the elasticity of thinking, fluidity of identity and an ability to see things in a new light through creative engagement with life, be it theatre or laughter. The transformation of everyday life into a project that teaches the art of living is a key message of the play. Hildebrand

⁷⁹ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.175.

⁸⁰ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.176.

⁸¹ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.177.

⁸² Hildebrand, 'Theatrical Theatre,' p.246.

suggests that in *A Merry Death* 'people, things and phenomena are given an aesthetic and symbolic function in addition to their real or natural function': the Doctor is transformed into a fool; Columbine, Pierrot's quarrelsome wife, becomes a beautiful mistress; and Death becomes 'a heroine from some fairground theatre'.⁸³ Hildebrand aptly notes that Evreinov was dissatisfied with contemporary theatre and sought a new theatre that could serve as a model for praxis: that is why commedia dell'arte became a source of inspiration for him and enabled him to overcome Symbolism through 'a renewal of the aesthetics of the theatre'.⁸⁴

The setting of the play is designed in such a way that the mixture of realist and symbolic details was meant to produce a comic effect. The action of Evreinov's *A Merry Death* takes place in a room that contains several important props, including an oversized clock, a large bed, a large thermometer, a lamp and a lute. Clayton identifies the lute as representative of commedia dell'arte and points to the co-existence of contrasting theatrical styles in the play reflected by the objects used in it.⁸⁵ He sees *A Merry Death* as a complex work that brings into conflict 'a number of theatrical styles'.⁸⁶ While the grotesque features of the play such as the thermometer catching fire and Harlequin's breath like a steam engine parody the poetic language of Symbolist theatre, the use of offensive language invokes many popular theatrical forms of entertainment.

The musical language of the play is also eclectic. Evreinov, in his footnotes to the initial publication of the text in Russian, explained the musical language of the play. 'The music of the harlequinade', he wrote, 'should be arranged in a tendentiously primitive way so that its childishly cute sounds will remind old men of

⁸³ Hildebrand, 'Theatrical Theatre,' p.246.

⁸⁴ Hildebrand, 'Theatrical Theatre,' p.246.

⁸⁵ Clayton, *Pierrot in Petrograd*, p.150.

⁸⁶ Clayton, *Pierrot in Petrograd*, p.151.

the wretched charm of the street show'.⁸⁷ While the songs of Columbine and Harlequin were supposed to be performed in the style of sentimental stage lyricism, the dance of Death needed to be accompanied by 'tasty violin music, deliciously sprinkled with the piquant sounds of the xylophone and the castanets'.⁸⁸ The image of Death associated with the violin and the xylophone invokes Camille Saint-Saëns' tone poem 'Danse Macabre' (opus 40) composed for orchestra in 1874. The latter has the sounds of xylophone imitating the rattling noises of dancing skeletons. It was originally composed in 1872 as a piece of vocal music for voice and piano based on the poem written by French poet Henri Cazalis 'Égalité, Fraternité...' that refers to a French legend about the masculine image of Death who plays a dance-tune on his violin at midnight and repeats the slogan 'Long live Death and equality!'⁸⁹

Evreinov's play also alludes to the female and male images of Death found in Russian folk rituals and songs. Some of the references to Russian popular culture's treatment of the theme of death were included in Modest Mussorgskii's cycle for voice and piano *Songs and Dances of Death* (Pesni i pliaski smerti), composed in the mid-1870s and based on Arsenii Golenishchev-Kutuzov's poems. In the third song of the cycle 'Trepak', a drunken peasant is caught in a snowstorm and freezes to death. Prior to his death, he imagines summer fields and dancing a lively folk-dance, the 'Trepak', with the female figure of Death.

The images of Death entwined with laughter were used in Russian rituals related to the cyclical vision of time, including Shrovetide festivals. In her book on Russian folk beliefs, Linda Ivanets describes many Shrovetide rituals connected with the returning sun, including lighting of bonfires and important rites that took place in

⁸⁷ Quoted in Clayton, *Pierrot in Petrograd*, p.152.

⁸⁸ Clayton, *Pierrot in Petrograd*, p.152.

⁸⁹ Henri Cazalis, "Egalite, Fraternite..", <http://genius.com/Henri-cazalis-egalite-fraternite-english-annotated> [date of access: 7.07.2015].

the cemetery 'where a funeral meal was held amidst wailing and laughter, and some of the foods were left for the deceased'.⁹⁰ We could see that Evreinov's play draws on the folk tradition of using laughter for overcoming the fear of death as part of festive rituals.

At the same time, bearing in mind the widespread popularity of the less formal form of dance known as *pliaska* in Russia during the Silver Age, which was usually associated with the performances of Isadora Duncan who believed in the embodiment of spirit through dance, it would be possible to interpret the use of dance in the final scenes of Evreinov's play as a symbolic gesture that celebrates new forms of art and the death of old theatrical forms. Nikolai Kul'bin, a Futurist artist and a close friend of Evreinov, proclaimed the 'dance-alisation of life' (*tansevalizatsiia zhizni*) as a new form of creative renewal of life.⁹¹

When Evreinov directed Sologub's play *Night dances* (*Nochnye pliaski*) in March 1909 at the Liteinyi Dramatic theatre in St Petersburg, he abandoned the use of professional actors and invited many prominent artists, poets and writers to perform in the play, including Maksimilian Voloshin, Nikolai Gumilev, Ivan Bilibin, Mikhail Kuzmin and Lev Bakst.⁹² Evreinov had young amateur female dancers performing barefoot in the style of Duncan.⁹³ He was a great admirer of Duncan

⁹⁰ Linda J. Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief* (New York and London: Amonk, M.E.Sharpe, 1989), p.7.

