

TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOVIET COMEDY FROM 1925 TO 1934

Up to now, the history of Soviet comedy has been given very little consideration, and V. Frolov's monograph called *Soviet Comedy* (Moscow 1954) presents it only in a very general way. No monographs have been written so far on authors of the best Soviet comedies; the only exception is B. Ros-totski's well-known book on Mayakovski (Mayakovski and the Theatre, Moscow 1952). — In general studies on the Soviet drama there is very little room reserved to the comedy, which is usually characterized only in addition to a whole description of the history of dramatic works. The inventive search by dramatists in the sphere of comedy, showing fruitful results in the entire development of the drama and in the process of its ability to master contemporary themes, remains unobserved by literary scholars. — A great contribution to the theory of Soviet comedy, especially to that of satirical comedy, have been the works on problems of satire, which of course require further generalization of concrete experiences made by Soviet writers of comedies. Without this, not a single question concerning the innovation efforts of the Soviet drama can be solved in a satisfactory manner. It is therefore necessary to study consistently and in detail the history of Soviet comedy in its periods, and this can be done in a whole series of papers.

The author examines the development of Soviet comedy in the years 1925—1934. The restriction is due to the fact that it was during this period of time that the comedy showed most clearly the chief tendencies characteristic of the formation of this genre in the art of socialist realism. Some substantial achievements of Soviet comedy in that period laid the foundations for its further development. — The purpose of the book is to make clear the basic lines of development in Soviet comedy during those years, to outline the principal moments of its evolution in the course of the whole decade, to show the modifications of the genre in connection with its gradual progress of getting nearer to life and being dependent on it.

The first chapter deals with the Soviet comedy from 1925 to 1928. The pathos of revolutionary fighting and heroism, the grandiose epos of the fall of an old world and the birth of a new one, found their expression in various genres of the drama. The everyday revolutionary life, the transformation of old life principles, the struggle against the survivals from the past which obstructed the building of a new society — all this was reflected in the Soviet comedy of that time. — Together with the art practice the theory of Soviet comedy was beginning to be created. An analysis is given here of the cultural and social situation in the twenties with reference to the conditions under which Soviet comedy was formed. The difficulties of its origin come from bitter fighting on the ideological front of literature and art. — The development of Soviet comedy was made more difficult by formalistic theories of comicality, directing comedy authors towards a passive, non-political and superficial sort of art, as well as by pseudo-scientific theories of satire dying away in a socialist society. — Party and progressive dramatic criticism (A. V. Lunacharski, B. Romashov), fighting against those theories, saw the comedy as a weapon in the hands of the proletariat and directed dramatic writers towards the creation of a comedy that would be highly ideological, satirical and would fight for the victory of the new world. — But there were other difficulties, too, brought about by the new aspect of life reality to be mastered, as well as by what was new in the ideological position of the dramatic writer. New forms had to be found for the comedy, forms that could serve the artistic generalization of new processes and phenomena of reality without abandoning its specific comedy features. — The period before 1925 was rather a kind of probing the themes of comedy and was marked by failure. The experience in the works of Mayakovski, whose play *Mystery-Bouffe* had indicated the possibility of merging in an organic way the romantic pathos which affirmed the greatness of the revolution and the satirical shaping of anti-revolutionary forces, was not, however, carried on immediately by the drama of the next period. — The comedy with a contemporary theme was still bound by traditional comedy means, old parts and schematic subject-matters that suffocated the living thought and gave no opportunity of presenting themes from contemporary life: *Laughter and Grief* (1922) by A. Neverov, *Sivolapinskaya* (1923) by D. Chizhevski, *Earthquake* (1924)

