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Shkvarkin and the Terrorists

The Soviet dramatist Vasilii Shkvarkin (1894 – 1967) wrote at different periods in his career four plays whose subject might well now fall under the broad heading of terrorism.¹ In 1925, at a time when plays on recent history formed a substantial part of the repertoire, he was placed first in a competition organised by the Moscow Education Department (MONO) which attracted 126 entries, but in which in the event no prize was awarded.² His entry was the play *Предательство Дезаева* (*Degaev's Treachery*), also known as *В глухое царствование* and *Убийство Судейкина* (*In a Doleful Reign, The Murder of Sudeikin*), an historical drama on the nineteenth-century revolutionary Populist Sergei Degaev, suborned and recruited as an agent by Georgii Sudeikin, colonel of the gendarmerie and inspector of the tsarist secret police in St Petersburg who was assassinated by the People's Will (*Narodnaia volia*) organization in 1883. The play was staged in Moscow in late 1925 at the Moscow Trades Union Council Theatre (*Teatr imeni MGSPS*), the third play performed by the newly formed Maly Theatre Studio (*Studiia Malogo teatra*). Thereafter it was staged widely round the provincial theatres, remained in the repertoire of the Studio in 1932 and was still on the stage in Leningrad as late as 1935. It was published in 1926 and again in a revised edition in 1930.³

It is an ebullient but uneven play whose three recorded titles provide some reflection of the confusion of emphasis in the drama. It is historical in that it deals with the relationship between the Okhrana and the revolutionaries in 1882–83 and makes use of historical characters – Plehve, Lavrov and others – in addition to the central figures. The dramatic collision, however, is confined to three contrasting characters: Sudeikin, the Gendarme colonel and secret policeman, Degaev, the

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² *Программы государственных академических театров*, 9 (1925), 10.

³ *В глухое царствование (Предательство Дезаева)*, (Москва: Модпик, 1926; Москва: Теокино-печать, 1930). Page references are to the *Modpik* edition. The Degaev story is explored in Richard Pipes, *The Degaev Affair* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

vulnerable revolutionary, and Degaev's wife, the instrument, and the mistress, of Sudeikin. An attractive young woman, she does not share the revolutionary zeal of the husband who has led her far from respectable gentility into a world of danger and deprivation, and is easily manipulated by Sudeikin in his efforts to turn Degaev into an *agent provocateur* and police spy among the *narodniki*. An effective if schematic opening scene shows Sudeikin applying cynical and ruthless pressure to another young woman to use her body in his service:

Неужели вы думаете, на другой на «канцелярской» службе, вы со всеми вашими прекрасными словами душой и телом не будете зависеть от любого столоначальника? Жизнь ломает. Чем же мы, жандармы, хуже других? Платим мы щедро... Вы слышали, как люди исчезают, пропадают без следа? Это не сказки! (3)

The grim humour, though not sustained, is an early indication of the author's talent as a comic writer. The young woman is followed by a worker who withstands Sudeikin's stage-managed reception, and then a drunken thief who is recruited. Similar pressure is then applied to Degaev and his wife, caught by Katanskii in Odessa following the discovery of an illegal printing shop. In a disturbing scene surely less reminiscent of Tsarist methods than prophetic of those of Stalin's police, Sudeikin threatens to have the wife brought in, stripped and raped by the police if Degaev remains silent:

Я могу проделать, как принято выражаться, любую гнусность, — и совершенно безнаказанно. В России это удобно. (12)

In the meantime, a conversation between Plehve and Sudeikin, in which the former indirectly orders the assassination of the Minister of the Interior, shows the apparent villain of the piece in a new light: Sudeikin appears less of a rogue than his political masters:

После такой торговли мне — Судейкину — хочется в баню сходить, — налипло. Кандидат в министры. Гадина... Я буду министром. Я. (10)

It is at this point that he learns of the arrest of Degaev, who will be the means of achieving ambitions whose culmination, like those of Raspliev in Sukhovo-Kobylin's *Свадьба Крецинского* (*Krechinskii's Wedding*: 1854), takes the play beyond psychological drama to the point of political fantasy or absurdity. Degaev

accepts his role as agent among the revolutionaries, and although the indulgent lifestyle he adopts gives rise to some suspicion, he is able to operate freely until he proposes the assassination of Tolstoi and Plehve.

