

Three Penny Theatre's
The Death of Nero

Dramaturgical Packet



This packet is a living document that will be continually updated based on the needs of the production team and cast. The initially two sections have been structured to provide the expected most common information. If there is something else you need or would like in terms of research and/or resources, or would like to set-up a dramaturgy consultation via Zoom, please reach out to your dramaturg Keenan Shionalyn by e-mail: keenanshionalyn@protonmail.com

Updated on 7/9/26

Table of Contents

<i>The Death of Nero</i>	1
Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)	4
<i>Section 1: The Playwright and the Play</i>.....	9
Playwright Biography	10
Influences On and From This Play	18
Theatre and Performance.....	18
Literature	19
Visual Art	21
Music	24
Relevant Productions.....	25
Prior Productions	25
Script Versions	25
Useful Productions for Reference	26
Character Descriptions	31
The Real World	32
Nero's Play World.....	33
The Liminal Space	36
Notes on Unnamed / Ancillary Characters:	37
Pronunciation Guide	38
General Guide to Russian and Latin.....	38
Characters and Personages:.....	40
Mentioned People and Figures.....	42
Places and Things (In Order of Appearance)	44

Thematic Descriptions	46
Interactive Script	53
<i>Section 2: Critical Analysis and Visual Guides.....</i>	54
The Historical Setting	55
Nero's World (Rome)	55
Pavel's World (Rome).....	65
Pavel's World (Saratov).....	76
Pavel's World (Switzerland and the Dacha)	94
The Sociocultural Context	95
Russian Modernism.....	95
Gender and Sexuality in the Russian Context and Liminal Queer Translation	98
Ballroom Culture	101
Drag as a Performance Tool.....	104
The Scholarly Context	107
The Death of Nero in the Russian Context	107
The Death of Nero in the Western Context	109
Queer Theory: Reparative Reading, Metamodernism, Futurity, Failure, Feelings, Temporalities, and Mourning	111
<i>Section 3: Dramaturgical and Production Archive.....</i>	120

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1) What is a dramaturg?

There are books dedicated to answering this question and none of them have a clear answer. It is helpful to consider dramaturg as both a noun and a verb. To dramaturg, means to treat a production and/or play critically — asking questions to reveal knowledge. A dramaturg is a specialized role in theatre meant to ensure the integrity of a work so that it is culturally aware and a check to ensure what is intended reaches the audience. One my favorite books on the topic states “dramaturgs do a lot of dramaturging” which is helpful in its uselessness. Most often, production dramaturgs take on the role that blends an education coordinator, research specialist, and outreach coordinator to ensure audiences have the contextual information to understand the play. They act as the advocate for the audience as a balance between vision / artistic choices and how it is communicated. They are literary and/or cultural experts present to guide the production and serve as a consultant to aid in research, design, evaluation, and outreach. While somewhat less common in the United States, in many parts of Europe dramaturgs are ubiquitous as part of the production team, and legally required in countries like Germany. Ultimately, my job is to ensure that the production answers, “Why this play? Why Here? Why Now?” in all aspects so audiences have the experience we hope for and to provide education to artistic teams.

2) How do I utilize a dramaturg?

I am here to help you present the play as authentically as possible. First, start by reviewing the dramaturgical packet, which was created as a resource with the most common requests and/or needed materials. If what you need is not covered, you need more information, or have questions, then reach out and I will be excited to assist. As a dramaturg, whether you are an actor, designer, director, or producer, I am here to ensure you have the information you need to make this play the best it can. While I will occasionally be in rehearsal or production meetings, you are always welcome to set-up a consultation where we discuss the specific questions you may have and I can then connect you to resources or conduct additional research to find your answer. For functional purposes, I am the dedicated expert on the play and the playwright, my role is answer and ask questions to ensure artistic choices are culturally responsive and aware. Reach out to keenanshionalyn@protonmail.com for quick questions or to set-up a time to meet and we can have a lengthier conversation.

3) What if my design / character doesn't match the examples you have here?

There is no expectation that your choices meet any criteria beyond what is discussed between the director and the designer / actor. My research here is not meant to constrain, but to provide a framework in which to situate the play and hopefully give you some inspiration. Artistic license can then build from there or detract entirely depending on what is needed in the production. I provide these references and images to help you understand the world of the play and the playwright so if you choose to forge your own path you can do so with informed intent. Making those choices with historical and cultural knowledge makes

them stronger and less likely to alienate audiences, historical verisimilitude is not the goal nor my concern—I care that your choices are culturally aware. When I step into discuss your directing, design, or acting, I will be asking questions about why you made those choices and only interject when your choices come in conflict with the script, vision for the production as a whole, or raise ethical/cultural concerns that may create conflict with audiences. In many cases, the historically accurate choice is the incorrect one, but knowing what was done historically helps make that choice stronger.

4) Can you make sure that my artistic choice is historically accurate?

I am certainly happy to discuss that concern with you. While many see dramaturgs as the people checking for historical accuracy or pointing out inconsistencies, in reality, what we are checking for is if your creative idea or vision is reading to audiences the way you intend. For example, a sound effect of a school bell might be historically accurate, however, schools have had digital bells for over twenty years, so a historically accurate sound effect might communicate the wrong message to contemporary audiences while an ahistorical digital bell might communicate the intended meaning. When we meet, we will instead discuss your intent and then collaborate to discover the best way to communicate that idea to our audience. I may point out barriers that might prevent transmission of knowledge or create cultural conflict. I can fact check your work, but I am more likely to respond to you with a similar question of “why is it important that it be historically accurate?”.

5) There is a lot of information in here, am I expected to read all of it?

Yes and no. It would be beneficial to review all of the material so you can approach your role informed and ready to ask further questions as needed. A dramaturgical packet is meant to be the foundation for your research and the jumping off point for your artistic choices. That being said, some information is more relevant than others, depending on your role. I suggest, at the least, you acquaint yourself with the structure and sections so if something is not relevant now, you know where to find it if it becomes important later. For most, this packet is the most useful after an initial read of the script and just prior to your second. You are not expected to become experts on this material but generalists with brief exposure to ensure our work is impactful and culturally aware. I follow the European model of dramaturgy, in that reviewing this material is a key component of script analysis that everyone conducts within their specific role, but it is the dramaturg themselves who must “know” this material so they may serve as a resource. There will not be a quiz.

6) How do I utilize the information in each section?

Each section serves a distinct purpose. Section 1: The Playwright and the Play is perhaps the most immediately useful information. It is the contact and background you need to make artistic decisions about the play within your role. For most, a significant majority of the content in this section will be relevant. Section 2: Critical Analysis and Visual Guides provides the type of information that typically go beyond basic levels of research. Critical

analysis is usually heavily sourced from academic writers and thinkers and as such it can be quite a bit denser. Rather than copy/paste scholarly articles, I prefer to provide a brief summary to each idea and then link my sources so you can read further if you prefer. I generally assume most do not read beyond my summaries as that content can be quite difficult and take a lot of time, that is fine. The resources are there for those who wish to dive deeper to gain a better understanding. Please be aware, many of the articles are made available for the purpose of this production but are copyrighted so should not be distributed further. The Archive is a section that will be updated over the course of the production. If there are items such as notes, sketches, or other artifacts that you think should be archived alongside the rest of the production information, reach out to me so I can include that info.

7) Do dramaturgs conduct research for the entire production team?

Yes and no. Research is a core part of all artistic roles within the theatre, but I am not here to duplicate or replace that work. Most artists, however, are not expert scholars or researchers so their depth is minimal. That is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does mean that most artists “don’t know what they don’t know”. Dramaturgs are here to help extend your research beyond the basics, with a special emphasis on the audience experience, historical practice, and critical frameworks. As an actor, that means you still need to do all the background work, as a designer, you still need to research the time period, the styles, etc. Where I step in is ensuring that what you find and create communicates what you intend, ensure it is as impactful as possible, and encourage deeper engagement with nuance. If utilized well, collaborating with a dramaturg makes you a stronger artist because your choices become strengthened through nuance.

8) When do I know I’ve conducted enough research for my design / character / etc.?