by P. Romanov, In Our Times (1926) by N. Shapovalenko. This direction is taken by a series of comedies in which the authors modified the theme of Gogol's Inspector in a new way: Comrade Khelestakov (1922) by D. Smolin, Sympathizer (1925) by I. Sarkizov-Serazini, Narkom's Brother (1926) by N. Lerner, and others. Such a mechanical use of Gogol's methods only resulted in unnecessary, useless stylishness, in obvious plagiarism without any elementary probability in life. The failure of those comedies confirmed the impossibility of applying old forms to a new life material. — The first significant achievements in the field of comedy appeared almost at the same time: Teacher Bubus by A. Faiko, The Mandate by N. Erdman, The Sweet Soufflé by B. Romashov (1925). — Analyzing the comedies of A. Faiko and N. Erdman, and studying the critical fights around them, the author concludes that in the critical literature on the Soviet drama there is rooted a simplified view of these works, which makes it impossible to judge their real position in the Soviet comedy of the twenties. — The author tries to show that there is no reason to place Teacher Bubus among works belonging to the reactionary trend in the drama of the twenties. This light comedy, which has some elements of political farce, is considered in the book as characteristic of the period that saw the origins of Soviet comedy, and as a work revealing the traces of searching efforts, typical of the genre in that period. — After a thorough examination the author rehabilitates the ingenious comedy by N. Erdman called The Mandate, a play about internal emigrants and their hopes for a return of the "old times", the unavoidable collapse of hypocrites worming their way into the new order, bourgeois chameleons appearing under the new historical conditions. The play deals a destructive blow to the remains of the bourgeois society by means of an effective satirical farce. — The author points it out as quite regular that, in the first stage of its development, Soviet comedy expressed and immortalized the anachronism deriving from the comicality of the old surviving under new historical conditions. And it was quite natural that the new society parted gaily and for ever with the painful and worthless past by means of the language of a comedy-farce. The form of farce became natural for describing bourgeois people expecting in vain a change of régime, as their own position in society was farcical and called for such interpretation. It is interesting to note that Karl Marx, reflecting on the "irony of history" that allows anachronism in the existence of what is old and useless under new conditions, really saw the final stage of this historical phenomenon as a farce. — Although the above-mentioned comedies were full only of the pathos of negation, they did create progressive ideas because they were written in the conviction that the revolutionary achievements would last, they showed the powerlessness of all efforts to turn the course of history. Such a pathos of negation, directed against all elements and all phenomena which were profoundly foreign to Soviet reality, was conditioned by revolutionary ideals. — The creation of a satirical comedy which had only negative characters was, therefore, quite natural at this stage; such works carried further on the trend of the 19th cent. Russian comedy, from which they took all the richness of artistic means. — It is understandable that the above-mentioned dramatists reflected in their works only one sphere of life, namely that which stood in sharp antagonistic contrast to the revolutionary principle. Still, there was the fruitful experience made by the young Soviet comedy, and its analysis and evaluation should not be absent in a history of Soviet drama. — In the process of a deeper conception of life in its real contradictions, the task that Soviet comedy set itself during its further development was to show directly the victory of the new over what was old. From this point of view, it is the comedy production of B. S. Romashov, author of the satirical comedy The Sweet Soufflé, that is significant in the middle of the twenties. — Great attention is given by the author of the book to the analysis of the subject-matter, free from all patterns of comedy intrigues and based on collisions revealing the fundamental aspects of the NEP period. The importance of Romashov's comedy cannot be understood without realizing the meaning of the part of Koromysov, the "red bank manager", in the whole system of characters. This character is an artistic "discovery" of B. Romashov, who penetrated here into an area which had been left untouched by Soviet comedy. — Critical literature explains this character in various ways. The author of the book argues with those critics who have not understood that the dramatist chose a satirical interpretation for his character, and approach Koromysov using a criterion for the character of a psychological drama. It is true that Romashov himself was not consistent and left the backdoor open to such a conception of Koromysov. The analysis of the play, however, makes it possible to reach the conclusion that, on the whole, Koromysov as a character fits the system of satirical characters in the comedy; and this is why it is a fundamental success for Romashov. — The author of the book also underlines the importance of Romashov's search for a way of describing a positive environment. The fact is that critics usually limit themselves to the comment that the positive characters of the play are plain, colourless and schematic. But they forget that Romashov, in creating the satirical comedy, gave himself quite a new task, the solution of which brought along great difficulties. The setting of the task and the solution indicated by Romashov makes his experiment very significant for a further development of this genre. — The Sweet Soufflé and The End of Krivorylsk are evaluated in the book in connection with the general evolution of