The following act brings the climax of the play in Sudeikin's breathtaking proposal for an alliance between police and terrorists which will bring him to the throne. Through police infiltration, he has brought into being a society which can only be compared with Stalin's:

Общество притаилось — ни гу—гу. Я всем предлагаю и деньги и службу в охранном отделении. Это хорошо. Честный челеовек теперь смотрит на другого честного человека, а про себя думает: ой шпион, ой сыщик! Сбилась наша публика, опасается, озирается. На улице, в театре, в гостях, и у себя дома — ушей бояться. (25)

His plan is now have Degaev shoot at him in the park, so that he can retire in justified apprehension for his own life. Degaev will then organise a small terrorist group outside the control of both the government and Narodnaia volia which will assassinate Tolstoi, Plehve, the Grand Duke Vladimir Aleksandrovich and their successors. In the ensuing panic, the government will recall Sudeikin and offer him the ministry of the interior:

... и террор замер, как рукой сняло. Я уговорю у царя беспремерные полномочия. Я буду отбирать людей. Своих, верных, со мною жизнью и смертью связанных. Ты будешь министром, а я при запуганном, ошалевшем государе — я буду диктатором всероссийским. Правителем всей земли. Всей земли... Как знать: чья еще династия займет российский престол — Романовых или Судейкиных? Моя. (26)

He is contemptuous of his superiors:

Власти наши — дурачье: государственных преступников надо казнить ночью, в казематах, а они в Питере, среди бела дня, на семеновском плацу. (27)

The next scene is the turning point of the play and its weak link. Prompted by Sudeikin's seduction of his wife and by his sister's report of the arrest of Vera Figner, Degaev confesses that he has been the traitor responsible for all the arrests. Exploiting the irony of the situation and Degaev's double role, Shkvarkin

turns the arranged attempt on Sudeikin's life by Degaev into a real execution ordered by Narodnaia volia, and the play ends in a long scene involving multiple assassination attempts, the murders of Sudeikin and his subordinate, struggles off-stage and on a darkened stage, and a symbolic ash-tray hurled through the window to attract attention to the victims. The ending reads as melodrama – an element present throughout the play, – because the violence which results from the intrigues of Sudeikin seems arbitrary and unmotivated by anything in the behaviour of the revolutionaries or Degaev himself. In the production at the Akvarium theatre, Alexander III was brought on in a final scene to hear a report on the murders.⁴ He has no part in the published versions of the play.

For contemporary critics, the author's failure to focus his attention and knit together the various subject lines meant that the potential of the play was not realised. In any case, its portrayal of the ambitions and methods of the secret police would have been quite enough to account for its disappearance from the repertoire during the 1930s, although it does not seem to have acquired any notoriety. Among the substantial segments cut from the play for the second edition is an anecdote about the revolutionary Populist N. I. Zhukovskii, who met Marx shortly before the latter's death and thereafter countered all arguments with the words 'Marx himself told me that'. Plekhanov's response was to circulate the following apocryphal statement to Marx himself:

Ну и наврал же я Жуковскому о русских делах, а он, поди, и поверил — всюду теперь распространяет. (35)

The other excisions provide a striking illustration of the sensitivities of the censor at that relatively early stage of Stalinism: a description of the execution of Perovskaia and Zheliabov, the conspiratorial and repressive methods of the police, the security of the chief of Police and a disrespectful reference to the sovereign:

Эх, если бы знала Россия, кто ею правит? Дети рассмеялись бы, старики от стыда заплакали... (27)

Shkvarkin's second history play, *Год-горн* (*The Year of the Furnace*) was published in the same year as his first.⁵ Isidor Shtok claims that it was produced at

⁴ М. И., 'Дегаевщина', *Новый зритель*, 38 (1925), 9.

⁵ *Год-горн* (Москва: Модпик, 1926).

the Zamoskvoretskii Theatre, which later that year became the Lensovet Theatre (Teatr Lensoveta).⁶ Unlike its predecessor, it does not appear to have established itself on the stage.

Rather than concentrate on a specific conflict between two principal characters, this play takes the form of a panorama of the year 1905, beginning four days before Bloody Sunday and ending with the arrest of the Executive Committee of the Petersburg Soviet and the news of the failure of the Moscow rising. In a social dimension, it contrasts the behaviour of a worker's family with that of the household of a wealthy merchant. The historical characters include Trotskii, Kuniants and Gapon, but none of these has more than an episodic role.