Anyone who conducts research for a living will tell you, there is no end. There is always more to know about a subject and the more knowledgeable you become the quicker you realize how much you *don’t* know. However, there is also a point where it is better to stop, embody or draft, and see where the gaps are. That moment is earlier than most people think. Diminishing returns set in for research rather quickly and unless you are a trained scholar, you are likely reaching your limit within a few hours / days. Remember, first drafts whether in writing / acting / design / or directing are always terrible, however, that first step helps you know where the additional research or learning needs to happen. The true work comes in editing / rehearsal, where your research becomes more focused. Dramaturgs guide you towards resources to help your editing work become easier and more informed.

9) I’ve hit a rut in my research, I don’t know where to start, or I don’t know what it is I am supposed to be researching?

Reach out and discuss with me! I can provide you tools, give insight into the world of the play and the playwright, and be a sounding board while you brainstorm. I am here for you. We all have different skill levels with research and analysis; part of my job is help you go

from where you are to the next level. Even if I don't have the answer, I have the research knowledge to find you the resources to help you! While not all dramaturgs have this knowledge, I have also taught script analysis, theatre history, and dramaturgy at the college level so I can provide some education to help you know how to move forward in your research and/or various ways to engage a text. I considered myself an educator first and am happy to serve in that role for you if it is helpful.

10) I am worried my question is stupid and/or you won't know the answer?

I am a firm believer in the importance of stupid questions. Questions are stupid because there is a societal assumption of knowledge, which is often faulty. Stupid is not a judgment, but merely a temporary mental state informing you that there is a gap in knowledge for whatever reason. Those reasons can vary from lack of content or conceptual depth, social awareness, or cultural / historical knowledge. As a dramaturg, my role is to ignore whatever societal judgment exists around stupidity and instead embrace it as a space that holds great potential for learning. If we are aware, then we can remedy. Whether your lack of knowledge is due to limited content depth, an understanding of social expectations, or cultural unawareness / misinformation, I can help you extend and grow. I live in the world of stupid questions, bring them on! I will not know the answer to everything you ask me, but as a scholar, I have the training to find the resources for you that can answer your questions, let you know the answer is not yet known, or clue you into the messiness or nuance within the question. My most common answer is...Yes and No or I don't know, but let me find out.

11) What if I disagreed with some analysis you shared? What if I have concerns?

Scholarship and critical research rarely provide clean answers, and discourse is a daily reality and expectation within research roles. Healthy disagreement is a good thing and leads to more knowledge, but it must be shared and discussed to ensure the full point-of-view is explored. So please reach out. It is possible one or both of us are missing critical viewpoints and we can help inform each other. People, including trained dramaturgs, sometimes get things wrong, such is what it means to be human. I often disagree with things I wrote just a few years ago because research is a continual process of learning, I know more now than I did then. The best scholars grow and change as new knowledge and insights are experienced. Also, be aware of the "Dunning-Kruger" effect, misinformation is the most rampant in the early stages of research (those new to a topic are often overconfident while misunderstanding the nuance of a topic while the more reliable experts, aware of the gaps in knowledge, tend to feel like imposters). If you have specific concerns, again, please reach out and we will discuss together.

12) I know a group that has some cultural connection and/or may be very interested in this play. Who should they talk to?

The dramaturg! Part of the role of dramaturgy is outreach and determining who may or may not be interested in a particular work. If you have a group that would like to become involved in some way, let me know. I can reach out and discuss with them and then connect them to those involved in the production who can best meet their needs in a mutually beneficial way.

13) I feel like I should ask something or should reach out, but am not sure exactly what to say?

I have this feeling all the time. Reach out anyway (if you can, I know well the anxiety that can come from reaching out to someone). I consider all of our conversations are working in draft, so don't feel like you need to have anything figured out. Sometimes you just need someone to process with, and I can serve that role if it helpful for you.

Section 1:

The Playwright and the Play

Playwright Biography

Mikhail Alekseevich Kuzmin (October 18, 1872-March 1, 1936) was a multi-faceted artist living in St. Petersburg Russia contributing to the fields of theatre, literature and music as a playwright, critic, novelist, poet, and composer. He is most often credited as the author of the first coming out novel *Wings* (*Kryl'ia*) in 1906. Unlike most queer writers of his time, Kuzmin avoided coding his characters, and is marked as one of the earliest writers of overt homoeroticism. His works are often labelled unclassifiable as he moved from one genre to another. Kuzmin's father, Aleksey Alekseevich, was a naval officer, settling in Yaroslavl after retirement as a judicial official. The nobility of Kuzmin's family stems from his mother, Nadezhda Dmitrievna (née Federova), the daughter of an inspector at the Imperial Theatre School. The theatrical legacy on his maternal side goes back to the famous French actor Jean Aufresne, who was known for his portrayals in Voltaire's plays in Paris, later recommended by Voltaire to Catherine the Great to perform in her court and to assist with the education of theatre under the new systems of public education founded by the Empress. It is important to note the spelling of his surname, which marks his nobility as opposed to the commoner name of Kuz'min, something the playwright was adamant about during his life.



Figure 1 Mikhail Kuzmin 1911 -
Photographer Unknown

Early Life

Born to a noble family in Yaroslavl, Kuzmin moved frequently between the rural areas along the northern parts of the Volga River, the city of St. Petersburg, and Saratov. It was in Saratov that Kuzmin saw his first theatrical production, a puppet show, that led him to operettas and dramas, especially Shakespeare. As he wrote referring to his love of Shakespeare, "I was, perhaps, a funny and pretentious little boy, but I was so happy, so happy and proud!" While a member of the land owning nobility, Kuzmin's love of European artists demonstrates his connection to the aristocratic class, but his constant requests to friends for money marks his family's general lack of income, a member of the noble poor. In 1891, Kuzmin established himself in the city of St. Petersburg after joining the St. Petersburg Conservatory, studying music under the guidance of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. His taste in music draws heavily from European Romantic composers including Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, Wagner, and perhaps most importantly for his draw to theatre, Offenbach and his operettas. After three years and little progress to show, Kuzmin dropped out of the conservatory exclaiming his desire to focus on literature and poetry, however, music remained central to his oeuvre. In all his writings there is a general sense of musicality. Kuzmin began to study Russian history and European literature while experimenting with various forms of writing, drawing from Wagner, Schiller, Voltaire, Offenbach and his largest theatrical influence, Carlo Gozzi's *commedia dell'arte* plays. Most of what is known of Kuzmin during this time is due to letters written to his childhood friend Georgii Chicherin, who became a Russian bureaucrat and eventual Commissar of the People for Foreign Affairs, following Lenin. Kuzmin spent a considerable amount of time

traveling during this time, with trips to various locales along the mediterranean including Italy, Greece, and northern Egypt.

Emergence into the Artistic World of St. Petersburg



Figure 2 Kuzmin (1906) -
Photographer Unknown

From the turn of the century, often referred to as the *fin-de-siècle*, Kuzmin experimented with several genres of literature, writing two operas (now lost), a series of poetry cycles, and his first play, *The History of the Knight D'Allessio* (1905), however he would disavow nearly all writings prior to 1906 as amateur. During that time, Kuzmin became increasingly religious, a follower of the Old Ritualists (Old Believers), a schism of Russian Orthodoxy. Kuzmin's work during this time often contains a discourse on religion and sexuality, clear that the playwright was grappling with what it meant to be a gay man while maintaining his religiosity. During this time, Kuzmin would oft be seen wearing the traditional attire of the Old Ritualist monks, a stark contrast to the fashionable aesthetics of his fellow artists.

Between 1902 and 1905, Kuzmin found himself amongst several artistic groups, but there is one that marks the beginning of his recognition as a major artist. The *World of Art* (*Mir Iskusstva*) became the playwright's cultural center, founded by the famous Sergei Diaghilev of the Ballet Russes, who became a lifelong friend of Kuzmin. Amongst the *World of Art* artists, Kuzmin met Vyacheslav Ivanov and his wife, who began the famous *Tower* salons, meeting on Wednesdays in their apartments and included important artistic members such as Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Blok, and Diaghilev. At those meetings, it was common to stage small plays, read poetry, and experiment with art and sexuality. After the failed revolution of 1905, the Tzar repealed many of the strict censorship guidelines that constrained Russian publishing during the 1800s. Due to this new freedom, Kuzmin was encouraged by his peers to write and publish, resulting in his first major poetry cycle *The Alexandrian Songs*, with odes to his earlier travels and references to his romantic dalliances. He also published a trilogy of religious mystery plays as part of a series of experiments meant to bring ritual and spirituality to the theatrical experience, to replace religion. Those plays all utilize characters abstaining from sex, while embedding considerable homoeroticism.