B. Romashov in the twenties (including the comedy *Heaven Will Save Him*), which is marked not only by success but also by defeats and problematic tendencies (*The Mattress*, 1927). The main line of development in Romashov as a dramatist, however, is indicated by his effort to form better and more precisely the fundamental conflict of the transition period, a conflict expressed in an open encounter between two profoundly hostile powers. Important in this respect is the step made by Romashov with the satirical melodrama *The End of Krivorylsk* (1926), the subject of which is based on the fortunes of positive heroes. In the first period there was an integration of satirical and positive heroes in the form of coexistence between two lines — old and new. Even though he had found such a collision in his play *The End of Krivorylsk*, in which the two lines met, there was not yet any penetration into all the human fortunes and actions of the heroes. There is still no effective conflict in continuous encounters reflecting the main contradictions of reality. In spite of that, the conflict which the comedy *The Sweet Soufflé* had presented only in rough sketch was here further elaborated and shaped. The attempt to find a form which could hold the door wide open to positive forces in the society, had nevertheless far-reaching effects and changed substantially the artistic structure of the play, cancelling the outlines of the genre. — An interesting episode in the development of theoretical thinking in the twenties, concerning the problem of satirical literature, was the antisatirical conception spread by the dramatic critic V. Blyum and others, which met with a resolute opposition of the public. In 1925 there was a discussion in theatre and other journals (*Zhizn iskusstva*, *Sovietskoye iskusstvo*, *Iskusstvo trudyashchimsya*, *Novy zritel*, *Vechernaya Moskva*) on the question of satire and its right of existence. The debate referred to the character of Soviet comedy and to its place in the new historical formation of society in general. From an evaluation of the character and part played by Russian satire in the 19th century, Blyum drew the conclusion that any kind of satire, and therefore even Soviet satire, aimed at “undermining the foundations”, at “shaking the pillars” of a given social order. He thought that such a literary form could have no place in the Soviet period. This conception resulted from an incorrect interpretation of the correlation between form and content, from fear of the generalizing power of satire. By admitting criticism only within the framework of “organized actions”, Blyum deprived satire of its fundamental function: to express and generalize what is typical. — The formation of satirical comedy does not cover, of course, the whole picture of the development of Soviet comedy in the middle of the twenties. The first steps were also made towards creating a gay, optimistic sort of comedy, able to show directly the positive side of life. This is where the importance can be seen of the comedies *Sieve Wonders* (1926) and *Youth Factory* (1927) by A. Tolstoy, and *Moon on the Left* (1927) by V. N. Bill-Belotserkovski. Their artistic and ideological level was not high. Schematic characters, standard comedy and vaudeville methods that tied up the living material of reality — all this prevented the plays from becoming true, valuable works of comedy art. But like the first attempts in the genre of lyrical comedy, even these plays cannot be neglected. — Vaudeville is beginning to have a special position in the period under discussion. The evolution of this genre in the history of Soviet comedy has not been studied before. The book traces the process of its revival, connected with the production of V. Arlov, V. Mass, and especially with that of V. Shkvarkin: *Round the World by Oneself* (1926), *Harmful Element* (1927), *The Lyre for Hire* (1927), *Card-sharper* (1928), and of V. Katayev: *Quadrature of the Circle* (1928). — The position of dramatists who tested their abilities in the field of vaudeville was not easy; they themselves did not know the right way of regenerating this genre and made a lot of mistakes, contemporary criticism then did not pay much attention to their attempts in this field. An obstacle to the revival of vaudeville was the view (established in the past) that it was an inferior genre lacking political or social significance, a genre in which primitive and easy laughter seemed to be both a means and an aim. This opinion, deriving from the practice of some vaudeville writers in the 19th century (Scribe, Labiche) and connected with the theory of H. Bergson, kept on to exist in the twenties. Much of what was said about the problem of vaudeville contained doubts as to the mere possibility of revival and existence for this traditional genre. — Vaudeville, and the comedy of the twenties in general, may be seen as a reflection of the gradual process to master new material in life, as a search for means of shaping it. Characteristic of the initial stage is above all the modification of old means to suit the new material, the use of old literary models in a new manner. — The works of V. Shkvarkin and especially those of V. Katayev were a great success for Soviet vaudeville at the beginning of the thirties.

