

Rosh Ireland
Four Vaudevilles:
Vasilii Shkvarkin's Comedies of the 1920s

Vasilii Shkvarkin's career as a dramatist began and ended with the Stalin period, since his first play was performed in 1925, his last in 1951.¹ While he has never been regarded as a playwright of the first rank, nonetheless his work includes two of the most popular comedies of the time – *Vrednyi element* in the 1920's and *Chuzhoi rebenok* in the 1930s. He was generally regarded as outside the mainstream, yet there are many points of intersection between his comedies and the work of the major writers of those decades. Since Shkvarkin worked in that difficult and dangerous period (Ar dov, referring to the tragic nature of his biography as a writer, declares that he can be compared only with Zoshchenko)², there are features of his work which may well derive from the pressures of the times.

The first is that he changed genres constantly. He began with historical plays and clearly retained a penchant for them until the end. He then wrote a number of comedies which began life as social satires, some of which underwent transformation on the stage into deliberate imitations of the traditional vaudeville form or were treated as a variation on the review popular in the mid-twenties. In 1929, in the face of virulent criticism, he withdrew from the comedy stage, to attempt, in the early 1930s, to write social drama by taking the kind of subject required during the period of 'cultural revolution' and making it palatable, though hardly credible, by relying on his now well developed qualities as a dramatist. He then discovered the farce (as defined by Ben Travers, the author of the Aldwych farces) and enjoyed signal success in 1933 with *Chuzhoi rebenok*. He continued to work in this vein during the

¹ The research on which this article is based was carried out with the aid of a grant from the Arts Faculty of the Australian National University. I acknowledge the generous cooperation of the manuscript section of the State Bakhrushin Theatre Museum and of the library of The Union of Theatrical Workers (earlier the library of the All-Russian Theatrical Society). The references to archival documents are to Shkvarkin's (Ф 480) and Fedor Kaverin's (Ф 454) archives in the Bakhrushin Museum.

² В. Ардов. «О комедиях В. Шкваркина», unpublished letter to graduate student. Ф 480, 171.

'thirties with three popular, but less attractive plays which went on the stage in 1937 and 1939, two of them being subsequently revived in the post-Stalin period.³ Before the war, he returned briefly to the historical genre with a play about Napoleon III. Then, during the war, he wrote two dramas on the perilous subject of the Occupation.⁴ His last play was a translation and adaptation of a comedy by the Ossetian dramatist Asakhmet Tokaev.

The second feature is that not all his plays were published, and many exist in a number of different versions and with a variety of titles. It has proved impossible to establish even where and when two of them were first performed, since published and other information is contradictory.

A Red Douglas Fairbanks

Of Shkvarkin's four comedies of the nineteen-twenties, two survive only as typescripts.⁵ The first, *Vokrug sveta na samon sebe*, is a rambling, uneven piece. N.M. Radin, who played the film producer in the Korsh Theatre production of 1927, commented on its lack of any particular merits.⁶ It was not taken up by any other theatre, though this may be partly due to the success of his second comedy, which premiered only a month later. Nevertheless it has its place in the development of Soviet comedy, which David Gutman in the same year saw as developing from review, through vaudeville, to fully formed comedy.⁷ It represents also a variation on an archetypal Russian theme.⁸ While

³ See Rosh Ireland. 'Four farces: Vasilii Shkvarkin's comedies of the 1930s', *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies* Vol. 16, Nos 1/2 (2002), 55-70.

⁴ See Rosh Ireland. 'A Writer of Comedies in Time of War: Vasili Shkvarkin's Dramas of Life under the Occupation' in *Modern Europe. Histories and Identities*, ed. P. Monteith and F.S. Zuckerman (Adelaide: Australian Humanities Press, 1998).

⁵ Before the Shkvarkin archive in the State Bakhrushin Theatre Museum became accessible, the present witer attempted to reconstruct these two plays, then thought to be lost. See: Rosh Ireland 'The Lost Plays of Vasilii Shkvarkin', *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies* Vol. 3, No. 1 (1989), 17-28.

⁶ *Николай Мариусович Радин* (Moscow, 1965), 38. Radin, who had cut his teeth on French comedy, had the intention of establishing a comedy theatre at the Korsh in the late 'twenties.

⁷ Д. Гутман, «К водевилю (в порядке обсуждения)», *Жизнь искусства* 10 (1927), 4.

⁸ I am grateful to Elena Fortescue for perceiving here a variant on the device of «прыжок в никуда», to which the final scene of the comedy gives a literal realisation.

the plot coincides with one of the recurring 'outsider' themes of the 1920s, the little man dissatisfied with and attempting to break away from the system, the central character's adventures take him through a series of discrete scenes, connected only by his presence, reflecting the review form. The similarity is reinforced by literary reminiscences evoked by some of those scenes. The play also marks the first intersection of Shkvarkin's work with elements of popular Hollywood cinema, which will reemerge in the last play of the series. One of the most intriguing aspects of the play was the revision of the ending, attributed by the critic Mikhail Il'in to the sensibilities of the theatre:

У Шкваркина Ипполит разбивается насмерть после прыжка со скалы.
Театр не решился показать смерть героя, ибо в зрительном зале сидят те же Ипполиты...

Whatever the reason, Shkvarkin rewrote the ending – from a defiant and spectacular suicide to a Hollywood ending – 'Be my very own Douglas Fairbanks.' At the same time, he crossed out the term *tragikomediiia* in the title.

Ruben Simonov, the director, nevertheless appears to have seen the play in terms of tragicomedy:

Главное действующее лицо Иван Васильевич Страхов. Его трагедия заключается в отрыве от общественной среды. Страхов, побывав в качестве лакея в доме богатого концессионера в Москве, постепенно опускаясь, попадает в пивную, затем в ночлежку, где его приглашают на киносъемки для исполнения головоломного кино-трюка. В последнем акте показана съемка.⁹

Трагикомедия разворачивается в Москве в наши дни, и мне хотелось развить все действие пьесы на фоне города и притом города не отвлеченного, а именно Москвы, для чего я ввожу некоторые заостряющие пьесу детали жанрового характера.