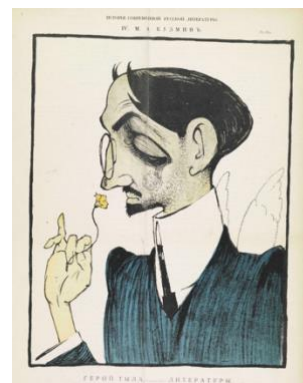


Figure 3 Mikhail Kuzmin,
Satirikon magazine, № 5, 1908

It was around this time that Kuzmin transitioned from his religious attire to what later became a hallmark look for the artist, the colored vests and dandy attire. One anecdote states that Kuzmin had nearly 100 vests in his closet or a vest for every day. His dandy-esque clothes and his light writing garnered him the reputation of "Russia's Oscar Wilde," a name he detested due to Wilde's disavowal of his sexuality during his trial. The reputation would follow him gathering multiple associations common with Wilde, such as being labelled an aesthete and decadent.

While those early works were received positively, Kuzmin had yet to make a mark on the theatrical scene. In 1906, however, Alexander Blok, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and Kuzmin joined

together to create the modernist play *The Puppetshow* or *Balaganchik* (1906). The play was an anti-realist romp utilizing *commedia dell'arte* tropes meant to mock the realism being put forward by Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theatre. Meyerhold played the lead role of Pierrot, becoming a hallmark of Russian symbolist art. The play is often considered canon within theatre history and Meyerhold's writing about the play are often included in graduate level coursework on theatre theory. Kuzmin's contributions, as composer and collaborator, however, have been almost entirely erased, a footnote at best. Instead, Kuzmin became known as a novelist, due to the release of his first book *Wings* (*Kryl'ia* - 1906), a somewhat autobiographical tale of young boy finding his way into acceptance of his sexuality and his mentorship into queer culture, referred to as Antinoan mentorship. While many at the time called the book pornographic, Kuzmin stood by the work becoming the first known author to overtly portray homosexuality uncoded and in a positive light. Kuzmin simultaneously wrote a new trilogy of plays published under the title *Three Plays*, meant to be his theatrical debut, a mix of pastorals and light-hearted Shakespearean style comedies. However, unlike publications, the stage remained heavily regulated, and the collection was officially censored due to a kiss between two men in the final play *The Dangerous Precaution*. Kuzmin was fined, but the result became lifelong censorship, Kuzmin's trademark open discussion of sexuality could not reach the stage. Only the *The Choice of Bride* went on to receive a staging; the homoeroticism lost on most audiences and the censor. The last play in the collection, *Two Shepherds and a Nymph in a Cottage*, became the subject of queer lore when an explicit satirical version was published turning the light pastoral into a crude sexual romp, whether the satire was meant as homage or insult is unclear.

Kuzmin's status as a queer writer was firmly established with the publication of *The Chimes of Love* (1906), a dramatic poem filled with homoeroticism, eventually put to music and staged as a play in 1911. When Isadora Duncan visited Russia, she donned her infamous Greek attire and danced to a reading of this play. Kuzmin declined his invitation to attend, finding the event ridiculous. While the intelligentsia declared the poem pornographic it became a key piece of queer literature, subject to several public readings. During the earlier Soviet years (1920s), it was meant to be converted into an all-male ballet in Moscow, but whether or not the ballet was ever performed is unknown due to archival destruction. In 1928, a public reading of the poem was cancelled and rescheduled out of fear that the government would prosecute the "undesirables" in attendance. On March 10th, the reading finally occurred, unadvertised, to an overpacked room. It was later referred to as the "last demonstration of Leningrad's homosexuals." The poem is still read amongst private queer reading groups in Russia today.

The Center of the Artistic World

Due to the success of *The Puppetshow* and *Kryl'ia*, Kuzmin quickly found himself at the center of the artistic elite in St. Petersburg. Between 1906-1917, he continued writing several collections of poems, novellas, and was able to make a living as a theatre critic in some of the highest regarded journals. Between 1910 and 1911, Kuzmin cofounded a new theatre with Vsevolod Meyerhold called The House of Interludes, dedicated to evenings of short plays. After the theatre closed, the two invited Nikolai Sapunov,



Figure 4 Mikhail Kuzmin by Konstantin Somov (1909)

Kuzmin's occasional lover, to start an artist retreat style theatre in Terijoki (contemporary Finland). After a successful opening, the three traveled to Terijoki for a grand opening celebration. Amongst a gathering of other artists, they took a boat for a river voyage, however during the trip the boat overturned. As a result, Sapunov drowned, an event that would haunt Kuzmin for the rest of his life. This event is critical as it marks the beginning of the end of his collaborations with Vsevolod Meyerhold. While the two would collaborate several times again over the next two decades, Kuzmin never recovered from the event and put distance between them. While Meyerhold's status would grow, Kuzmin's began to fade.

However, it was the decade from 1906-1917 that Kuzmin was his most productive as a theatre artist writing over 20 plays. Kuzmin's plays during this time, like his theatre company, were focused on short form dramas. Many of the plays are now classified under the genre of mime-ballet, or short plays set to music and dance. The works are an homage to the French *ballet de cour* or court dramas popularized in the 16th and 17th centuries in the royal courts of France. Some were staged successfully at the House of Interludes or at the cabaret The Comedian's Halt. However, as many plays were considerably homoerotic, they either went unstaged or only performed in private residences as was the case with *The Venetian Madcaps* (1914), a *commedia dell'arte* piece staged at the newly built Nosov art nouveau mansion in Moscow. The one exception to this status being operettas. Kuzmin's two operettas *The Maiden's Delight* (1911) and *The Return of Odysseus* (1911) became hits amongst the public theatres. Both were panned by critics. The latter gained particular following amongst queer audiences due to its burlesque of the classic Greek tale and the emphasis on the homoerotic nature of Telemachus — it became one of Kuzmin's most profitable plays. Operettas in Russia, unlike traditional theatre, were unofficially exempted from strict censorship rules, a phenomenon also seen in France. As such, Kuzmin had little difficulty staging his overtly queer operettas.

In 1913, Kuzmin set about travelling again, mostly in Ukraine, where in Kiev he met his lifelong partner Yuri Yurkin, originally named Iosif Yurkunas, from Lithuania. The background of Yurkun is almost entirely unknown, even his name was changed to Yuri, an homage to Kuzmin's first lover "Prince Georges" who died in his youth. Yurkun was just under 18 years old when they met and was either an actor or a store clerk, accounts vary. Like most of Kuzmin's lovers, Yurkun was bisexual and his affairs with women and occasionally men caused considerable heartache. Tragic bisexual love triangles are common in Kuzmin's writings.

As the decade continued, Kuzmin continued to write, dabbling in vaudeville, pastorals, and pantomime. This period establishes Kuzmin as a writer of light comedies and often characterized as a decadent (a trait associated with the fall of Empire, often a pejorative by those who find the expression shallow, distasteful, and hedonistic). However, such a classification misses the message of Kuzmin's works, while many of the heterosexual pairings are indeed frivolous, the homoerotic relationships and those formed in solidarity with women contain considerable depth to contrast the ridiculousness of heteronormative



Figure 5 Portrait of M.A. Kuzmin, Alexander Golovin, 1910

society. Gender play is a common theme throughout this era and the comedic nature in which it is presented later became criticism against the playwright as a mark of the *bourgeoisie*. Many of Kuzmin's works during this era contain drag, open sexualities, and what I term the "creative queer", women who abandon heteronormative life to start utopias with gay men. The style in nearly all works emphasize anti-realism through dance, movement, and physical acting.