The second chapter of the book describes the period from 1928 to 1930, that is the time of the greatest success achieved by satirical comedy. The success of Soviet dramatists in this field obviously depends on the degree of their political and ideological maturity. — The lack of a clear ideological direction could be seen in the creation of works which were objectively of a slanderous character. A group of comedies with “critical aims” is judged in this connection: *Soviet Miss Nina* (1925) by A. Voinova, *Zoika's Apartment* (1926) and *Purple Island* (1928) by M. Bulgakov, *Passage Room* (1928) by Y. Pushmin, *Esteemed Comrade* (1930) by M. Zoshchenko, and others. Apart from the

fact that there are some partial differences between those plays, one main thing is common to all of them: an empirical relation to reality, a passive position of the artist. The absence of ideology and political principles led the dramatists of this kind towards distortion of the vital truth. And it was difficult to discern the borderline separating the works in which the lack of ideology resulted in chaotic heaps of deformations, from those which had been brought forth by malicious Philistinism, pleased with difficulties of development in the Soviet state, and which were full of anti-Soviet feeling. The road taken by a real revolutionary satirist and the way of such dramatists diverged abruptly. — The origin of satirical comedies at the end of the twenties was in connection with the party line to overcome political and economic difficulties and to criticize defects in work. The comedy production of L. Nikulin and V. Ardiv is especially characteristic in this respect. But their low level of style, thematic platitude, superficiality and illustrativeness of characters, lack of great generalizations, tendency towards anecdotic amusement, prevented those comedies from leaving a more noticeable trace in the art. — The interest taken in satire during the years 1927—1928 can be seen not only in the artistic practice of satirical writers but also in the field of theoretical thinking. Articles on satire, appearing in Pravda and other newspapers and periodicals, were again concentrated above all on making clear the question whether satire could exist under the conditions of building socialism. The new conception of the task for Soviet satire was itself being formed in the struggle against the nihilistic approach of some critics to satire in general. This situation was made more difficult, too, by the appearance of the above-mentioned works, which under cover of the RAPP slogan of "unmasking" reality defamed in fact the Soviet society. — Discussion on satire flared up again in 1929. There were new interventions by V. Blyum, who revived the conception of liquidation already known in 1925, which was directed against the very existence of Soviet satire and derived from fear of the generalizing purpose of satire. It showed the limitation in the concept of a new nature for Soviet satire, revealed in the embarrassment and assaults of critics writing against the satirical works of Mayakovski, essential for the formation of a new kind of satire. — As the existence itself of satire or satirical comedy was questioned, the genre had to prove its right and legality of existence only in practice. At that time of theoretical disputes on the nature of satire, the theory was considerably overtaken by the artistic creation of V. Mayakovski. This is also why the central part of the second chapter is devoted to V. Mayakovski's satirical comedies. The task lay in thinking over the significance of Mayakovski's production against the wide background of artistic fights during that period in the field of satirical comedy and in that of the theory of satire. The present achievements of the Soviet literary science in the study of the poet's dramatic heritage suggest the importance of explaining first certain principal questions connected with Mayakovski's innovations in the drama. — Mayakovski's plays gave evidence especially of the wide range of problems tackled by satirical comedy, covering new spheres of contemporary life. He began to see his subjects in the new phenomena springing up in the course of the development of a new society which was building socialism. And so for the first time Mayakovski's courage and determination went beyond the traditional framework that set the "world" of satirical comedy within the limits of presenting negative phenomena. — When judging in public his play *Hot Bath*, Mayakovski often emphasized that it "defends the prospects, inventiveness, enthusiasm", and that its "political idea is to fight against narrow-mindedness, limited practicalness, and for heroism, the tempo and socialist prospects". Such a formulation of the problem reaches far beyond the boundaries of the old conception of satire. Mayakovski's satire, deeply penetrated by the vital truth, contributes to the formation of men, stirs them to overcome what is bad and negative, not by concealing the defects but, on the contrary, by bringing them to light and denouncing them openly. — In connection with the purpose of satire the question of the characteristics of the subject becomes especially important. The theme in Mayakovski's play *Hot Bath* generalized in specific comedy forms the period of the first Five-Year Plan with its intense enthusiasm, vigorous creative energy and pathos of the great fight for socialism, the analysis of Mayakovski's comedies makes it possible to conclude that a characteristic form of the synthetic description of reality has been found in them. Mayakovski's satirical comedies are based upon conflicts expressing the struggle in real life. And dramatic collisions, subject to the laws of satire conventions, are after all in correlation with the logic of life itself. — It was for the first time in Mayakovski's comedies that pathos and satire merged into one whole. They not only whip the narrow-minded bourgeois way of life, Philistinism, limited practicalness, inertia, bureaucracy, but also celebrate human imagination, work, active and creative relation to life. *Hot Bath* not only deals a crushing blow to bureaucracy but also expresses the vigorous development of the first Five-Year Plan, the pathos of socialist construction, the work enthusiasm that destroys the bureaucratic obstacles in life. — One of the most significant problems arising in the study of Mayakovski's satirical comedies is the way of presenting the positive principle. The positive heroes in *Hot Bath* have their aim: to subject time to man, to create a "time machine", i. e. to bring nearer the communist future. Mayakovski has rid his positive heroes of reasoning functions, of the part to be speaking-trumpets of the author's ideas. The play