Сценическое действие разворачивается на фоне картин московского быта.¹⁰

Scene I begins when Ivan Vasilievich Strakhov (played by Vasiliï Toporkov), following an argument at work, accepts an offer from a foreigner to be his butler. This he discloses to his wife during a domestic dispute in a scene

⁹ «Хроника», *Новый зритель* 2 (1927), 14.

¹⁰ «Москва. Театр б. Корша», *Жизнь искусства* 6 (1927), 20.

whose construction and dialogue are reminiscent of Erdman. His ideal is discovered to be the film star Mertsalova, whose poster hangs on the wall,¹¹ but he is critical of the theatre of the day in a comment which appears to lead into Scene II:

Театр... Да и там все наизусть знаю; сначала под вывеской буржуазных пороков фокс-трот во фраках покажут, а потом честный рабочий из любви к угнетенной горничной революцию сделает.

Strakhov takes up his duties in a series of comic misunderstandings as a party is held in the house of Shtamm. The foxtrot is indeed demonstrated, followed by the promised bourgeois corruption, as Shtamm's wife seduces a business partner to obtain a deal for her husband and a position for her lover. The next episode is in such appalling taste that it could well ensure that the play never appear on the stage again. The highlight of the evening is the appearance of Velikii Charli, who, to the horror of Ivan Vasilievich, turns out to be, not Charlie Chaplin, but a gorilla-like boxer (the description 'negr' is added in ink in the text) with speech punctuated by grunts. Ivan Vasilievich's search for foreign culture, then, is disappointed and there is a shift to the ideological plane. The collision comes with Ivan Vasilievich's discovery that he is among people who supported the Entente during the Civil War, in which he had himself fought.

Boris Alpers finds this, and the whole play, implausible 'from beginning to end'.¹² In Shkvarkin's defence, it should be said that, though the exchange is highly contrived, the nub is that Ivan Vasilievich is convinced that the westerners would have understood and sympathised with the Bolsheviks, had they realised the real extent of the suffering imposed on the population. He is disillusioned by a lady's (less plausible) statement that she had been well aware of it and found it amusing.

¹¹ While accepting the cinematic pun in the name, one is tempted to note its similarity to that of D.V. Zerkalova, an actress involved in a scandalous dispute at the Korsh Theatre in the 1925-6 season. The story might be seen to find partial reflection later in the third comedy of the series, *Лица напрокат*. See *Жизнь искусства* 2.П.1926, 1-3.

¹² Б. Алперс. «Вокруг света на самом себе», *Репертуарный бюллетень* 4 (1927), 25.

The connection between the plot and the cinema, and indeed the play itself, takes a different turn as Shtamm and the film director discuss a film they intend to make (and which will be made in the fifth act):

Штамм. Мне нужен трюк, трюк небывалый... предложите какому-нибудь бывшему человеку гроши: две, три тысячи рублей и он рискнет на что угодно.

Кинорежиссер. Да, но... он сломает себе шею!

Штамм. В таком случае, я за фильму заплачу второе!

As Ivan Vasilievich walked demonstratively out of his flat and marriage in Scene I, so he marches defiantly out of the Shtamm house, flinging off his butler's tails.

Scene III takes Ivan Vasilievich into a poets' pub (the café-bar *Sovremennost'*), where he tries out a 'free profession' by replacing the drunken first violinist in the band, only to make a gesture of protest, and to be thrown out of the pub in consequence, when Shtamm comes in, demands a foxtrot and sends Ivan Vasilievich a glass of beer with a coin in it. The central character in this genre scene is a poet who whispers decadent verse into the ear of his beloved and is taken by Ivan Vasilievich to be a soul-mate, an individualist and rebel like himself. Then, however, to Ivan's disgust, he modifies his verse for Soviet taste when he performs for the patrons, and for a meal.

Тихая, белая, ясная...

Ты грустишь... И как память легка,

На подушке устало-безвластная

Белой лилией вянет рука...

becomes

Бодрая, сильная, красная.

Ты стоишь на посту, у станка,

На рычаг налегла твоя властная

И с машиной слилася рука.

Boris Petker, who played the poet, describes the scene:

Особенно памятна мне сцена в кабачке; в ней было сумбурное смещение литературных, мещанских, богемных страстей, в ней действовали пошляки, наркоманы, пьяницы, и в то же время в ней было

ощущение каких-то новых, еще не очень определенных желаний и устремлений.¹³

This seems to be a further indication that the inventiveness of the production compensated for an uninspired script. Scene IV finds Ivan Vasilievich in a doss-house with unmistakable echoes of Gorky. In a memorable speech, a former deacon recalls his service in a cemetery chapel:

Пропускная способность у нас была выше всякой нормы. В 19-ом году за сутки до двадцати новопреставленных поступало. Прямо массовое производство. И после этого нас в тунеядстве обвиняют.¹⁴

It is typical of Shkvarkin that the joke extends a sentence longer than might be expected.

The cinema director enters offering a hundred roubles to anyone who will dive three hundred feet into water. His reception among the inmates is predictable. The most dramatic reaction comes from Fedia, appearing in the cast list originally as *vor*, overwritten as *fokusnik*, who advances threateningly on the director, forcing him to increase the offer and reduce the height. In the original version he draws a knife, which is taken from him by Ivan Vasilievich. That variant is crossed out, and he is left merely to make a threatening gesture and to be restrained by the deacon and Ivan Vasilievich, who accepts the proposition as the director's party runs for the door.

After these four genre scenes, Scene V unfolds as a parody of Hollywood: the *Khap-khap* redskin tribe has kidnapped a white woman. Ivan Vasilievich is to rescue her. Then, surrounded by enemies, he has to jump over a cliff to escape. There are different levels of implausibility here. It is marginally acceptable that the director should produce an ideological framework for the scenario: the tribe, as their name suggests, are '*kulaki and sobstvenniki*', whose intention is to exploit the lady in any way they can. But that Ivan Vasilievich should find it impossible to fight, rescue and jump because the heroine is depressingly plain, and that the director be then able to substitute Mertsalova, who inspires Ivan Vasilievich to a stunning performance which quite wins her heart, is beyond consideration in any convention short of parody. In the revised

¹³ Рубен Симонов (Москва, ВТО, 1981), 460.

¹⁴ These lines are crossed out in the typescript.

ending, Ivan Vasilievich jumps and is brought back on a stretcher. In the meantime the set is changed to a 'magic tent' and Ivan Vasilievich regains consciousness in a manner which prefigures awakening of Prisyppkin.