The Revolution and the Darker Turn in Art

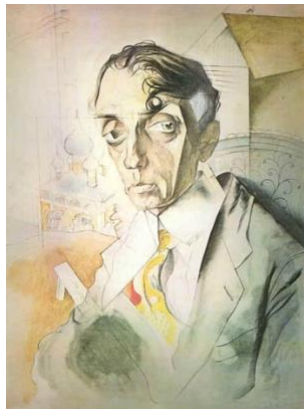


Figure 6 Mikhaïl Kuzmin, Yuri Annenkov, 1919

While Kuzmin initially supported the revolution of 1917, it was not long before he found the new dogma of the socialist Bolsheviks unappealing. Coinciding with the revolution, Kuzmin was almost immediately dismissed as *bourgeois*, never again taken seriously beyond his intimate artistic circle. Kuzmin found it difficult to find paid work in the new socialist reality, scraping by with meager paychecks from the occasional translation or musical composition. Many of his former colleagues, such as Alexander Blok and Anna Akhmatova, turned against him, the latter calling him "the spawn of the devil." While homosexuality remained legal in the early Soviet years, few wanted to be associated with anything that might be considered *bourgeois*. Exemplifying the fear of this era, Kuzmin prophetically wrote in his journal in the 1920s, "If the Diary is ever seized and read, then all of us will be shot."

It can almost be said that no new plays by the playwright were produced after the revolution, but one genre makes that statement impossible. Kuzmin's children's plays found great success. Like his prior works, critics panned the plays calling them "too spicy" for children. However, under the new Soviet government the intelligentsia did not have the ultimate say, a series of educators and bureaucrats jointly decided which were produced. While the bureaucrats agreed with the critics, the educators loved Kuzmin's plays and found they were the most engaging for youth, they avoided pandering and trusted children to be intelligent consumers of art. Kuzmin became the first produced playwright under the new Soviet Theatre for Youth, which the US model is based, with his play, *The Lucky Day, or Two Brothers* (1919). Several other successful children's plays were staged such as *The Nightingale* (1922), *Puss-in-Boots: A Fairytale Puppet Show in Three Acts* (1923), and *Sister Alyonushka, Brother Ivanushka: A Magical Show with Music and Singing in 5 Acts* (Unknown). Nearly all of Kuzmin's plays for youth were successfully staged.

Beyond children's plays, Kuzmin's works went ignored. Despite this setback, the playwright began experimenting with new forms of art inspired by film, Futurism, and the new German Expressionism happening in Berlin. While prior plays were light and comedic, these new works were complex, darker, and contained deep puzzles in the wordplay and imagery. *Tuesday Mary* (1921) exemplifies this shift, opening to an absurdist recitation of words by a newspaper seller, before shifting to a scene inside an airplane cockpit, to a play within a play. Space and time became tools to experiment. *Che-Pub-Kab* or *Ghoul's Stroll* (1924) is a complex play with associative wordplay and imagery connecting the 15 individual scenes which otherwise appear unrelated. Kuzmin's longest play *The Death of Nero* (1928), is a complex tale connecting the Roman Empire to Russia, critiquing

all forms of populism and savior-complexes. The play jumps between times, queers history, and its violent imagery critiques the worst of society. The shift towards darker themes, violence, and overt societal critique mark a new era for the playwright changed by the revolution. These plays situate Kuzmin as an early and central contributor to the absurdist movement called OBERIU (Association for Real Art), alongside Daniil Kharmis. Until now, none of these plays have been staged.

Of the many novellas and poems written during the 1920s, it is his poetry cycle *The Trout Breaks the Ice* (1928) that is perhaps his most celebrated (often assigned reading in graduate courses in Russian literature), an homage to his former lover Nikolai Sapunov and a treatise on queer life in the new Bolshevik reality. In 2018, the avant-garde theatre Gogol Center, in Moscow, dramatized the poem to rave reviews, receiving several Golden Mask awards for acting and directing. It also became one of the last plays of the theatre, as the artistic director, Kirill Serebrennikov, a queer activist, was arrested on false claims during the run, later resulting in him fleeing the country (alongside many involved with the theatre). In 2022, the Russian government shut down the theatre, during *I Don't Take Part in War*, a play protesting the war with Ukraine.

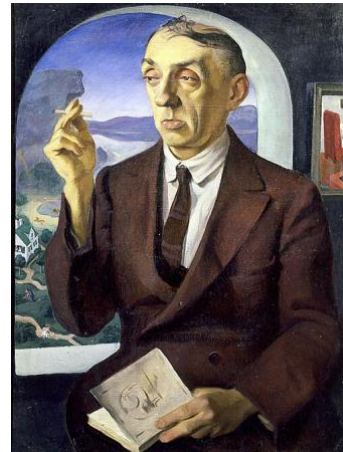


Figure 7 Portrait of M.A. Kuzmin, Nikolai Radlov, 1926

The decades after the revolution were not kind to Mikhail Kuzmin. With fewer means and little to no access to consistent income, starvation was a common threat. What little income the playwright did receive came from small translations and musicals compositions. In 1918, his partner Yuri Yurkun was arrested on suspicion of conspiracy. In 1926, Kuzmin met with German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, and while he disagreed with the medicalization of homosexuality, the meeting connected him to foreign dissidents (Hirschfeld and other sexologists became the first targets of the Nazi regime). Kuzmin became rightfully paranoid and suspected many near him to be informers and halted public readings. Later he was informed that the GPU had a “fat file” on him. In 1931, government agents raided his apartment arresting his partner, Yuri Yurkun. During the raid, they confiscated significant artworks and writings, including diaries. Yurkun was forced to become an informer and Kuzmin’s diaries were not returned. Due to his friendship with Georgii Chicherin (now the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs), Kuzmin was spared. That friendship also granted him access to an abnormal amount of butter. Kuzmin continued to read from his works to visiting friends in his communal apartment, sharing his butter, artists colloquially referring to the event as “Butters with Kuzmin”. In 1934, Stalin criminalized homosexuality. In late 1935, Kuzmin began experiencing seizures, resulting in routine hospitalization. Mikhail Kuzmin died on March 1st, 1936, due to a flu caught from poor sanitary conditions in the hospital. At the time of his death, he was all but forgotten in the literary world.

While it pains to write, in many ways, Kuzmin was fortunate. One short year later, the NKVD utilized his confiscated journals to track down many queer individuals, artists, and friends in

Leningrad and Moscow, including his partner Yuri Yurkin in what is now referred to as Stalin's Artist Purge. Trials in the length of 15 minutes condemned his friends to "ten years of confinement in remote camps without the right of correspondence." In reality, nearly all were executed by firing squad immediately, as was the case with Kuzmin's partner Yurkun and long-time colleague Meyerhold. Kuzmin's fear with his journal came true. In 1941, the Germans advanced upon Leningrad in a three year event now called the Siege of Leningrad, which contemporary historians classify as a genocide. Prior to the Germans gaining hold of the city, the NKVD burned significant archives, deemed unessential or more likely documents that might embarrass the Soviet government. Amongst that collection, was the official archive of Kuzmin alongside the confiscated artifacts. Yurkun's unofficial wife, Olga Gildebrandt Arbenina, who lived with Kuzmin and Yurkun, attempted to gather a few missed items and gave them to a friend fleeing the country. That friend never arrived at their destination, and the archive is presumed lost or destroyed. When Arbenina returned to Leningrad in the 1950s, after Stalin's death, Kuzmin's wooden grave had been destroyed, presumably for firewood. Exemplifying the unreliable nature of his archive, the year of birth on his replaced headstone does not match official records.



Figure 8 Yuri Yurkun,
1910s, Photographer
Unknown

In the 1970s and 80s a group of scholars from both the Soviet Union and Western countries, under the new policy of *glasnost* began to track down artifacts pertaining to Kuzmin. Most of what was collected were hidden by close friends, in back rooms of libraries, and/or smuggled out of the country. We can never know how much was lost, but through friends and colleagues, the Kuzmin archive now has over 50 plays, several novels and novellas, most of his poetry, a handful of journals, and other correspondences. The journals of Kuzmin remain the primary source for queer historians of Russia just prior to and immediately after the 1917 revolution, documenting a rich queer culture. While official and unofficial archives now exist, they are incomplete and do not tell full and trustworthy stories. As Simon Karlinsky wrote in the 1970s, "almost everything printed about Kuzmin in literary histories, encyclopedias, and textbooks from the 1930s to this day, is misleading, wrong, or incomplete," the statement remains mostly true 50 years later. In 2013, Putin passed the anti-propaganda law that made it more difficult to discuss homosexuality of cultural figures. The law was expanded in 2022 making discussion of homosexuality in a positive light, publicly, a criminal offense. Since that date, archives of Kuzmin have again started disappearing and archivists assisting scholars risk prosecution. Despite these barriers, Kuzmin left behind a rich collection of plays allowing us a glimpse into a queer past that history is intent upon erasing. *The Death of Nero* may provide the most poignant reminder, historical violence does not have to repeat and queer utopias can be created, but we must reject the draw of populism (i.e. heteronormativity). History has footnoted Kuzmin as a queer poet and novelist, but it was in the theatre where he spent his life. May the stage unbury those stories.