is not based upon a static contrast between the positive and negative but on a vivid mutual influence and clashes between the acting characters. Their interests and stimuli of action are antagonistic and exclude each other. The subject of Mayakovski's comedy represents a continuous series of conflicts, clashes and skirmishes which give the play a growing internal tension. This is then shown in the ways the satirical characters are revealed, in the use of fabulousness, in the structure of the finale, etc. — Mayakovski's experience also provides substantial material for an answer to the question how, in satirical comedy, the affirmation of an ideal is realized, how the pathos of negation and the pathos of the affirmation of reality get combined in it. — The literature on Mayakovski has established the opinion that the pathos of affirmation is connected with the heroic line, concretely embodied in the positive characters of the comedy. The author tries to show that it is an organic part of all the formal components in the comedy. — The affirming pathos in Mayakovski's comedies results from the unity of two principles: the affirmation cannot be reached without struggle, without revealing the negative; on the other hand, the satirical revelation is arrived at on the basis of the affirming, profoundly optimistic aim of Mayakovski's creative activity in the direction of the "communist far-away". — Mayakovski's satire is based on a new conception of criticism and self-criticism which are a source of social progress, a means of consolidating the socialist order. The affirmation of what is new and progressive is in fact brought about by self-criticism. This means that in a socialist society it is the criticism itself which assumes a new, affirming character, if conducted from the positions of communist ideas. — It is of course impossible to identify self-criticism and satire in a mechanical way. Satire is a special literary genre, a special artistic form of representing reality. But within the basis of a new, Soviet kind of satire there is, no doubt, the principle of self-criticism. In this respect it is obvious that the affirming pathos of Mayakovski's comedy results not only from a concrete creation of positive heroes but primarily from a negation, by satirical means, of the old, of everything that opposes social progress. — Here are fully shown the deeply innovating features of the Soviet satirical comedy, and it is above all its creative character that comes to the foreground. — Such satire is not afraid of laying thick colours when it represents the negative; on the contrary, it expects an infringement of elementary probability. It is in this connection that the specific nature of Mayakovski's satirical art is analysed. An organic part of it is formed by theatrical convention and fancifulness, put at the disposal of an art of great truthfulness. — Particularly important is the question to what extent Mayakovski succeeded in achieving the unity of style in his satirical comedy, which shows both satirical characters ("revived tendencies") and characters representing the positive powers of society acting together. It can be seen that Mayakovski abandoned the "pure convention" of characters as masks. The positive characters in Mayakovski's comedies are not copies of positive heroes in life; they are presented by means of a certain convention. Their existence on the stage is somewhat subject to the "laws" that determine the life of satirical characters. Their actions are subject not only to the logic of their natures but also to those conventional situations that are produced by fantastic themes. Mayakovski's way of describing positive characters enabled to preserve the unity of style in the comedy, to make wider the choice of artistic shades of expression, to avoid the black-and-white pattern and oneness in drawing positive characters. The principle realized by Mayakovski in the creation of positive heroes enlarged the scale of senses and feelings in the satirical comedy. — An important factor which helps to see the substance of innovations in Mayakovski's satirical comedy is also the use of artistic forms deriving from his views on the theatre as a spectacle and tribunal. A search for expressive stage forms that suit the specific nature of dramatic art is an integral part of Mayakovski's innovation work in the drama, a part which must neither be forgotten nor lost. — The author of the book pays attention to the fate of Mayakovski's comedies on the stage and to the struggle they caused among critics. These are very instructive pages in the history of Soviet literature and theatre and help to realize the importance of Mayakovski's satirical comedies as a whole. — The dramatic production of Mayakovski is certainly a culmination in the artistic efforts of the Soviet satirical comedy in the twenties. Assimilating all previous achievements and discoveries, continuing in the tradition of the classical Russian comedy, it was also the expression of a deeply innovating power, an example of a fighting, humane and socialist sort of art. — The final part of the second chapter is devoted to an analysis of A. Bezymenski's satirical comedy called *A Shot* (1929), which has not yet been examined in its specific art features. The author shows Bezymenski as a man who fought together with Mayakovski against the RAPP slogan of "living people" in literature, against the abuse of psychology and for a fighting contemporary theatre. There is undoubtedly a unity in political and ideological principles between Bezymenski and Mayakovski, a relationship between Mayakovski's principles used in the creation of satirical characters as "revived tendencies" and Bezymenski's method of revealing the social basis of man". They both try to denounce and make ridiculous what is negative, revealing its substance without any necessity for psychological elaboration. — But the artistic efforts of Bezymenski in the field of satirical comedy also had some peculiarities of their own. Bezymenski tried to carry on the classical tradition, especially