⁹¹ Ekaterina Bobrinskaia, 'Zhest v poetike russkogo avangarda,' in Valerii Sazhin, ed. *Avangardnoe povedenie: A.Kruchenykh. Lakirovannoe triko; Sbornik materialov* (Saint-Peterburg: Kharmsizdat', 1998), pp.49-62 (p.59).

⁹² Unknown author, 'Istoriia gosudarstvennogo teatra na Liteinom,' <http://www.naliteinom.ru/index.php/history/full/full2> [date of access:7.07.2015].

⁹³ Irina Sirotkina, 'Dance-'pliaska' in Russia of the Silver Age,' *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, 28, 2 (Winter 2010), 135-152 (140).

whose performances were perceived by Russian critics and artists as highly innovative and inspiring. Following Duncan's second trip to Russia, Alexander Benois and other editors of the first issue of the literary journal *Apollon* refer to Duncan's 'Dance of the Future' in the editorial.⁹⁴ Benois suggested that 'all the plastique of everyday life should renew itself – to light up, to be permeated by the rhythm of pliaska' and called upon dance to be a law of life.⁹⁵ In 1908 Sologub affirmed 'the rhythm of liberation is the rhythm of pliaska'.⁹⁶

Irina Sirotkina links the fascination with modern dance-pliaska in the style of Duncan in Russia with the popular teaching of Viacheslav Ivanov about the roots of art in ancient Dionysian mysteries and with the utopian belief in the vitality of Nietzsche's dancing Superman.⁹⁷ This revival of Hellenism in Russian culture had a significant impact on Evreinov, too. In his search for a renewal of theatre based on the exploration of ancient rituals and folk traditions, Evreinov grew to dislike professional actors whom he defined as impersonating machines.⁹⁸ While he considered the playwright to be the author of the literary text dramatic work, he saw the director as the main author of the theatrical work.⁹⁹ Hence, Evreinov's *A Merry Death* might be successfully interpreted as an allegorical depiction of the death of the theatre oriented towards the logocentric tradition.

Being a hybridised version of the commedia dell'arte's comedy, Evreinov's Harlequin resembles the image of Russian holy fool whose vision of truth is often

⁹⁴ Sirotkina, 'Dance-pliaska,' p.140.

⁹⁵ Aleksandr Benua, 'V ozhidanii gimnu Apollonu,' *Apollon*, 1 (1909), 5-11 (10).

⁹⁶ Fedor Sologub, 'Teatr odnoi voli,' in *Teatr. Kniga o novom teatre* (Saint-Petersburg: Shipovnik, 1908; Moscow: GITIS, 2008), pp.148-165 (p.164).

⁹⁷ Sirotkina, 'Dance-pliaska,' p.136.

⁹⁸ Evreinov, *The Theatre in Life*, p.153.

⁹⁹ Evreinov, quoted in Golub, p.162.

presented in the form of eccentric spectacle characterised by offensive jokes and subversive behaviour.¹⁰⁰ The aim of Evreinov's play written for the cabaret-style theatre was to estrange audience and actors from the life of the city by intervening at various levels of experience, including affective experience, representational experience and perceptual experience. By using such a powerful affect as laughter, in *A Merry Death*, Evreinov foregrounded the intensity of corporeal experience in order to alter the limits of perception and to test the limits of representation, making visible the possibility of new kinds of knowledge beyond everyday urban life. Given that St Petersburg of the 1900s-10s was the living embodiment of Russia's experience of modernity,¹⁰¹ Evreinov's vision of theatricality - presupposing the use of humour and creative perspective on life - did not reject the hegemonic contemporary biopolitical discourses, but mapped a new direction towards more authentic and novel forms of non-representational life. As has been demonstrated here, Evreinov's vision of theatricality was subordinated to a new egalitarian mode of seeing and representing reality.

Conclusion

The present analysis of Evreinov's play *A Merry Death* in the context of Russian and European cultural experiments in the 1880s-1920s reveals the post-Bergsonian and post-Chekhovian interpretation of laughter as something that can be experienced as transgressive: the audience is given a chance to experience a catharsis of pity and fear through its active engagement with the comedy. However, Evreinov's *A Merry Death* does not produce an overall clearly positive corrective function and does not involve spectators in a collective assertion of social values. It points to some

¹⁰⁰ , A.M. Panchenko, 'Smekh kak zrelishche,' in D.S. Likhachev, A.M. Panchenko, N.V. Ponyrko, *Smekh v Drevnei Rusi* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1984), pp.72-153.

¹⁰¹ Steinberg, *Petersburg*, p.4.

shortcomings in human behaviour and encourages spectators to overcome their anxieties and master their lives by seeing art and life as interchangeable. The play celebrates a ritual of recognising comic behaviour as a manifestation of irrational forces of life that cannot be configured effectively by relying only on positivist and empirical forms of knowledge. By switching constantly from fictional to real references in *A Merry Death*, Evreinov teaches his spectators to develop further their theatrical instincts, so they could challenge their habitual ways of thinking and seeing. The allusions to Russian and European popular culture embedded in Evreinov's play are entwined with his vision of theatricality as a celebration of myth and fantasy alluded to by the atmosphere of comic stage behaviour. His play brings to the fore the ability of theatrical comic performance to address the suppressed fears and anxieties of modern individuals caused by the fragmentation and alienating effects of urban life.