For Misha.¹



Figure 9 Replaced Grave of Mikhail Kuzmin, Reads "Mikhail Alekseevich Kuzmin, 1875-1936, Poet", Photographer Unknown, 2013

¹ Biographical information: Shionalyn, Keenan. *The Theatrical Potentiality of Mikhail Kuzmin's Queer Dramas*, Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2026. Malmstad, John and Nikolay Bogomolov, *Mikhail Kuzmin: A Life in Art*, Harvard University Press, 1999. Kuzmin, Mikhail, *Teatr: V chetirekh tomakh (v dnukh knigakh)*, A.G. Timofeev (ed.), Berkeley Slavic Specialities, 1999 (Books 1-4).

Influences On and From This Play

Theatre and Performance

Krechinsky's Wedding (1850-1854), *The Case* (1861), and *The Death of Tarelkin* (1869) / *The Trilogy of Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin* (1969) by Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin. (Influence)

Commonly called the Sukhovo-Kobylin trilogy, the plays are a thing of lore amongst theatre aficionados. Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin was involved in a murder of his mistress and over many years was jailed, released, and then rejailed. During the trial, he wrote this trilogy, which is now considered part of the international canon of theatre. It would later take the intervention of the Tsarina to permanently end the case. The plays have been staged many times, but most famously *The Death of Tarelkin* was directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold in 1922 as an experiment in what would later become his acting practice of *biomechanics* and the set-design practice of *constructivism*. The final in the trilogy contains the oft-quoted famous line, "All of Russia is under arrest." The murder mystery around Sukhovo-Kobylin became a pulp fiction subject in Leonid Grossman's 1927 book *The Crimes of Sukhovo-Kobylin*. Kuzmin draws heavily on the lore of Sukhovo-Kobylin and the third play in the trilogy for *The Death of Nero*. All three plays have been banned at various points by the censor.

The Death of Ivan the Terrible (1863) by Aleksey Tolstoy (Influence)

The trilogy by Tolstoy (second cousin of the famed Leo Tolstoy) is a historical account of the founding of Russia and the boyars written in Shakespearean history style and influenced by the accounts by Nikolai Karamzin (Karamzin is now considered a style of sentimental Romanticism). All three were banned by the censor. It was not staged until 1867, but received poor reviews. The Moscow Art Theatre opened its second season with the trilogy starring Konstantin Stanislavsky (replaced by Vsevolod Meyerhold after an illness). By all accounts, the stories are entirely made-up and have very little historical accuracy but read like murder mysteries (more like *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* than true histories)

"Speech Delivered at the Eighth Congress of the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League" (1928) by Joseph Stalin

The speech introduces Stalin's 5-Year Plan (which Stalin insisted would be finished in 4). Kuzmin heavily employs several statements from the plan in this play as a criticism of authoritarianism, out-of-touch with the realities of everyday life. While the full statements of the "completed in 4 years" would not occur until 1933, the mindset must have already been present, as Kuzmin includes it in this 1928 play. The full speech is available at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1928/05/16.htm>

As *The Death of Nero* has, until now, never been staged, its influence on the stage has been minimal. Few know of the work beyond Kuzminian scholars.

Literature

The Crimes of Sukhovo-Kobylin (1927) by Leonid Grossman (Influence)

A pulp fiction account of the murder Louise Simon-Dimanche (1850), a French woman living in Moscow and lover of Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin. In Russia, the event is referred to as the Sukhovo-Kobylin affair and has been the subject of many books, films, and crime podcasts. Officially, it remains unsolved. Sukhovo-Kobylin was twice arrested for the crime, his servants confessed and then later recanted, and after accusation his second wife Nadezhda Ivanovna Naryshshkina fled to France to avoid becoming involved. She later married the famous author Alexander Dumas (*Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*) which led conspiracists to suggest he was really Alexander Pushkin, who they claim faked his death and took on a new name in France.

The Idiot (1868) by Fyodor Dostoevsky (Influence)

The now classic novel featured a young Prince whom everyone assumes is stupid. The young Prince is presented as innately good which sets him at odds with society. Some of these traits appear in Pavel. The Ivolgins are a particularly drunk and obnoxious family within the novel, which Kuzmin alludes to with the family of the same name.

The Twelve Caesars (121 CE) by Suetonius (Influence)

The original historian of the rulers of Rome up until the time of the author. Suetonius portrays Nero as especially cruel and mocks his homosexuality, artistic proclivities, and other effeminate traits. Many of the historical portrayals draw straight from *The Twelve Caesars*, although Kuzmin instead extols the sexuality and artistry of Nero as the saving traits. Many historians now question Suetonius' account, finding his account of Nero filled with negative bias. Nero was certainly a cruel authoritarian ruler, but Suetonius exaggerates the scale in many cases and misrepresents the causes.

Goodbye, My Friend, Goodbye (1925) by Sergei Yesenin (Influence)

A poem written by the poet's own blood, just prior to his suicide. The poem has been interpreted many ways, but is likely a letter to his lover Nikolai Klyuev. Prior poems by Yesenin were considerably Romantic, utopic, and filled with nature. This poem is mundane. The full text can be seen here: <https://allpoetry.com/-Goodbye,-my-friend,-goodbye->

To Sergei Yesenin (1925) by Vladimir Mayakovsky (Influence)

The poem was written for Yesenin's funeral as tribute to the poet. In contrast to Yesenin's poem, Mayakovsky's is lengthy and overly filled with imagery. While Kuzmin doesn't comment on it directly, he shows some disdain for Mayakovsky's words as if to say, "You don't get to decide what our deaths and our lives mean, you are not one of us." The full text can be seen here: <https://allpoetry.com/To-Sergei-Esenin>

Declaration of Emotionalism (1924) by Mikhail Kuzmin, Anna Radlova, Sergei Radlov, and Yuri Yurkun. (Co-Influence)

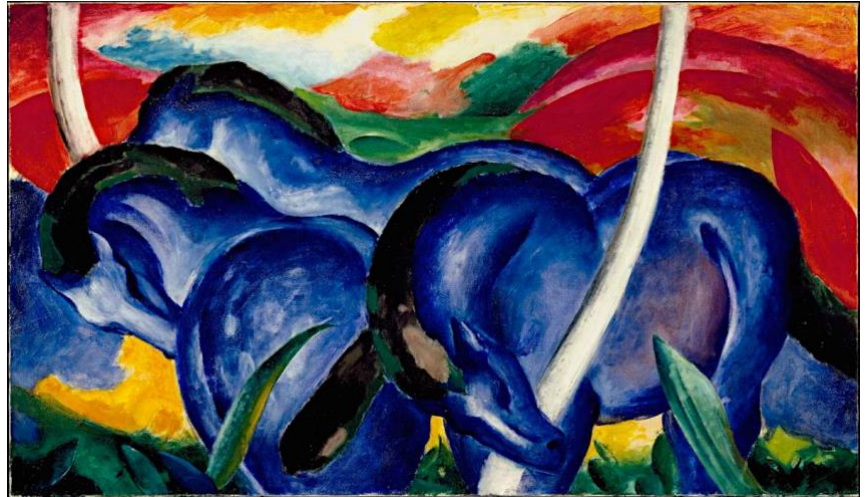
Kuzmin's final artistic manifesto for Emotionalism introduces an art as emancipatory, free from canons and strict adherence to history as written, focused on movement, with the entire intent to transfer emotion from the artist. The ideas are founded on Leo Tolstoy's "What is Art?" written a half-century earlier, but extend to reject realism and promote artistry (which Tolstoy had a general disdain for). The full text is in the final section of this packet.