that of Griboyedov, he wanted to achieve a unity of satire and the heroic drama. Independently on Mayakovski, he looked for his own way in representing the positive hero of the satirical play. Not all of his methods were successful. A Shot is not without schemes, the satirical characters are more static than in Mayakovski's plays. The positive characters are rhetorical and not sufficiently concrete. These defects, however, must not lead to doubts as to the basic creative principle realized by Bezymenski's satirical comedy. His play A Shot, together with Mayakovski's dramatic production, takes a fruitful line, affirming the sharply appealing form of the satirical theatre.

The third chapter studies the characteristic features of the development of Soviet comedy in the years 1930—1934, that is under the new historical conditions of building the foundations of socialism. — During that period, the fate of Soviet comedy was linked with events that meant a decisive turn of the whole Soviet literature to contemporary themes. The drama, and especially the comedy, reflected the characteristic aspect of the period, that is the search for new artistic forms which would bring literature and life closely together. Special attention should be paid to the increase of genres, to the growth of literature and dramatic art which was also reflected in the comedy of that time. The main theme in the literature and drama of those years was the heroism of socialist building, represented in the comedies of the thirties, remarkable for their heroic pathos (*Tempo*, *After the Ball*, *Snow* by N. Pogodin, *Time, Forward!* by V. Katayev, *Railway Carriage* and *Marion* by I. Shtok). — Especially characteristic of this period are the comedies by N. Pogodin. The author of the book tries to explain their substance and see the peculiarities of Pogodin's humour, which is the source of the optimistic pathos in the comedies. The artist noticed clearly the fact that contemporary heroism could not use the traditional gestures (attributes of classical heroism) and that new artistic means were needed. The effort to show heroism in its simple, deeply human form led Pogodin to humour, Pogodin's comedies are characterized by transitions from the serious to the ridiculous, suggested by the logic of human relations, by a specific synchasy of comedy and drama elements. They show an obvious mixture of genres that blurs the borderlines in the effort to interpret reality in its natural form, to describe the peripeteia in life, to show the widest possible range of human feelings — from joy to sorrow, from laughter to crying. Pogodin was not alone in his efforts. V. Katayev had similar tasks in his comedy *Time, Forward!* In the formation of comic, dramatic and even tragic principles, the authors sought to achieve an artistic unity. From this point of view, Pogodin's and Katayev's efforts represented a necessary stage in the history of Soviet comedy. — The fruitfulness of these efforts, however, must not conceal the fact that such a way brought about the danger of losing the purity of the comedy genre with the result that it would become "serious", deprived of its comic element as the chief nerve, in other words the risk of losing the specific comedy aspect. This danger, not avoided by Soviet comedy in the end, became greater with some critics (Y. Yuzovski, E. Mindlin) trying to canonize the vagueness of genre. — The result of a closer contact between comedy and life, a reply to the need for a deeper penetration into the substance of new human relations in the socialist society, was the evident success of lyrical comedy, able to render the inner world of the builder of socialism and to penetrate into the sphere of his feelings. The following comedies are examined in this connection *Nonsense* (1933) by K. Finn, *The Miraculous Alloy* (1933) by V. Kirshon, *Girls of Our Land* (1932—1933) by I. Mykytenko, *Personal Life* (1933) by V. Solovyev, *A Good Life* (1934) by S. Amaglobeli. The central figure of this new Soviet lyrical comedy was the positive character. (An important place can only be given to the comedy called *Nonsense*.) In these plays there is a clear tendency to put the comedy sphere entirely at the disposal of positive heroes but there may also appear characters with certain faults, still under the influence of the past, yet capable of overcoming them with the help of other people. The laughter in these comedies does not mortify but puts things right, "purifies", helps man to reach a higher level of social existence. The atmosphere of joy in life, the kind description of positive heroes of the time, their wonderful vitality, the beauty of their youth and energy — all this made the comedies very effective. — At the same time, however, the dramatist's concentration only on the positive environment resulted in weakening the stage conflict, in lessening the tension of dramatic actions in the comedy. The conflict in those comedies is the weakest point in them. The fact that the comedy ground was dominated by the positive hero, so that the comedy was without a critical line and had no sharp conflicts, brought with it a new problem. The action in the comedy was mainly performed by positive characters (or at least by people who easily got rid of what was left in them from the past) and there were no sharp conflicts between them; it was, therefore, intrigue that gained its new right of existence as a specific way of presenting the relations between characters on the stage. And there is really a trend in the above-mentioned comedies (with positive heroes only) towards intrigue, which assumes a somewhat self-sufficient character. Such intrigue was intended to substitute the stage struggle reflecting the conflicts between different forces of society (*A Good Life* by S. Amaglobeli). — The book follows the tendency of easing and removing contradictions in life, the trend towards a simplified description of life which appeared in the Soviet comedy at the beginning of the thirties.