Через несколько секунд из под простыни показывается рука Ивана Васильевича, шарит по простыне, тянется к носу. Иван Васильевич сморкается, приподнимается, садится, озирается и видит 'шатер'.

Иван Васильевич. А большевики наврали, что 'того света' нет. Вот сволочи! Куда же я попал? ... Умер я мученической смертью, – значит, в раю. (*Видит на себе простыню*). Белые одежды... Следовательно – я праведник... Чорт меня знает... а вдруг – святой?

A thousand roubles in the hand confirms Ivan Vasilievich in this belief, until a smart cameraman suggests that a patent will cost him 800 and the fine 300, leaving him a hundred in debt. The cameraman hails Ivan Vasilievich's return to earth with: 'Long live the red Fairbanks'. The producer offers him a contract to work in the west, which Ivan Vasilievich declines in words taken from the original version:

И если соберусь за границу, то разве с винтовкой на перевес.

Next Mertsalova appears, to offer him the role of her lover in a 'real picture to be shot in Moscow'. The original ending had been connected, not with the image of Mertsalova and a Hollywood world which turns out to be attainable, but with the quest which leads only to the ubiquitous Shtamm. When Ivan Vasilievich once again defies Shtamm, refusing to accept the demeaning role in which he is to be cast, and announcing his intention to return to Soviet reality, he is blackmailed through his earlier rebellious exclamations and told that his only course is to go to the west. So he jumps again and is killed, Mertsalova reappearing too late.

The overt parody in Scene V invites an extension of that approach to the rest of the play, which then could appear to be a parody on contemporary Soviet drama, as the critic S. Valerin suggested:

По началу вся эта обрисовка нового Евграфа и его бытового окружения даны всерьез, так что зритель обманут, – ему кажется, что и пьеса всерьез. Но по мере его развертывания, по мере прогрессивного и так сказать, демонстративного мельчания образа Евграфа, – зритель перестает интересоваться судьбой Евграфа – Ивана Васильевича и, поняв 'секрет' пьесы, сосредоточивает свое внимание (а это нетрудно) на отыскании в пьесе ее основного – пародийности.

Он замечает, что самое построение речи пьесы Шкваркина сделана по Эрдману, в манере Мандата.

For Valerin the key to this view of the play is the fifth act, in which he sees a burlesque of Harry Lloyd films.¹⁵

A less charitable view is taken by N.Volkov, who regards the play as a series of borrowings from Erdman, Gorkii, Blok and Bulgakov:

Портит пьесу и то, что она, как музыка капельмейстера, вся сложена из чужих мотивов. То это – Евграф, обусловивший весь стержень *Вокруг света на самом себе*, то это – *Мандат* (язык первой картины), то это – кусочек из горьковского *Дна* и даже блоковской *Незнакомки* (поэт в пивной)...

Постановка... и макетом (в двух центральных картинах) и общим подходом к построению сценических образов чем-то до крайности напоминает столь сомнительный образец, как *Зойкина квартира*.¹⁶

Lev Gurych Sinichkin

Shkvarkin's second comedy was one of the most successful of the 'twenties, establishing his status as a comic writer and still present in the repertoire of the *Teatr Satiry* in Moscow ten years later, when its 500th performance coincided with the 100th of Shkvarkin's best-known comedy, *Chuzhoi rebenok*. It was first staged by Fedor Kaverin in the cramped little *Studiia Malogo teatra* on the Sretenka in March 1927. David Gutman and Emmanuil Krasnianskii then produced it in April at the *Teatr Satiry* in Leningrad as a review, with music by Dunaevskii. Not until the summer break, when a group of actors laid off for the summer at the Moscow *Teatr Satiry* resolved to spend the time working up a version of the play under the direction of Pavel Pol, did it enter the repertoire of that theatre.

All contemporary accounts agree that *Vrednyi element*, like its predecessor, underwent radical changes while being prepared for the stage. As the title suggests, it was written as a social comedy (Kaverin calls it a comedy

¹⁵ С. Валерин. «Вокруг света на самом себе», *Программы государственных академических театров* 7 (1927), 6–7.

¹⁶ Н. Волков. «Вокруг света на самом себе», *Известия* (cutting; no date).

of manners¹⁷) around the activities of elements of society hostile to the new order. As in *Vokrug sveta na samom sebe*, the scenes took place in settings characteristic for that group: a communal flat (the inhabitants of which include a prostitute), the Butyrki prison, a casino and a white slaver's flat.

It also contains a number of elements which prefigure specific episodes in Maiakovskii's major comedies, among them the bed-bug image, the mock dancing lesson for the social climber, and the suggestion (acted out by the speaker rather than turned into an interlude) that a text be reinforced by an ideological pantomime. As the director Fedor Kaverin records, he took his cue from the central character, an out-of-work actor in whom Lenskii's Lev Gurych Sinichkin was promptly recognised,¹⁸ and, with the willing cooperation of the author, made the few changes needed to transform the social comedy into an old-fashioned vaudeville, changes involving the addition of the traditional couplets, handwritten on the left hand pages of the director's copy. The published version¹⁹ incorporates these changes, though the couplets are revised and there are numerous discrepancies in the text, many of them involving changes which remove lines which might offend. The prostitute Mania, for example, is given a rather desperate change in the tools of her trade from '*krovat' da kushetka*' to '*gitara da kushetka*'.

Kaverin's direction underlined throughout the vaudeville element, reinforced by an elaborate musical score, part using popular romances, part in a circus idiom, by S. Germanov. Markov identifies the two crucial elements of Kaverin's direction in general as the use of music and the exploitation of objects and of the set:

...вещи часто сами играют в пьесах, как играют и декорации... Каверин заставляет актеров до конца обыгрывать предметы...

¹⁷ «Вредный элемент – в студии Малого театра. Беседа с режиссером Ф.Н. Кавериным», *Программы государственных академических театров* 11 (1927), 8.

¹⁸ The allusion is reinforced by the central character's name, Shchukin, since Boris Shchukin played Sinichkin in the 1924 production at the Vakhtangov theatre.

¹⁹ М. Модпик, 1927.