Master and Margarita (1967) by Mikhail Bulgakov. (Influenced)

Bulgakov's book is now considered a classic of Russian literature and has been turned into several successful films and TV series in Russia, Europe, and the United States. While the novel is an artistic success and Bulgakov is owed considerable credit for his achievement, most entirely ignore the work on which this book was based. In 1929, Bulgakov was in attendance for Kuzmin's second public reading of the play. Bulgakov then spent the 1930s writing *Master and Margarita*, which due to content, was not published until the 1960s. Anecdotes suggest that the second known script of *The Death of Nero*, which is now held in an unrelated private collection, was held by Bulgakov until his death (1940) after which it disappeared for years before ending up in the Orlov collection. The truthfulness of that account cannot be verified but the novel itself draws considerable comparisons. Both the novel and Kuzmin's play share a dual-temporality structure (1st Century Nero and Contemporary Playwright Pavel – surrogate for Kuzmin / 1st Century Pontius Pilot and Master – surrogate for Bulgakov). Both literary works also feature a woman who seems to exist outside of time, acquaints herself with the worst of society, and by the ends forgives the author freeing him from his torture (Marianna / Margarita) – in my scholarship on Kuzmin I've labelled this trope the "creative queer" as it is common in Kuzmin plays after 1911. Both feature animals as anthropomorphic creatures who portend the future (Monkey / Cat / Parrot / Eagle). The novel features a Professor Kuzmin who has too many colorful scarves and is a bit eccentric (scarves = vests). In both, time collapses, and anti-realism reveals the societal rejection and critique. Some scholars have acknowledged these connections such as Marie Louise-Bott, Judith Kalb, Lada Panova, and myself: however, most scholars, historically, rejected such an idea. Recently, supporting this claim has become less alienating in Western countries thanks to the work by Panova. Note, that all scholars acknowledging the connection are either women or queer. In cultural studies, that pattern is common for authors and playwrights associated with canonized figures but not of the most privileged class. Regardless, the two works share considerably and speak the depth of expression in the post-revolutionary world that could not be made public at the time. While Bulgakov's work is now celebrated, I mark that Bulgakov is continuing a practice of Kuzmin's which should amplify the importance of both works.

Visual Art

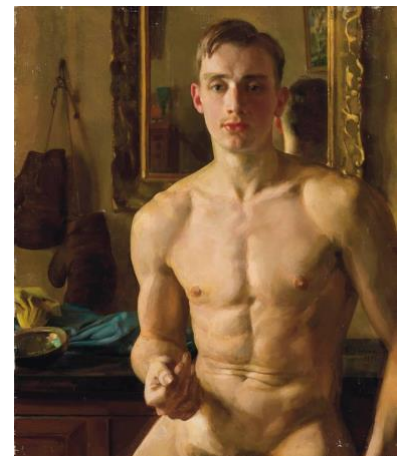
German Expressionism (Influence): In the post-revolutionary years, Kuzmin was obsessed with German Expressionism and its adaptation into film. While he does not cite particular artists for this play, I've included a few visual references from *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (Kuzmin's favorite film), *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, paintings by Kirschner, and Marc. Kuzmin believed expressionism to be the only original art at this time.

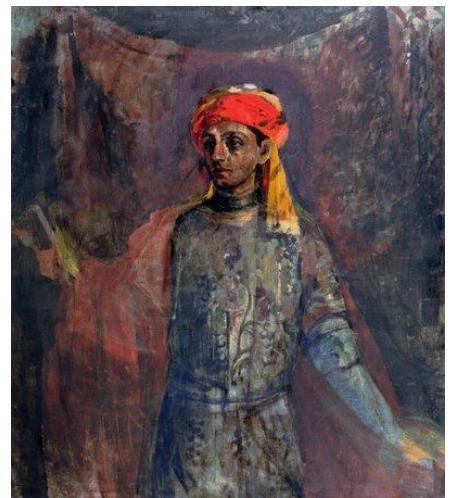


Russian Symbolism (Influence): While Kuzmin never formally joined the Russian symbolists he was deeply connected to the artists through his involvement with the World of Art salon. Symbolism meant to focus on the divine, often the divine feminine. It was a mix of spiritualism and modernist aesthetics. While Mikhail Vrubel was not in Kuzmin's inner circle, his art style has become ubiquitous with the movement. See two samples below.



The World of Art / The Decadents (Co-Influencers): The World of Art movement (*Mir Iskusstvo*) was a major influence on Kuzmin's life. Organized initially by Sergei Diaghilev (of the famed Ballet Russes), Kuzmin was brought in during the later years. The styles, sometimes classified as symbolist, others decadent, are rather unique to this group. The group experimented with gender and sexuality, and such can be seen in their art, which has drawn comparisons to The Decadents and the salons of Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley. Most artists here were at one point or another, a lover of Kuzmin. Artists include Konstantin Somov, Sergei Sudeikin, and Nikolai Sapunov.





Music

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (Influence): Kuzmin was admitted into the St. Petersburg Music Conservatory under the mentorship of the famed composer Rimsky-Korsakov. While Kuzmin did not graduate, his musical tastes and styles are influenced by his time there. The music is fast paced and an example of early Russian modernist compositions. Sample of his music can be heard:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLO09Th4dLYVIES2a0G9lEdpzDcT8KN9iH>

Richard Wagner (Influence): Kuzmin considered Wagner one of the best composers. The romantic and intense emotions of the work were a great influence on the playwright. Samples of Wagner's music can be heard:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLO09Th4dLYVlOoVSMlOn5iuiNYXvL2ubp>

Hector Berlioz (Influence): Another romantic composer, Kuzmin drew heavily on the emotional themes of this composer. Samples of Berlioz' music can be heard:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAdybX2aeL4QkRE8p_tY8U3A4ZRYHG1PF

Jacques Offenbach (Influence): Primarily a composer of operettas. Kuzmin believed that Offenbach was one of the greatest influences of the 19th century and something everyone needed a little bit of. Samples of Offenbach's sounds can be heard:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rffV5d-OWM4> and

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVsmINjouN8>

Mikhail Kuzmin (the playwright was also a composer!): Included are some samples of the music Kuzmin composed. His primary form of income during the post-revolutionary years was composing music. Songs can be heard:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7T3e18sMQo&list=OLAK5uy_niPvyQsLuE-kx-9wL-tmQpdOPUQdnZ66A and <https://open.spotify.com/artist/1oCVSORWv3tTyOHGjNH44>

Relevant Productions

Prior Productions

There are no known productions of *The Death of Nero*. This production, with Three Penny Theatre, is set to be the world premiere of the play. The playwright intended to produce the play within his lifetime, but due to the Soviet reality, the risk in producing was too high. The playwright conducted two public readings of the play in 1928 and 1929.

Script Versions

The script was initially considered lost to time, only an outline of the play held in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, during the *Glasnost* period in Soviet Russia, two scripts were discovered, held by friends of the playwright. One is currently held by the Anna Akhmatova Museum in St. Petersburg and the second remains in the private Orlov collection (which some have suggested was originally part of Bulgakov's private collection). It is unclear whether either is an original, however, handwritten edits in the version in the Anna Akhmatova Museum suggests the playwright reviewed it at some point. The idea for the play began in 1924, while witnessing Lenin's funeral, however, the first script was not completed until 1928 and revised in 1929. The majority of the writing must have occurred in 1928 as there are significant references throughout the play to events that occurred in that year. The play was never published during the playwright's lifetime. The first recorded publication was in 1977, in Russian, alongside a collection of poems written by Kuzmin. In 1999, archivist A.G. Timofeev published an improved version, in Russian, in a collection of all the known plays by the playwright. An English translation was published in 2005 by Michael Green. In 2025, Lada Panova, one of the leading scholars of Kuzmin, published the script, in Russian, with new materials found in various archives. The translation we are using in this production, is a new 2026 translation conducted by the dramaturg Keenan Shionalyn, based on the 2025 Russian version, with permission from Lada Panova. Out of an abundance of caution and by request, the names of some individuals involved have not been included, but all send well wishes on a successful production.