Continuity in this diffuse drama depends on the younger son and daughter of the working-class family and on a friend of the family. In Act I, which is lively and moves at a good pace, the daughter of the house, in domestic service, is being pressured to marry a shopkeeper (and receiver of stolen goods), in preference to a discharged soldier who has returned from the war with a St. George's Cross, but also on crutches and dying from tuberculosis. Father and son, meantime, argue on predictable lines over the activist priest Gapon. Act II deals with the eve and the day of Bloody Sunday. The son's distrust of Gapon is supported by a Bolshevik agitator, before Gapon himself enters to ask for water and to bless his followers. On the day itself, a conversation with an old neighbour links the expectations of the march to the impact and aftermath of Emancipation:

К господам, значит: как так? Да-а. А сгодя, экзекуция пошла. Мужиков под черед перепороти. Девоч солдаты, страсть, перепортили... (12)

Just after the mother of the family has expressed the hope that on this occasion the Tsar will take their part, the body of the eldest son who has been killed in the fighting is brought in.

Act III, which is strongly reminiscent of Tolstoi's *Плоды просвещения* (*The Fruits of Enlightenment*), brings a change of scene and plays itself out as a comedy of manners in the household of the merchant, whose pretensions are revealed by a series of malapropisms in his exchanges with his Muscovite wife:

⁶ И. Шток, 'Комедиограф Василий Шкваркин', *Театр*, 8 (1958), 125–133. There is no record of a production in the card indexes of these theatres held in the library of the Union of Theatrical Workers. There is a record of a performance at the Usievich Club in Moscow in 1927.

Двенадцать лет в Петербурге, а говоришь, как на вшивой горке: «придурью». Можно сказать то же самое цивилизованным, парламентским языком. Не «придурью», а например, эрудицией. (13)

A company made up of wastrel son, romantic lady, left-wing damsel, progressive lawyer and others then gathers for a seance manipulated by the son and a dragoon officer. Contact between the two households is established by the worker's daughter Olia, who is in service with the merchant, and her friend Petr, who offers to help when the lights fail. The lawyer greets the latter with a speech which Shkvarkin loads with heavy-handed humour:

Товарищ, надеюсь, я выражу общее желание, если от лица присутствующих, принесу вам благодарность за готовность помочь нам в деле, так сказать, освещения. Я всегда звал интеллигенцию работать рука об руку с пролетариатом, и еще в прошлом году неделями, так сказать, не снимал фрака, присутствуя ежедневно на банкетах и поднимая бокал за наше общее дело. (19)

The exaggerated humour works quite well for the author, but makes for a caricature of the merchant household gross enough to unbalance the play. Olia's curtain line: 'Are these really people?' (*Разве это люди?*) is only too apt. The act ends with two farcical episodes: a scramble in the dark as Petr switches out the light to avoid an attack by the dragoon officer, and a muddled attempt by father and son simultaneously to seduce Olia.

The fourth act begins with the arrest of the Executive Committee of the Petersburg Soviet chaired by Trotskii: Shkvarkin in a note cites as his sources Trotskii's *1905 год* (*The Year 1905*) and Sverchkov's *На заре революции* (*At the Dawn of the Revolution*). The scene is a short one, its main elements being the closing of the session by Trotskii, after he establishes moral authority over the Police Chief, and Zvezdin's appeal to the troops called to support the arrest. The second scene returns to the worker family, now joined by refugee peasants. Petr arrives from Moscow (by train!), wounded, to report the failure of the rising there. The peasants are then arrested, as is Petr, who is taken for being in possession of papers which have been planted on him. The younger son then ends the play reading from Lenin on the beginning of the Revolution in Russia ('Начало революции в России'). Effective in some of its passages, *The Year of the Furnace* is rather too ambitious in its scope and presents a conventional view of the events of 1905 with

a decided lack of balance. There is no doubt the central, if episodic, role assigned to Trotskii was enough to ensure its disappearance from the stage by 1927.

Having abandoned history for comedy in the late 'twenties, Shkvarkin returned to the theme of terrorism, albeit in a contemporary setting, in two plays of the early 'thirties. Equally congruent with the demands of the time, they marked a new beginning for the dramatist following his retreat from the stage in 1929, occasioned by vicious criticism from the left (Shkvarkin himself cites the verses of Blium and Beskin written at the end of the 1929–30 season).⁷ These plays are a strange hybrid of comedy and the kind of social drama required at the turn of the 'thirties, engineered to accommodate the themes required as the Soviet theatre fell increasingly under the influence of RAPP,⁸ although later happily abandoned as Shkvarkin turned from semi-serious drama to become the most popular writer of farces of that decade.