These tendencies, harmless and not very clear at first sight, had grave consequences for the comedy already in the latter half of the thirties. — All the complicated processes that characterize the development of the comedy in the early thirties are examined in the book with reference to the development of theoretical and critical thinking at that time. The origin of the “positive comedy” theory is studied here together with its programme of demonstrating positive phenomena (Y. Yuzovski, V. Kirshon). Attention is especially paid to the opinions of Yuzovski. There was no place in his theory for the kind of laughter which would make ridiculous the faults and all that survived and was unworthy of man, that is for a sort of criticizing laughter that would help man in his improvement. And it was not the overcoming of difficulties in life, fight as a form of social progress, laughter as a symptom and expression of victory achieved (A. Lunacharski), but the mere reproduction, “demonstration” of the positive that was said to be the characteristic feature of Soviet comedy. The idea of a comedy full of cordial, cheerful laughter addressed to people formed by the revolution and building a new socialist society, that is to the positive forces, was undoubtedly right and had good practical results. It was, however, quite wrong to bring to the foreground a comedy which had no criterion, no self-criticism or critically emotional relation to what contradicted the ideal. — The book also analyses the pseudosociological views of I. M. Nusinov, who declared that humour was a category socially alien to the proletariat. — The attempt made by some critics to put humour, characteristic of optimistic and lyrical comedies, against the criticizing sort of laughter, led not only to undue opposition made between lyrical and satirical comedies, but also to elimination from Soviet comedy of the satirical trend in general during the first half of the thirties (O. Litovski). — Characteristic in this respect is, on the one hand, V. Kirpotin’s campaign (in the middle of the thirties) against the satirical traditions of Mayakovski and, on the other, various theoretical distortions of the substance of satire. It is not accidental that a strange and absurd term, “positive satire”, appears in the middle of the thirties as if it corresponded to the new nature of Soviet satire. This term was spread by Y. Zhurbina. The novelty of “positive satire” lay in that it had abolished the critical character of satire, thus violating the basic pathos without which satire was unthinkable, and substituting satire for a one-sided positive description of reality. The affirming pathos of such “satire” was in Zhurbina’s mind the result of a merely lyrical-pathetic relation to the phenomena of life. Her conception of “positive satire” was a special theory that justified the embellishment of reality. — The theory of “positive satire” was nothing more than a new variety of the liquidation “theories” spread by V. Blyum and I. M. Nusinov. I. Nusinov took an extreme position both in his relation to humour and to satire. — The author of the book underlines the significance of interventions by M. Koltsov, A. Lunacharski and M. Gorki in this situation, which were meant as a defence of satire and humour in Soviet literature and of laughter as a weapon in the class struggle and a “symptom of victory”. The fight of Lunacharski and Koltsov for the flourishing of satire in Soviet literature was also very important for Soviet comedy. — The satirical line in the first half of the thirties is rather in the background, but it is not interrupted. It is necessary to acknowledge the contribution of V. Katayev to the development of Soviet satirical comedy (A Million Torments and The Primrose Path), and that of N. Nikitin, author of Competition for Millionists (1933 to 1934). Analysing these