Использование музыки – разнообразно: по ассоциациям смежности, сходства, противоположности – музыка служит Каверину вместо отсутствующего слова режиссера.²⁰

The tiny stage of the studio was made to resemble that of an old-fashioned theatre, with floats and a prompt box. The old practice that each actor took centre stage in turn was followed, the numerous acting areas in Act I being exploited for this purpose. From the opening, when the curtain danced a polka (a device discovered accidentally when the director pulled the wrong cord), the elements of the set joined in the action, to the four ten-foot pillars in the nepman's flat, which drooped and straightened as the mood changed:

Все эти чувства тоски и веселья по очереди вместе с актерами должны пережить и наши колонны. Четыре рабочих, каждый у своей ручки, сперва медленно опускают их вместе с занавесом в ритме тягучего романса при угасающем свете софитов, потом в веселом плясовом напеве раскачивают их ритмически, все учащая и учащая раскачивание сообразно музыкальному росту пляски.²¹

There can be no argument that the play contains elements traditionally regarded as belonging to the vaudeville. The aging actor, in a bid to conjure up an audience, however ersatz, advertises his flat for rent and plays a role for those who come to view it. Receiving a deposit, he goes off to play it and eventually lose it in a frowsty NEP casino, where he is arrested with his fellow gamblers. In the Butyrki, where the prisoners trade identities against their probable sentences, he assumes the identity of the white slaver and is released with that identity. He then is invited by the latter's wife to play the part of her husband, which he does with such aplomb that he wins her, while her former husband goes off to administrative exile.

The signals given by Shkvarkin at the beginning of the play are contradictory. To begin, splendidly, with the bed-bug image, the actor gazing at the audience through opera-glasses:

Алексей Николаевич, ведь это клопы. Смотрел, смотрел, кто это сидит?
Взял бинокль – клопы на стене.

²⁰ П. Марков. «Ф.Н. Каверин», *Жизнь искусства* 13 (1928), 8.

²¹ Ф. Каверин, А. Попов, *Спектакль на малой сцене* (Москва. Театропечать, 1929), 54.

would seem to indicate that the author was to pursue the notion of socially harmful elements. The following exchange with the budding novelist, culminating in Shchukin's solo pantomime to music of the fall of capitalism, seems to point to satire of good quality. Then, however, the jokes become almost purely 'stage' as a second actor enters in a manner reminiscent of Ostrovskii's pair of itinerant actors, having escaped the collapse of his troupe with little but what he is wearing: Pierrette's cape over the uniform of General Trepov (*'Razdet'sia ne mogu: arestuiut'*). His *emploi* has been the topical, if uncomfortable, role of the tyrant's corpse spurned by the mob.

Where Shkvarkin creates an opening for visual humour and for satire on the current state of historical drama, the first set of vaudeville couplets are then sung by the actor Nadryv-Vechernii, establishing now that convention and making a return to social satire virtually impossible:

Все, что жизнь смела, как ветер, –
Мы ввели в репертуар:
Здесь – на ходулях добродетель,
А там – царицын будуар...

Поглядевши на тиранов
От Петра до наших дней,
Зритель бьет в ладоши рьяно
И кричит: «Дашь царей».

The rest of the act, though it touches tangentially on social issues which could be dealt with in a less flippant manner – prostitution, procuring, the housing crisis and unemployment – remains in that light vein, perhaps making acceptable the absurd resolve of Shchukin to use a deposit received during his charade of letting the flat to gamble at the casino.

There is little that is original in the casino scene which opens the second act. Shchukin appears, to let his modest neighbour play his money and win; then to let his head be turned by two attentive ladies, and finally to lose it himself. The casino is raided and Shchukin finds himself with the white slaver, the stock exchange rigger, the casino operators and a habitual criminal in the Butyrki. Their neighbours in the cells are the black market and the racetrack. It is in this scene that the duality of the play is most marked. The prisoners discuss their status:

Я себе мыслю так: преступник политический – это интеллигент. Преступник уголовный – это бандит. А кто такое мы? Мы – золотая середина. Следовательно, мы преступники экономические. Все ясно! Но в таком случае, почему нас не посадили раньше? Я протестую!

There is here, of course, another echo of *Mandat*. The absence of any law covering their offences is discussed:

Статья? Кодекс? Законы? ... Судья смотрит на вас и говорит: '10 лет!' Смотрит на вас: '5 лет!' А если у вас совершенно честное лицо, ну тогда всего на три года.

A touching reception for the prosecutor is rehearsed, services to the revolution recalled:

Щукин (припоминая). Учился в гимназии, играл на сцене. Отбывал воинскую повинность...
 Столбик (с надеждой). Может быть, в штрафной роте?
 Щукин (гордо). В 7-ом Уланском короля Алфонса XIII полку.
 Крупье. Я сам тринадцать лет был алфонсом и то не хвастаю.

The prisoners form a group to compose a letter to the prosecutor in a pose that reproduces Repin's painting *The Cossacks Write a Letter to the Sultan*.²²

Столбик: По русской поговорке если фактов нет, их надо взять. (Смотрит наверх.) Пишите! (Вдохновенно.) Пишите так, чтобы прокурор (хлопает себе по лбу) тронулся!... Припадая к вашим красным стопам... Мы красные жертвы советской законности... по недоразумению лишены невинности... просим восстановить указанную невинность... путем вашего вхождения в наше безвыходное положение. Да здравствует МОПЕР!

Finally, all are given chits with their sentences, pronounced without a court appearance. There is a discussion on the relative merits of Narym and Solovki which, seen in retrospect, carries grim overtones:

Столбик. Я вас информирую... (Его окружают). Что такое Нарым? – Большая неприятность и перемена климата. Но если у вас есть средства – Нарым это – золотое дно: Вы поворачиваетесь лицом к деревне и

²² A copy of the painting is glued in the left hand page of the director's copy, with actors' names attached to individual portraits in the painting. (Ф 454, В. Каверин. «Режиссерский экземпляр комедии Шкваркина *Вредный элемент*», 72).

скупаєте меха; затем поворачиваетесь лицом к городу и отправляете меха в Москву.

Наважин. А Соловки?

Столбик. Соловки? Там не то, что коммерсант, там даже солнце не делает никаких оборотов! Сначала там 4-месячный рабочий день, а потом 8-месячная рабочая ночь.