Useful Productions for Reference

Title: *The Death of Tarelkin* by Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin

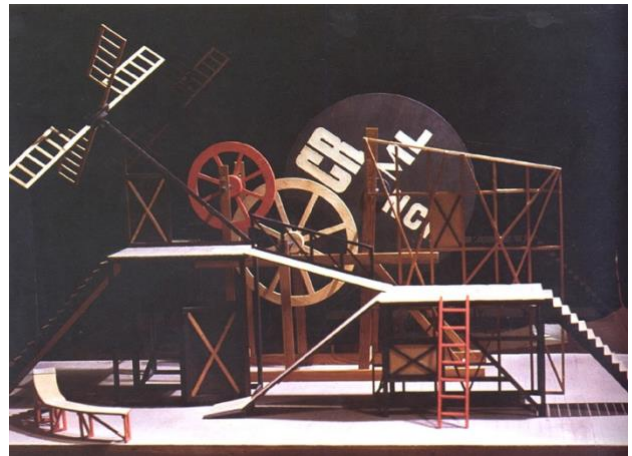
Direction: Vsevolod Meyerhold

Designer: Varvara Stepanova

Premiere: November 24, 1922

Location: RSFSR (State Higher Director Workshops), Moscow

Significance: *The Death of Tarelkin* is known in theatre history as one of the major experiments by Vsevolod Meyerhold into constructivism in both directing and design. During the early Soviet years, constructivism was part of the larger movement of futurism, which utilized mechanics and machines to envision a production oriented communist future. It was not until the rise of Stalin in the 1930s that Socialist Realism became the required style under the guidance of Stanislavsky. Meyerhold's set was made to feel like a machine and actor training followed the *biomechanics* system that Meyerhold is now associated with. The playwright is the same as the one involved in the murder case that inspired *The Death of Nero* and Meyerhold was a long-time collaborator of Mikhail Kuzmin, having started two theatre companies together. Varvara implemented several acting instruments on stage (what we now call stage blocks), which the film director Eisenstein altered to "attractions", now a staple of non-realistic theatre and film.



Title: *The Venetian Madcaps* by Mikhail Kuzmin

Direction: Petr Sharov and Vasily Nosov

Designer: Sergei Sudeikin

Premiere: February 23, 1914

Location: Nosov Mansion in Moscow

Significance: One of the most lavish productions created in pre-revolutionary Russia. Due to the content of the play, the production was not open to the public. It was staged inside the newly completed Nosov Mansion, noted for its art nouveau architecture. The play is a hallmark of Kuzminian commedia dell'arte and circus performance. The designs for the production were presented in a commemorative booklet and now housed in several Russian museums. While not a public performance, it is perhaps the hallmark of success for Kuzmin, the final major production before the revolution.



Title: *Revizor* by Nikolai Gogol / *Revisor* by Jonathon Young, Kidd Pivot, 3 Minutes West, and BBC

Direction: Crystal Pite

Designer: Jay Gower Taylor, Nancy Bryant, and Tom Visser

Premiere: February 20, 2019

Location: Sadler's Wells, London, UK

Significance: The production captures one of the main influences for this play, Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector*. Of particular note, the production emphasizes the anti-realism of the script with an emphasis on movement and gesture. Their physical oriented production fits what Kuzmin called a "mime ballet", a dance and movement oriented production. The intertextual, asynchronous, and absurdist portrayal matches that of Kuzmin while simultaneously dealing with complex and nuanced topics. The two productions share much and as this is a contemporary piece with a filmed version available, can be a great source of inspiration for how to approach anti-realism in a theatrical world that is still stuck on Stanislavsky.

Link (Access may vary):

<https://marquee.tv/videos/kiddpivot-revisor> OR

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=heaoQPpMAsg> OR

https://vk.com/video-131026356_456263965



Title: *Forel Razbivaet Led (The Trout Breaks Through the Ice)* – Adapted from the poem by Mikhail Kuzmin

Direction: Vladimir Nastavshev

Premiere: 2017 and 2020

Location: Gogol Centre, Moscow

Significance: The 2017 production (presented digitally in 2020) was the last play at the Gogol Centre (the premiere avant-garde theatre in Russia) before queer activist and Artistic Director Kirill Serebrennikov was arrested on false accusations of fraud. Upon his release, he fled the country and the theatre has since been shut down for protesting the war with Ukraine. This production is an homage to Kuzmin. It takes Kuzmin's final poetry cycle (*The Trouts Breaks Through the Ice*) to explore Russian queerness in the 1920s. The poetry cycle goes through the lifecycle of queerness as Kuzmin experienced with a plea that his former lover Nikolai Sapunov, who drowned, might one day emerge from the ice. The metaphor of death and reemergence is shared in *The Death of Nero*, both written at roughly the same time. Gogol Centre's production captures the aesthetic of St. Petersburg (Petrograd then Leningrad) in the 1920s, which is much less "Russian" as American films might portray and much more Parisian or Berlinian.



Title: *The Death of Stalin* (Film) by Armando Iannucci, David Schneider, Ian Martin, and Peter fellows based on the French visual novel *La Mort de Staline* by Thierry Robin and Fabien Nury

Direction: Armando Iannucci

Premiere: 2017

Location: US and Worldwide

Significance: This dark satirical comedy portrays the aftereffects of Stalin dying and inadequacies of the bureaucracy and “yes-men” surrounding the leader. At its core, the film is a critique of authoritarianism and ridiculousness of those around authoritarian rulers. The various political figures around Stalin all posture themselves to take over while the country appears forgotten. It is a tale of backstabbing and government incompetence. It received rave reviews in Western countries for its blend of horror and humor and timeliness in our age of rising authoritarian populism. It draws comparison to our production in its absurdism and lack of realism with historical references. The film was universally despised by Russian reviewers and the Russian government revoked its screening license. The film is now banned in Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Belarus.



Character Descriptions

The play is split into two realities, the contemporary real world of Pavel which exists in the year 1919 in Rome and a flashback to 1914 in Saratov. The other world is Rome during Nero's lifetime, however, that reality is not real, but a play-within-a-play. In each of the two realities there are roughly twelve named characters, three primary actors and the remaining supporting. In addition, interlocutors disrupt and move between realities, each portending a future.

The Real World (1919/14)

Pavel
Marie
Friedrich
Zhilinsky
Ivolgina
Sonia
Margarita
Pompeo
Redentor
Luigi
Ulysses
Cesare
Carlo
Vittorio

Other / Unnamed

Voices (Pavel)
Maid (Nero)
Barber (Nero)
Lizzie (Pavel)
Young Man (Pavel)
Guard (Nero)
Carlo (Pavel)
Vittorio (Pavel)
1st Man (Pavel)
Englishman (Pavel)
Parrot (Pavel)
Police (Pavel)
1st Servant (Nero)
2nd Servant (Nero)
3rd Servant (Nero)
4th Servant (Nero)
Chief of the Guards (Nero)
Voices (Nero)
1st Citizen (Nero)
2nd Citizen (Nero)
3rd Citizen (Nero)
Removed Man (Nero)
Herald (Nero)
Doctor (Nero)
Monkey (Nero)
Senators (Nero)
Courtier (Nero)
Architect (Nero)
Treasurer (Nero)
Minister (Nero)
African (Nero)
Enslaved Servant (Nero)

Older Woman (Pavel)
Old Man (Nero)
Women (Nero)
Policeman (Nero)
Owner (Nero)
Colonel (Pavel)
Wet Nurse (Nero)
1st Madman (Pavel)
2nd Madman (Pavel)
3rd Madman (Pavel)
Old Man (Pavel)
1st Passerby (Nero)
2nd Passerby (Nero)
Companion (Nero)
Centurion (Nero)
Doctor (Pavel)
1st Woman (Nero)
2nd Woman (Nero)

Nero's Play World (first century CE)

Nero
Poppaea
Sporus
Acte
Phaon
Pertinax
Servilius
Lepida
Pudentilla
Sidonia
Claudius (voice)
Seneca

The Liminal Space

Tyche / Girl
Fedya

The Real World

Pavel (Pavel Andreevich Lukin / Pasha) is a thirty-two/thirty-three year old man from Saratov, Russia. His wealthy father abandoned him as a child to start a new family; he was raised by his abusive mother and stepsister. They were often starving as his father did not send them money. After his mother died, possibly by suicide, he was sent to live with the Ivolgins where he began his career as a playwright. Pavel was likely an adult when this occurred. Pavel's character is ambitious, insecure, and a dandy. He is presumed bisexual as he claims to be in love with Marie, or homosexual in a lavender marriage. Several characters are alluded to be sexually involved with Pavel such as Friedrich and other unnamed characters. His best friend is Nikifor Zhilinsky, who is not mentioned as a lover, but equal participant in cruising activities. Pavel is a blend of autobiography by the playwright and homage to the Russian playwright Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin. The surname Lukin is likely a reference to the Bolshevik historian Nikolai Lukin, whom Kuzmin was acquainted through the journal *Pravda*.