comedies, the author of the book tries to explain their vital basis and to notice the peculiarities of their satirical themes, the richness and variety of the comedy means that serve the satirical task. — The range of ideological and artistic efforts of Soviet comedy was wide at the beginning of the thirties. Besides lyrical and satirical comedies there are also comedies of another kind. The fact that comedy is not in opposition even to a philosophical principle is proved by *The Hen and the Watchmaker*, a work of the old Ukrainian dramatist I. Kocherga. — The examination of the Soviet comedy in the first half of the thirties makes it possible to conclude that the development of Soviet comedy was uneven, and that the explanation of its genre modifications is to be found both in the development of life and in the conditions of literary struggles. It is more characteristic than ever of the Soviet comedy in the first half of the thirties that there is a series of artistic efforts, searching, genre variety; heroic, lyrical and satirical comedies are joined in their development by Soviet vaudeville, where the success is mainly connected with the name of V. Shkvarkin, author of the play *Another Man’s Child* (1953). — The importance of this work in the Soviet drama is not yet seen as it should be. Much is due to underestimating the possibilities of vaudeville as a genre in general, not only in the thirties but also in later years. It was customary to consider vaudeville as a superficial, merely amusing genre, unable of presenting even one slightly more important social problem. And yet, it is Shkvarkin’s comedy that gives an excellent example of the use of vaudeville methods and offers good material for understanding the character of the new vaudeville, as well as for realizing its possibilities. — This point of view is taken by the author of the book in his analysis of the vaudeville comedy by V. Shkvarkin. He shows that the intrigue character of vaudeville can serve the purpose of revealing successfully the fundamental contradictions of reality, that vaudeville is not essentially without conflicts but is able to describe real contrasts between old and new

morality, between old and new ethics in human psychology. V. Shkvarkin proved it in practice. The spring in the action of the play *Another Man's Child* is the conflict of contradictory opinions, interests and characters which are developed in a specific form belonging to vaudeville and its amusing misunderstandings, intricate situations and chases. In this sense it may even be stated that there is not much difference between comedy and vaudeville, which has a special hybrid character in the Soviet drama. Vaudeville is here under great influence of comedy, so that it is sometimes rather difficult to distinguish its features of genre. Nevertheless, the analysis of the vaudeville *Another Man's Child* refutes V. Yermilov's argument according to which vaudeville contrasts and contradictions are harmless and innocent, and what is peculiar to vaudeville is only a good-natured smile. The practice of Soviet vaudeville in the thirties, and that of Shkvarkin especially, shows that vaudeville can raise various sorts of laughter and is not far even from satirical elements.

The period from 1925 to 1934 is, therefore, the time of formation for the Soviet comedy genre. In this decade of its development, Soviet comedy made an experience of considerable informative value, characteristically reflected in theoretical and critical disputes and animated discussions of that time. This experience, present in the further development of Soviet comedy, enables the scholar to understand the causes of success and defeat. It is also valuable for the contemporary theatre, where the need for witty and bright comedies of all sorts still remains to be satisfied.

Translation by Jaroslav Ondráček