Since Shchukin has heard that Solovki boasts a theatre,²³ he is persuaded to change identities, and thus sentences, with the white slaver, who prefers Narym and its commercial opportunities. When a telephone message frees the latter, it is Shchukin who is released with his new identity. The speculator then concludes that Narym is a genuine sentence, whereas Solovki represents merely a judicial admonishment – (*Solovki – eto tak, dlia moral'nogo strakha*) – and ends the act by seeking an exchange amongst the audience:

«Даю Нарым, беру Соловки!»

The banter amongst the NEP-men, a mixture of jokes and puns, is more specific to the setting than in the first half of the play, and reflects a situation peculiar to the period, even although the participants, at least in historical terms, cannot be aware of the gravity of their position.

Kaverin, perceiving that the scene might become one of relatively heavy humour, took steps to make the set convey as little as possible the confining and depressing character of the prison cell. The open wall towards the audience was reinforced by a skewing of the perspective which provided an open ceiling, and the inmates jostled to ogle women prisoners through the bars of a frameless window suspended above the forestage. The positions adopted

²³ Shchukin, or the author, may have read a reference in *Жизнь искусства* 12 (1926), 9-10, to an issue of *Новые Соловки*, published by the camp administration, in which an article «Соловецкий рабочий театр» and a review «Театральная неделя» list current productions, including *Мандат*, *Заговор императрицы*, *The Count of Lixemburg* and an evening in memory of Esenin organised by the one-time editor of *Рампа и жизнь* Boris Glubokovsii. Strangely, Kaverin's copy does not mention the theatre at Solovki. Shchukin's line here is: «За то на Соловках и паек, и помещение (this last word crossed out), а что я буду в Нарыме делать?» (84)

by the inmates also suggested freedom of movement in space, rather than constriction and confinement.²⁴

In contrast, the third act is predominantly in the vaudeville mode. It depends on Shchukin's playing the role of Navazhin so well that he frustrates the wicked schemes of Navazhin's brother-in-law and acquires Navazhin's wife (a lady with an independent income), and, by contrast, on Navazhin's utter failure in the role of Shchukin. Absurdities, games and frequent couplets well outnumber the few semi-serious interludes, so much so that the balance of the play as farce with some serious social shading reasonably maintained in the prison scene, tips over into clowning, musical numbers and undemanding vaudeville. The ending is pure vaudeville, since it produces a double wedding. One character perceives the irony:

Надрыв-Вечерний. Товарищи. Погодите калоши надевать!... (Шукину)
 Что же, столкновение классов вы хотите свадьбой кончить? Вася, это и
 вся твоя идеология?
 Все. Да ведь это же водевиль!

Markov, reviewing Kaverin's production for *Pravda*, saw the third act as close to operetta.²⁵ Within that framework, however, there are elements verging on the sinister which could have brought the comedy closer to the genre of *Zoikina kvartira*. Shchukin's daughter, discovering that her father is supposedly to be exiled, accepts the offer of Navazhin (conveyed through a procuress) to become one of his kept women. Shchukin is asked by Navazhin's wife to continue to play her husband in order to complete a business deal. The deal turns out to be a project to set up a chain of opium dens which would also provide girls procured from impoverished intelligentsia families. The girl who gives Shchukin-Navazhin his lesson in social graces and in the fox-trot, in which the histrionics are provided by him, not, as in Maiakovskii's version, by the teacher, is seeking protection to enter a ballet school.

Once again Kaverin's set and props reinforced the vaudeville aspect:

Неистоимые трюки – смешны и наивны: дуэль на гитарах, бритва-гигант, трубка телефона, с которой гуляют по сцене, будильник в

²⁴ See Ф. Каверин, А. Попов, *Спектакль на малой сцене* (Москва. Театроиздат, 1929), 52.

²⁵ П. Марков, «Вредный элемент», *Правда* 20 (1927).

кармане ростовщика, танцующие портфели в руках представителя охраны и порядка.²⁶

Recording the transformation of a comedy of manners into a vaudeville, the critics perceived the friction engendered between the contemporary references and the deliberately old-fashioned form chosen by Kaverin.²⁷ Most gave Shkvarkin credit for understanding and reproducing effectively the vaudeville form, for a series of lively miniatures, for witty and inventive dialogue and for writing parts attractive to actors. If one excludes the extremely hostile reviews,²⁸ then the most serious criticism of the play referred to looseness of structure:

Недостаток вообще всех пьес Шкваркина заключается в том, что в них нет той драматической спайки и того развития интриги, которые можно было бы требовать.

В результате этого получается раздробленность действия и отсутствие крепкой внутренней спайки между отдельными его частями, каждая из которых, взятая порознь, может при сравнительно небольших усилиях режиссера представлять законченную отдельную миниатюру.²⁹

No doubt in part for that reason, David Gutman in Leningrad described the play as a review and played it in five scenes, each with a catchy subtitle:

Картина 1. Погибает произведение искусства!

Картина 2. Казино работает круглый год!

Картина 3. Что это? «Кресты» или бесправная Англия?

Картина 4. Ничего страшного!

Картина 5. И в водевиле этого не позволяют.³⁰

Gutman, in fact, saw Soviet comedy as developing from the popular review form, as it cast off ephemeral elements and became more tightly constructed round a given subject:

²⁶ С. Марголик, «Вредный элемент», *Вечерняя Москва*, 16 III 1927.

²⁷ Б. Алперс, «Вредный элемент», Репертуарный бюллетень художественного отдела ГПП, 2 (1927), 27.

²⁸ See, for example: Мих. Павдо, «Над кем смеетесь?» *Рабочий и театр* 21 (1927), 11. Мих. Ильин, «Вредный элемент», *Новый зритель* 12 (1927), 8.

²⁹ М.Б. (Б. Мазинг), «Вредный элемент. Студия Малого театра.» *Жизнь искусства* 12 (1927).

³⁰ Poster for Leningrad production. *Жизнь искусства* 20 (1927), 23.