Kmo uđēm? (*Who Goes There?*), dated 'Makhindzhauri, June–August 1930', was produced at the New Theatre (Novyi teatr) in January 1931 by the team (Kaverin as director, Mandel'berg as designer and Germanov as musical director) which had collaborated on the last of Shkvarkin's vaudevilles of the 'twenties, *Шулер* (*The Trickster*). The author describes it as a 'play' and his short note summarising its theme seems to indicate a new departure:

Тема: Борьба студентов против классово-чуждого элемента, проникшего в высшую школу.⁹

Isidor Shtok, generous as ever in characterising Shkvarkin's work, suggests the author was carried away by the excitement of the new age in tertiary education and intent on packing into the play an extraordinary amount of material garnered the impressions of his own contacts and the press. Justifiably, he notes the play's inordinate length.¹⁰ Superficially at least, it seems representative of the melodramatic five-year-plan drama typical of the early 'thirties, with two main characters who pose a potential risk to Soviet society: a professor of chemistry who might be expected to be hostile to the system and susceptible to the blandishments of the

⁷ Rosh Ireland, 'Four Vaudevilles: Vasilii Shkvarkin's Comedies of the 1920s', *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies*, 1–2 (2005), 69–93.

⁸ A. J. Metcalf, 'RAPP and the Theatre: 1927–1932', (unpublished paper).

⁹ В. Шкваркин, *Кмо идет?* (Москва: Федерация, 1932).

¹⁰ И. Шток, 'Комедиограф'.

West, and an ambitious and conniving student with relatives abroad and contacts with foreign intelligence services. Each is an example of disloyalty (or potential disloyalty) in science, and each is also a moral danger to society: the student, Verigin, lives on the earnings of his mistress, a seamstress, while Markovskii, the scientist, having discarded one mistress, an actress, attempts to seduce Vera, a young provincial girl come to Moscow to study. In contrast to them is the student Belkin, Vera's former sweetheart and Verigin's rival for a post-graduate post, enjoying in this contest the support of the student collective.

In general, if not in particulars, the development of the plot is predictable. Verigin, denounced for being a kept man, turns the tables on his accusers by faking a suicide attempt (in a carefully-plotted mime scene, a device Shkvarkin uses frequently), supposedly because of the persecution he alleges in his suicide note:

Искренно желаю победы новому классу. Был бы счастлив служить ему.
Но меня затравили... (25)

Even before the suicide, Verigin has seized the moral high ground by accusing Belkin of trying to discredit him in order to get the postgraduate post:

Что же так мало обвинений? Валяйте дальше. Белогвардеец. Убийца.
Вор... Да! Если общественность сводится к обыску постели — я не общественник. Если ударность заключается в битве по лицу беззащитного — я не ударник... (23)

This undermines Belkin's credibility with the student body, and he is further demoralised when he quarrels with Vera over her appearance in suggestive clothing in Markovskii's flat; in fact, she had borrowed the clothes of the professor's ex-mistress when her own were soaked in a downpour. Downcast and a little drunk, Belkin is walking past a shop when he becomes the central figure in a scene quite at odds with the realist style of the play as a whole. Two tailor's dummies in the window, a couple in evening dress, begin to dance and then to discuss Belkin's predicament, naturally from the point of view of the class enemy – precisely the point of view, of course, from which Belkin has judged Vera's conduct. When the dummies speak of Vera in the hands of a professor who has offered her perfume, stockings and a bed, Belkin loses his temper and smashes the window, ending the pantomime.

Verigin, predictably, is caught red-handed stealing scientific papers from Markovskii. To make matters worse, his doctor, deeming such conduct good reason to set aside his professional obligation of confidentiality, announces that his suicide attempt was a put-up job. Markovskii's case is rather different, in that Vera's influence seems to convert him to a position of loyalty to the Soviet state. Whereas earlier in the play he is critical of those who turn against Belkin:

Но теперь принялись за Белкина. Так называемая «общественность» требует вашей «публичной казни». Неужели нельзя обойтись без перманентной жестокости? Земли вы, людей не любите...