Будет ли это комедия? Вероятно, да. Но скорее, чем комедия, будет создан водевиль. Это – менее ответственная задача, и она, конечно, будет решена скорее. От обозрения к комедии через водевиль – вот вероятный путь движения нашего театра.³¹

Boris Alpers regarded *Vrednyi element*, with *Mandat*, as an indication that the vaudeville form and contemporary material were incompatible:

Опыт *Мандата* и *Вредного Элемента*, повидимому, говорят о невозможности использования в современной пьесе водевильной формы...

whereas Emmanuil Krasnianskii, involved with the *Teatr Satiry* in Moscow, where the play was produced by Pavel Pol for the following season, and co-director of the Leningrad production, took the view that *Vrednyi element* was the first proof that the vaudeville form could accommodate contemporary material.³²

Shapka vodevilista

Vrednyi element marked the beginning of the long association between Shkvarkin and the Moscow *Teatr Satiry*. Later in the same season, Krasnianskii and Gutman staged Shkvarkin's third comedy, *Lira naprokat*, with music by Dunaevskii. This is the other comedy long thought to have been lost. There is a typed copy in the Shkvarkin archive, stamped by Glavrepertkom with the date 10/II/28.³³ There are twenty cuts in red pencil with the Glavrepertkom stamp and run over in ink, ranging from four words to two and a half pages, although most are short. This comedy is also described as a vaudeville. There is a handwritten note in pencil on the page following the list of characters, signed by Shkvarkin:

Куплеты – кроме пролога и финала – не мои. Заболев, я вообще не мог обработать пьесу.

³¹ В. Гутман, «К водевилю (в порядке обсуждения)», *Жизнь искусства* 10 (1927), 4.

³² Э. Краснянский, *Слуги трех муз* (Москва. Искусство, 1987), 113.

³³ Ф 480, 12.

One is tempted to see the play as Shkvarkin's *Bagrovyi ostrov*. The plot follows the misadventures of a theatre electrician who writes a play and has it accepted by a theatre. He defends his lack of literary training:

Спросите у самого Льва Толстого, чем он раньше занимался. – На кавказском фронте золотопогонником был. Да знаете ли вы, что даже великий Ломоносов до двадцати лет на пляже Белого моря беспризорником бегал.

Here the go-between is the *zavlit*, who announces that the play has been accepted but 'requires certain changes' (these words are crossed out in red). He then suggests himself as co-author. The theatre itself is introduced by the doorman, Galunov, with a once well-known monologue contrasting the cloakroom of the past with that of the present:

...А прежде, бывало, в каких мехах в театр ездили... Примешь такие соболя, снег отряхнешь, повесишь, да шубе–то еще поклонись... Сунулся я раз к одному купцу с номерком, а он номера не взял и обиделся: ты, говорит, мою шубу должен в лицо знать. Правильно. Глянешь, бывало, на вешалку – и видишь одежды разные, как люди между собой разговаривают. Здесь шуба с дамским пальтом под руку взялись. Здесь – другая к ротонде склонилась: нашептывает... А теперь что. Одеженка серая, смрадная... пихаешь ее на гвоздь без всякого уважения и сидишь сам, как на барахолке. Нет, погибло искусство.

This monologue was inserted by Shkvarkin in the course of rehearsals. Krasnianskii uses it to demonstrate Shkvarkin's growing confidence in the troupe, describing him as an author jealous to an extreme of his text and unaccepting of the liberties the actors of the theatre were wont to take with their scripts.

Василий Васи́лиевич ревниво относился к своему произведению. Он не выносил произвольных изменений текста, даже перестановки слов в фразе. А наши актеры привыкли в обзрениях свободно обращаться с текстом, по–своему «обогащать» и видоизменять его. Для Шкваркина это было невыносимо...

И действительно, в ходе репетиций, актеры сами убедились, что приписывать, прибавлять что-то свое к шкваркинскому тексту совершенно бессмысленно. Шкваркинская фраза предельно точна.

As the actors acquired confidence in the author, so the author came to accept their good faith, and wrote in a number of interludes, including the doorman's monologue.³⁴

The casting of Mitia's play in the *khudsovet* appears to carry a reminiscence of the Zerkalova affair.³⁵ There are two candidates for the role of the niece – Iunona Antonovna, the director's wife, and the younger Graal-Garemnaia. Perhaps mindful of the *zavlit*'s axiom:

В частной жизни вы можете поступать по совести, но в общественной – никогда...

the council decides for Iunona. Then an affair between the director and Graal-Garemnaia produces an ultimatum to the former: 'Break with her and marry me'. The director complies, and the council decides that its wording in the minutes 'director's spouse' now applies to Graal-Garemnaia.

Act II begins with a scene between Mitia, the would-be playwright, and his wife, which one would regard as highly reminiscent of Erdman's style and rhythm in *Samoubiitsia*, were it not that *Lira naprokat* was completed and performed early in 1928:

Митя (во сне кричит). Режут, режут...

Люба. Тебе бандиты приснились. (Митя садится) Кто тебя режет?

Митя. Не меня, пьесу режут. (думает) Что, бишь, я должен сделать. Да, ноги закрыть.

Люба. Митя, ты думай про другое или газету прочитай. Тебе развлечься надо, тогда ноги сами собой закроются.

Митя. Что-же в газете веселого.

Люба. Там вся жизнь, как в зеркале наоборот отражена.

Act II is the most inventive section of the comedy. Mitia is asked for *bytovye tipy* and Liuba suggests *fininspektor*. Mitia closes his eyes to imagine and a flesh-and-blood finance inspector enters. The act is broken by an interlude in which the *zavlit*, Sasha Bystryi, receives dramatists. A woman playwright proposes a melodrama in five acts from the life of the Samoyeds

³⁴ Э. Краснянский, 240–241.

³⁵ See above note 5. Ironically, the play once again brought Shkvarkin and Radin together, since Radin staged it in Krasnodar.

with the aurora borealis, psychology and dancers. The *zavlit* predicts a subject of the type satirised by Bulgakov in *Bagrovyi ostrov*:

Он разоблачает шамана, старики хотят его убить, Гаврилу спасает молодая самоедка... Они бегут на оленях... На них падают белые медведи... Гаврила говорит им речь и медведи из белых становятся красными!

The set now begins to play an active role, as Mitia's involvement with the theatre, and with Graal-Garemnaia, prompts his wife to leave him. Lamps light up around the stage as Mitia speaks a monologue:

Пока я людей освещал – выходило, а как начал просвещать – ни чорта не получается.

He writes a suicide note, blaming no-one for his death 'except Sasha Bystryi, Gnomov, my mother-in-law and others' and wonders how it might be explained.