Ну вот, насоки на иноверных... общественное перетряхивание грязного белья... Этот сор... Неужели вы так не брезгливы? (35)

He is no less callous at the end of the play in attacking Verigin:

...Таких господ надо уничтожать. (63)

When Verigin reminds him of his earlier words, he renounces them:

Мои [слова]? Вздор! Сплетни! Никогда ничего подобного не говорил! Наоборот... Я удивляюсь правительству, обществу... до сих пор не изжить этих бандитов! (63)

His reward for thus turning his coat is partial acceptance into the community:

Всего один шаг в нашу сторону сделали. Ближе, профессор! (64)

Apart from the theatricality of the shop-window pantomime and the sham suicide scene, there is another dimension to the play which hardly fits the familiar model. Besides his recognised ability to compile a comic plot, transferred in this instance to a more serious area, Shkvarkin is generally credited with two qualities which were to be crucial to his success later in the 'thirties: he can make lively and 'actable' characters, particularly in the ranks of minor characters; and his dialogue coruscates with puns, quips, word play and whimsy, much of it appropriate and ludicrous, some of it exaggerated, out of character or in doubtful taste, as if the author could not resist the temptation to leave in any joke once it had been found. One student's speech on the importance of sport in developing self-control evokes the following (fanciful) picture of an adjournment in the British House of Lords, when all the members go out into the courtyard:

Толстовки долой, и до тех пор по рылам бьются, пока ихний председатель, этот... скипетр из окна не позвонит. Тут все, как один, залезают обратно в верхнюю палату и прямо их не узнать. У другого еще кровь из носу, а он: «не соблаговолит ли достопочтенный сэръ ответить на вопрос, касающийся до Огненной земли?» Второй вскакивает — и с полной вежливостью, будто не дрался: «На вопрос достопочтенного сэра я уже имел честь ответить на позапрошлую пятницу». А сам думает: «Что, съел, сволочь!» Это самообладание. (18)

The irreverent tone and disjointed logic of the badinage which is such a feature of the earlier vaudevilles, particularly as handled by some perky minor characters, sometimes undermines the seriousness of the theme:

Сычова. Паша, я без мужчин фильмы не понимаю и пожара боюсь. (7)

Сычова. Ученый... раньше науки были кроткие: рисование, закон божий, а теперь — что ни учебник — «борьба классов», «сопротивление материалов». Одни жестокости преподают. Вон в тринадцатом номере тоже профессор. Он какую-то экономию изучает, а сам сразу за двумя ухаживает. И большевики хороши: вредителей изживают, а с мужчинами до сих пор не покончили.

Зинка. ...Я создала новый образ Дианы! Выступаю без покрывала, под одним псевдонимом. А он на что способен? Какую-то вонючую жижу изобрел!

Сычова. Они работают.

Зинка. Я тоже не покладая рук танцую... Однако портрет его, его! Справедливо? Нет, социализм в одной стране невозможен! (9)

Зинка. А что вы хорошенькая, это только обуза: теперь с наружностью ни в одно учреждение не берут: она, говорят, и так устроится. (15)

Доктор. Что же это вы, молодой человек, стреляетесь, так сказать, недобросовестно. (26)

Зинка. Теперь все ругаются, а приятные лица только у жуликов бывают. (47)

While no one has attempted to analyse Shkvarkin's dialogue, the accepted point of comparison is Erdman. Surely, however, the sentence rhythms, the leaps of logic

creating nonsense, the misuse of sophisticated words and expressions, the placing, and consequent distortion, of set expressions out of context and the collision of registers all point to a kinship with Zoshchenko.¹¹

While the humour is a lightening element, Shkvarkin was evidently still apprehensive that the play might list towards melodrama, and in a note to the director he insists that the play be approached almost with levity:

Умышленно не углубляя психологических моментов пьесы, я старался сделать ее легкой и бодрой.
Примите это во внимание.

He asks the actors to eschew exaggeration and requests a degree of underplaying, suggests that any music be restricted to the background, as a support for some characters or scenes, and instructs the designer to avoid clutter:

Пожалуйста, не загромождайте.

Since the play tackled, at least on the surface, a topical subject and was set in a tertiary institution, it was discussed (apparently before the public preview on 6 January) at a meeting of the editorial board of *Komsomol'skaia pravda*. On that occasion, Kaverin announced that a number of attractive items were to be included in the show: topical interludes, interval business, staged quizzes with the actors in costume competing against the audience, etc., all of which, it was accepted, would increase the political impact. The play was approved, though many of the suggestions made to the author involved reinforcing the role of the Party organisation in the educational institution.¹²

Kaverin's archive contains the texts of three verse interludes.¹³ The first consists of twenty lines of verse by Shkvarkin on the year 1905. The second, headed 'Ob ovladenii tekhniki' (On Mastering Technology) opens with four lines which can only be described as lubberly:

Справляя праздник всей страны,
Победно взяв знамена в руки

¹¹ Disappointingly, a comparison with Zoshchenko's stage play of the same period, *Уважаемый товарищ* (*Dear Comrade*, 1930), proves not to be apt because of that comedy's total saturation with negative characters speaking fractured Russian.

¹² Мих. Д., 'Новая пьеса из вузовской жизни', (unidentified cutting).

¹³ State Bakhrushin Theatre Museum, Manuscript Section, *Fond* 454, 689–691.

Мы помнить в празднике должны
 Про связь постройки и науки.

There follow sixty lines about backwardness, catching up and study, ending with:

Поставим крест на темноте,
 Лишь захотеть нам горячо–бы!
 Так поднимите руки те,
 Кто голосует за учебу.

These verses are followed by an interactive scene with the audience, which in this case is made up of workers at a sugar factory:

Оказывается, Саввушка этот завод хорошо знает и, импровизируя, рассказывает о тех событиях и отдельных лицах, отметить которые просит фабзавкоморганизации...

The third interlude is 26 lines of doggerel on the thirteenth anniversary of the Red Army. (In the published version of the play, there is a further interlude in which three students rehearse *agitprop* verses on the Five Year Plan for performance at a chemical factory.)

If *Komsomol'skaia pravda* was benign, the critics, no less hostile to Shkvarkin than three years earlier, were indignant.¹⁴ Shkvarkin's *vuz* was seen as quite out-of-date, his Verigin too consistent a villain, the reform of Markovskii unexplained, his students unsatisfactory, his foreign spy unnecessary, his class enemies idealised, and his hero's visit to a pub bewildering. In a review which verged on a denunciation, Aleksandr Gladkov brought against the author a charge very serious in the context of the time:

Режиссура не вытравила из пьесы затхлый интеллигентский душок.

One is left with the impression that, at a time when it was impossible even to approach the satirical (Blum made his statement about the undesirability of satire at this time¹⁵ and Erdman's *Самобийца* (*The Suicide*) appeared on the list of

¹⁴ С. Чекина, 'Кто идёт?', *Репертуарно-инструктивные письма*, 2 (1932), 10–11. Евг. Сим, 'Кто же идёт?', (unidentified cutting). А. Гладков, 'Кто идёт?' (Студия Малого театра)', (unidentified cutting).

¹⁵ 'Советская сатира — поповская проповедь. За ней очень удобно спрятаться классовому врагу. Сатира нам не нужна, она вредна рабоче-крестьянской гударственности.' *Литературная газета*, 13/1/1930.

banned plays¹⁶), Shkvarkin had attempted to find a new vehicle for the real talents which he knew he possessed and sought it in an approved area. Unfortunately, the levity of his approach made for a play which lacked balance and consistency and which, of course, was premised on an acceptance of the propaganda myths of the time.

Later in 1932, N. M. Radin, who had played the film producer in *Вокруг света на самом себе* (*Around the World on Oneself*) in 1927 and staged *Лира напрокат* (*Lyre for Hire*) in Krasnodar in the following year, was lamenting in his correspondence that he had undertaken to direct Shkvarkin's eighth play, *Доктор Егор Кузнецов* (*Dr Egor Kuznetsov*), at the Moscow Dramatic Theatre (Moskovskii dramaticheskii teatr, the title taken by the old Korsh Theatre when removed from private hands three years earlier):

Связал меня черт с постановкой пьесы Шкваркина (ей до сих пор еще и названия не придумано) — слабая пьеса: не понимаю, как мог ее пропустить худполитпросвет. Я говорил дирекции, что это верный жирный минус для театра — не понимают.

A later letter indicates that Shkvarkin, at that time, had problems with the censor:

Доктор Егор Кузнецов перенес много страданий от цензуры. Пьеса поверхностная, как обычно у Шкваркина, но публика смотрит ее с удовольствием.¹⁷

The first performance was scheduled for 30 December, but the season may not have begun until 5 January 1933. A strong cast included Radin himself, Mark Bernes, Mikhail Bolduman and Boris Petker.