«Вы не знаете причины смерти?» – «Обыкновенная история, нечем жить и цензура.»

Act III has the theatre rehearsing Mitia's play, which is wrecked by the rival actresses. Graal-Garemnaia sets a candle to drip hot wax on the face of the *tragik* as Iunona recites a monologue over him. Iunona hides Graal-Garemnaia's dancing shoes. Saturn Ivanych is reconciled with Iunona, and the misunderstanding between Mitia and his wife is resolved. Mitia concludes that he has something else to teach the actors, as an electrician:

Как у нас сцена освещается... В освещение надо душу вкладывать.
Саша Быстрый. А вы, товарищ драматург, смеетесь. Сияете, как на похоронах цензуры.

Krasnianskii, who staged the play in the same mode as Kaverin had *Vrednyi element*, saw the play as a satire on the ways of the old theatre. Hostile critics saw it as a lampoon on Soviet theatre or an affectionate reconstruction of the archetypes of the old theatre, which the author would have been wiser to expose to the sharp light of the present. Krasnianskii recalls one particularly hostile review which read the title as a variant on 'cobbler, stick to your last'. Many years later, Krasnianskii bearded the critic, who admitted that the production was an interesting one and well acted. His motive for the review

had been to wean the theatre from its fondness for staging such vaudevilles.³⁶ One is tempted to identify that critic as Mikhail Il'in, writing in *Novyi zritel'*:

Зрителю предполагается сделать из него соответствующие выводы:

- а) искусство – ремесло особенное, стороннему человеку к нему прикасаться нельзя, ибо у него в этом случае «все пробки перегорят»,
- б) актеры – народ милый и занятый, и если им не будут мешать скверный завлитчастью и жены директора, то все пойдет хорошо...

The critic adds three considerations: plays by people of all kinds of backgrounds are staged; Mitia's theatre belongs to an earlier age; and

Глаз у Василия Шкваркина дурной. Он крив, он смотрит со стороны; из угла очень близкого к логову мещанина.³⁷

In view of what would follow a year later, a very hostile review by Beskin in very much the same terms must be noted.³⁸

Shkvarkin finds amusement in the absurdities of Soviet theatre just as in the perennial and familiar quirks and intrigues of theatre people. With justification, Shtok describes the play as a 'kapustnik'.³⁹ The pedestrian and anodyne final couplets (Shkvarkin's) confirm that the play has offered no subtext whatsoever:

Мы отыграли акт финальный,
Уходим пестрою толпой.
И вот уж занавес прощальный
Шумит над нашей головой.

Harry Piel

Less than a year later, in January 1929, Shkvarkin returned to the Studia Malogo teatra with *Shuler*. If *Vrednyi element* was successful, then it was for its vigour and colour and for the opportunity it provided for Kaverin to display his

³⁶ Э. Краснянский, 116–7.

³⁷ Мих. Ильин. «Лица напрокат», *Новый зритель* 5 (1928).

³⁸ Эм. Бескин. «Лица на прокат», *Вечерняя Москва* (undated cutting). Both the Moscow and Leningrad productions were unfavourably reviewed in *Жизнь искусства* 6, 39 (1928).

³⁹ И. Шток. «Комедиограф Василий Шкваркин», *Театр* 8 (1958), 128.

inventiveness,⁴⁰ not for any qualities connected with the structure or plot. *Shuler* is more ambitious, in that the action flows from a central paradox. At the same time, the array of characters, the comic situations and the verbal exchanges are by contrast muted, as if the author had wished the play to stand as a social comedy far less dependent on comic elements not integrated with the plot. The fundamental comic situation is a variation on a well-known and much-used plot. A young man despatched from Moscow home to the provinces into administrative exile (rounded up, like his predecessors in *Vrednyi element*, in a casino raid), discovers that his family and friends will only accept him in a role which they, learning of his arrest, have invented for him – that of the gentleman thief (and worse) played on the screen by Harry Piel. The identification is made in a conversation between the hero and a maidservant, enraptured by Piel on the screen and perceiving in Bezvekov an equivalent ‘*elegantnaia groza bogatykh kvartalov*’.⁴¹

Pavel Markov relates the plot to J.M Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*, translated by Kornei Chukovskii five years earlier.⁴² The young man, while waiting to be rehabilitated and allowed to return to Moscow, is pressed to assume that role by local NEPmen, by the local thief and by a romantically inclined young lady who turns his head. He has a rival, a local merchant's son, whose efforts to match the exploits of Aleksei Tolstoy’s *Kniaz' Serebrianyi* in order to meet the wild expectations of the same young lady are in absurd contrast, until the hero is rehabilitated by a telegram amongst the engagement party greetings. He is then promptly rejected both by the lady:

Папа, он обманул меня, он не герой, он просто честный обыватель.

and by the local business community, to whom an honest man is anathema. He is promptly stripped of his tails and, like Ostrovskii’s actors, sent off with only the bundle with which he arrived. Then the merchant's son, his name change to Leopardov recorded in *Izvestiia*, can step in to claim the lady.

Shkvarkin, perhaps to compensate for a lack of vigour and verbal sparkle in the play, arranges for a number of spectacular set pieces: a party in the

⁴⁰ Н.А. Смирнова, *Воспоминания* (Москва. ВТО, 1947), 410.

⁴¹ Piel, of course, served as the model for Prisytkin’s whiskers.

⁴² П. Марков, «Шулер», *Современный театр* 4 (1929).

opening scene to introduce all the cast (except the hero) amongst the dancers; a roundabout with the main characters whirling round the stage mounted on appropriate animals; a fire off-stage which rates nineteen lines of detailed stage instructions to convey entirely through sound effects the whole process of the destruction of a house by fire; and a disrupted engagement party as a final scene.

One must believe that the opportunities so offered were well exploited by the theatre, since E. Mandelberg's set was praised by many critics:

С точки зрения режиссерской дано такое соединение оформления (блестяще сделанного художником Мандельбергом), пластического движения, выразительности слова и музыкального сопровождения, который подымает словесный материал (в общем далеко не безупречный) до степени большой выразительности.⁴³

However, the costumes chosen appear in illustrations to have been quite exaggerated, a point also made in reviews:

Условные, цветные костюмы не вяжутся ни с совершенно реальным, жанровым характером текста, ни с общей трактовкой спектакля и отдельных ролей, корни которых естественно уходят в совершенно конкретные бытовые явления.⁴⁴

In his own introduction to the play, Kaverin claims to have been attracted its very ambivalence, its balance between comedy and drama and its readiness to slide from farce almost into tragedy. Hence he attempted to take the play rather more seriously, as a piece in which tendencies to romanticisation identifiable in the provinces were taken to a level of absurdity, that absurdity being demonstrated by the second, also absurd, personality constructed for the hero:

В нашей работе наиболее интересным нам кажется то, что спектакль все время балансирует на грани комического и драматического. Фарсовое положение неожиданно порождает почти трагические задержки и, так сказать, сознательно рваная и сумбурная партитура спектакля должна связаться в одно пронизанное оптимизмом целое... Мы ищем для спектакля несколько иного звучания, чем те беззаботные

⁴³ Н. Равич, «Новые постановки», *Жизнь искусства* 10 (1929), 8.

⁴⁴ Лев Шатов, «Шулер в Студии Малого театра», *Новый зритель* 5 (1929).

и шаловливые тона, к которым привык зритель наших комедийных постановок.⁴⁵

Markov sees the cast as being unable to maintain the manner asked for, the manner of *Mandat*, and thus losing the play:

... актерский стиль колебался и вместе с ним колебался весь Твердовск.

He was also concerned that the central figure, who cannot remain a cipher of the Khlestakov type since he must be conscious of and pained by the dual role he has to play, is left too vague a figure to carry the weight of the play:

Так и уходит этот шулер неразгаданной загадкой, оставаясь в течение всей пьесы ее наиболее туманным обстоятельством.⁴⁶

Other critics agreed that the play was too slight a thing to bear Kaverin's declared approach or to warrant consideration as satire:

Это неплохо придумано или, вернее, пересказано... Но, помилуй же, где здесь намек на нашу 'бедную' советскую действительность...? Разве на этом легкомысленном анекдоте можно строить ту издевку над человеческим балаганом низменных страстей и то разоблачение мнимой романтики, которые несомненно определяли постановочный план Ф. Каверина? Драматургический материал явно не выдержал этой нагрузки и рассыпался порой щебнем словечек, реплик и щекошущих ситуаций.

M. Zagorsky perceives a parallel with Kataev:

Работать над *Шулером*, как над советской сатирой, такая же ошибка, как работать над *Квадратурой круга*, как над комсомольской пьесой. Обе эти пьесы, по существу, переводные и ставить их надо в традициях добротного водевиля... не задумываясь, не морща лоб и не философствуя. Между *Квадратурой круга* и *Шулером* – органическое родство. Оба они выглядят настоящими французами на советской сцене, оба прекрасно владеют диалогом, интригой, оба ради красного словца не пожалеют родного отца и, наконец, оба умеют смеяться.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ «К постановке пьесы *Шулер* в студии Малого театра. Режиссер Ф. Каверин о пьесе.» *Новый зритель* 5 (1929).

⁴⁶ П. Марков, «*Шулер* (Студия Малого театра)», *Современный театр* 4 (1929).

⁴⁷ М. Загорский, «Из впечатлений. По поводу пьесы *Шулер*.» *Советский театр* 5 (1929).

As might be expected, Beskin's review was vicious:

Очень уж это, в конце концов, пустая шутка, без глубины. И тема – тасканная, перетасканная... Никакой связи с современностью у нее нет, а современные словечки либо приклеены к стареньким положениям, либо пушены не без некоторой доли обывательского ехидства.⁴⁸

«Вон из Москвы!»

Shuler had premiered in January, 1929 (authorised by Glavrepertkom on 30 October, 1928), less than two years after *Vokrug sveta na samom sebe*. The Leningrad premiere (at the *Teatr Satiry*) did not take place until the new season in October. Throughout these two years, Shkvarkin had been the target of unremittingly hostile criticism from left-wing critics, which verged on denunciation in political terms. 1929 was, of course, the archetypal year of mobilisation of Soviet society, the first year of the five-year plan. The literary world was rapidly coming under the control of RAPP, which could now turn its attention to the theatre. Hence negative comment on a comedy in the vaudeville mode set in a provincial town of the Stargorod type could be expected to dominate. Indeed it is surprising that there were so many generally favourable reviews, in which the craft and wit of Shkvarkin were as well received as Kaverin's direction and Mandelberg's set.

There are in the Shkvarkin archive verses dated 24 July, 1929, entitled *Makhindzhauri* and described as *poema liricheskikh otstuplenii*. An early verse indicated where Shkvarkin saw his enemies:

Да здравствует собака в труппе!
Теперь и Блюм и Бескин в купе
Пусть лают, прыгая на стены,
Ответить есть кому со сцены.

The verses end as Shkvarkin signals a withdrawal:

Еще минуту, господа –
Я тоже скоро отбываю,
Чтож на грядущие года
Я самому себе желаю?
Изруганный в печати, злой,

⁴⁸ Эм. Бескин, «Шулера (Студия Малого театра)», *Вечерняя Москва* 9-II-29.

Уставший от Москвы нахальной
Москвы вульгарной, театральной,
Хочу, приехав, как домой,
Здесь отдохнуть от зимней бури.
Да здравствуют Махинджаури!

Shkvarkin's next play would carry the dateline 'Makhindzhauri', but a year later, in July-August 1930. After completing six plays in four years, he appears to have stopped writing for the stage for two years. This would mark a change in Shkvarkin's approach, as he brought out two dramas on the approved, if not mandatory at that time, subject of spies and wreckers in higher education and in medicine. While his comic skills intruded into both plays, and each presents memorable lines and even whole scenes, their plot and structure are so implausibly contrived that they could with justification be regarded as an aberration on the author's part. Where the 'twenties comedies were, with the exception of *Lira naprokat*, hybrids of social comedy and vaudeville, these were far less comfortable hybrids of social melodrama and elements in the farce idiom.

While hybrid forms would return in Shkvarin's work, with a much later attempt to write plays on the dramatic, topical and perilous subject of the occupation, he would turn in 1933 to a pure farce form with his best-known and most successful comedy, *Chuzhoi rebenok*, to follow it with three more popular, but less accomplished examples of that genre during the 'thirties.