Despite the misgivings expressed in his letters, Radin was kinder to Shkvarkin in an interview:

Новая пьеса В. Шкваркина, на мой взгляд, довольно значительное явление в современной драматургии. На первом плане автор набрасывает схватку представителей новой культуры с группой отсталой научной

¹⁶ *Репертуарно-инструктивные письма*, 2 (1931), 32.

¹⁷ Letters from Radin to A. S. Rabinovich, 31 October, 1931, and N. N. Sinel'nikov, 2 February 1932. *Николай Мариусович Радин* (Москва, 1965), 137, 142.

интеллигенции. Форма, в которую явтор укладывает свою мысль, до некоторой степени нова и экспериментальна; в этом ее интерес.¹⁸

The play, which appears to have survived only in typescript,¹⁹ and to have been staged subsequently only in a handful of provincial theatres, is weak and disappointing even in comparison with *Who Goes There?* It is set in a provincial town which is visited by a writer in search of new subject-matter, the traditional figure of the celebrated hack looking to tap into a more genuine seam in life:

И я не знаю этого героя... А когда пишу, всовываю ему в руки красное знамя и заставляю произносить передовицы!

The conflict in the play is between two doctors, the first is a young zealot, the second a medical wrecker. The latter, under the misapprehension that he is suffering from a fatal illness, is ironic at the expense of the Soviet system and does his best to sabotage the economy by handing out sick leave certificates to all and sundry. He also contrives to be absent when a dangerous operation is performed on a factory manager, thereby shifting the responsibility onto his inexperienced younger colleague. There are a number of sub-plots involving young ladies competing for the attention of the young doctor, as well as an old burnt-out doctor who is finally invited to join the ranks of the workers – in contrast to the saboteur, who is ostracised.

There is little evidence in this play of the quirky wit and penchant for the dramatic scene that save *Who Goes There?* There are a few scattered sharp lines:

Провинциальный доктор, умирающий при особом мнении. Лучше живи, «соглашаясь с предыдущим оратором.» (10)

Жалеть вслух человечество в присутствии месткома! Это же ненормально! (26)

...с доктором–коммунистом живет, педтехникум кончила, прирожденная проститутка. (37)

There is also one neatly-arranged scene in which a woman school-teacher, having had her door tarred in the traditional punishment for the sins referred to above,

¹⁸ 'Доктор Егор Кузнецов' (unidentified cutting).

¹⁹ *Доктор Егор Кузнецов*, (Москва, на машинке, 1932).

then talks the culprits round so that they scrape off the tar with their Finnish knives. Such touches, however, are few and far between and outweighed by the stuffy orthodoxy of an unconvincing plot and the 'positive' characters.

Leaving aside the familiar accusations of the critics that Shkvarkin sees everything from the point of view of middle-class vulgarity:

Шкваркин специализируется на мещанской популяризации политграмоты. Он приспособливает эпоху к уровню обывателя. Он не 'утомляет' идеологией. Он не волнует проблемами. Он рассказывает об идеях эпохи, 'до всего коснувшись слегка', с галантностью профессионального кавалера, рассуждающего о мировой политике.²⁰

or that he has totally failed to 'unmask the class enemy' in the manner prescribed by RAPP,²¹ it is hard not to agree with them that the play lacks cohesion:

... вся пьеса выглядит сборником маленьких скетчей, написанных от случая к случаю.²²

and that his hero is too anaemic to carry the ideological burden placed upon him. In taking the kind of subject virtually required during the period of 'cultural revolution' and making it palatable, if not credible, by relying on his recognised qualities as a dramatist, Shkvarkin was attempting to write social comedy. The experiment ended badly, because his talents as a dramatist belonged essentially to the sphere of light comedy or farce. *Dr Egor Kuzntsov* was for Shkvarkin an unprofitable excursion down a side road, but in the following year he found the main road with the farce *Чужой ребёнок* (*Someone Else's Child*), the most popular Soviet comedy of the 'thirties and the one play with which his name is always linked, while others are disregarded or forgotten.

²⁰ Ю. Юзовский, 'Обыватель доволен', *Литературная газета*, 16/1/1932, 4.

²¹ С. Чекина, 'Доктор Егор Кузнецов', *Репертуарно-инструктивные письма*, 3 (1932), 14.

²² М. Загорский, 'Доктор Егор Кузнецов', *Вечерняя Москва*, 15/1/1932.