Marie (Maria Petrovna Rubleva / Masha) is also from Saratov, Russia and the daughter of a wealthy government official, equivalent to a local governor. She is alluded to be, but never clarified, to be older than Pavel. She is always portrayed as heterosexual although her marriage to Pavel is for money not love. She is at times a femme-fatale, a stand-in for the heteronormative expectations that the playwright sees as preventing a queer future. She is a blend of Louise Simon-Demanche (lover of Sukhovo-Kobylin) and many of the lovers involved in bisexual triangles with Kuzmin's partners such as Olga Glebova (Sudeikina) and Olga Hildebrandt Arbenina (Yurkuna). She is one of the "three Marys", the symbolic comparison of Mary Magdalene.

Friedrich (Baron Friedrich von Steinbach / Fritz) is from Selesia in Central Europe (the border area of Poland, Czech Republic, and Germany). He is presumed to be younger than Pavel, but never clarified. He learned of Pavel through Nikifor Zhilinsky, a homage to a queer network that resembles that of Kuzmin's circle. He draws comparison to the British mentor Stroop from the playwright's debut novel *Wings* and several real life individuals who sought out Kuzmin due to his queer writings. Friedrich's sexuality is unclear, at the least he is sexually interested in Pavel, but his attraction to Marie is not definitive. He models a similar trope of a German Baron bisexual love triangle as seen in *Cabaret*.

Zhilinsky (Nikifor Ivanovich Zhilinsky / Nika) is a close childhood friend of Pavel. The two are coded as queer, but not lovers. Zhilinsky is a semi-biographical portrayal of Kuzmin's close childhood friend Georgii Chicherin, who was a Russian and Soviet bureaucrat who followed Lenin and Trotsky as the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. Chicherin alluded to his sexuality in his letters to Kuzmin, but did not live openly nor marry. Like Chicherin to Kuzmin, Zhilinsky acts as Pavel's guide and social coordinator, often preventing him from making mistakes while allowing him a confidant for his sexuality. Zhilinsky shows interest in Sonia suggesting he may be bisexual.

Ivolgina (Elizaveta Nikolaevna Ivolgina / Liza) is the matriarch of the Ivolgin estate where Pavel resides in Saratov. She is presumed older, but her age is never clarified. She appears overbearing at times, a detached motherly figure. Initially, she is negative towards Pavel, shifting as he comes into an inheritance. She is overprotective of her daughter Sonia.

Sonia (Sophia Platonovna Ivolgina / Sonia) is the daughter of Ivolgina and implied to be approaching the age of marriage, making her a young teenager of 16 or 17. She is a romantic and trying to catch the eye of Nikifor Zhilinsky, who appears interested.

Pompeo (Crooked Pompeo) is a stock villainous character, or the queer villain. He is referred to as crooked Pompeo, which in a literal translation is closer to “Not-Straight” Pompeo. He communicates that he is aware of Pavel’s sexuality and invites him into their community. He is a criminal who manipulates Pavel into causing an uprising in order to loot a hotel.

Redentor is marked as old, but appears to be the experienced strategist amongst the criminal group.

Luigi is the paranoid member of the criminal group.

Ulysses is the practically minded member of the criminal group.

Cesare is the youthful teenager, impulsive, and crass member of the criminal group.

Carlo is listed as an adult in the criminal group but has no lines or actions.

Vittorio is listed as a teenager in the criminal group but has no lines or actions.

Nero’s Play World

Nero (Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus / Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus) is a fictionally extended portrayal of the Roman Emperor who lived in 37-68 CE and ruled from 54 CE to 68 CE. The play begins in his youth and continues until his death. The play specifically marks his red hair. The accounts of Nero are portrayed as relatively consistent with the violent and art obsessed ruler in the historical account by Suetonius. Unlike the historical account, however, Kuzmin particularly emphasizes the anti-Christ comparison as a critique of Stalin, Lenin, and other authoritarian rulers. The one redeeming quality of Nero is his homosexual relationships, which are the few times he is portrayed as kind and human. Typically, Kuzmin portrays art as a positive trait, but Nero is never allowed to achieve that status due to his selfishness, which Kuzmin saw as incompatible with art. Nero had multiple spouses, both men and women.

Poppaea (Poppaea Sabina), often referred to in her life as Ollia, as the second wife of Nero and Roman Empress. Her prior husband Otho would later become Emperor as well. She abandoned her

original name after her father was disgraced, carrying forward her mother's name (Poppaea). Suetonius portrays her as a political opportunist, like Nero's mother. Her first son was drowned by Nero to prevent a usurping of the throne. The historical accounts of her death disagree, but Suetonius states she was pregnant and fighting over Nero's frequent attendance at chariot races to gamble. Nero kicked her abdomen killing both her and the baby, other writers claim Nero poisoned her. Contemporary historians believe neither story, acknowledging the severe bias of Roman historians against Nero. She likely died due to complications as a result of a miscarriage.

Sporus (real name unknown) was either an enslaved individual freed by Nero or the son of a man freed by Nero. Sporus was documented as being attractive and at some point castrated to maintain his youthful looks, it is unclear if this was before or after he met Nero. Multiple accounts note his similarity in looks to Poppaea. After Poppaea's death and a short marriage to another woman, Nero married Sporus. Unlike his prior marriage to a man named Pythagoras, who was listed as husband, Sporus was always referred to as Nero's wife. Sporus donned the clothing of the Empress and was paraded in public as a woman until the Emperor's death. The root of his name is debated, some arguing it refers to his inability to have a child giving him the moniker of "seed" or "semen" while others suggest it stems from the Latin word for spurious, or illegitimate. Historians debate the consent toward marriage, one account notes that Sporus gifted Nero a ring depicting the rape and forced marriage of Proserpina, which Nero considered a bad omen.

Acte (Claudia Acte) was a freedwoman and mistress of Emperor Nero. She was originally enslaved by Nero's uncle after his conquering of Asia Minor. Nero expressed his desire to marry her, but was discouraged by his mother and several other officials. Historians mark her as devoted to Nero, even after his death, warning him of several attempts at assassination and how to avoid further political upheaval. She is depicted as a secret Christian in several pieces of literature, including this play and Alexander Dumas' novel *Acte*, drawing connections to the Sukhovo-Kobylin murder (Sukhovo-Kobylin's wife became the lover of Alexander Dumas after the murder). Whether or not she was Christian is unknown, but several of her enslaved servants were Christians making it possible one or the other converted each other, however, it remains speculative.

Phaon (real name unknown) was a freedman of Nero, coming from his childhood household at the Domitia Lepida manor. He was a close confidant of Nero and made Secretary Treasurer for a short while. He is known to have housed the fleeing Nero in his villa.

Pertinax (unknown name) is a character invented by Kuzmin. Suetonius' history mentions a dancemaster and barber as Nero's tutor, names are omitted. Within Nero's World, Pertinax is a freedman, who is tutoring Nero in his youth. He is trained in dance, but alludes to his prior sex work. He is charged with teaching Nero to read because he is literate, but is not a scholar. The character may be an ahistorical allusion to Publius Helvius Pertinax, the son of an enslaved man who became Emperor in 161 CE, in the "Year of the Five Emperors". He ruled for half a year and brought financial stability to Rome by restoring discipline within the armed services which angered

the military leading to his assassination. Some historians argue that if his policies had lasted, the ruin of Rome may have been avoided, his successor won the Emperorship in an auction.

Servilius (unknown name) is a character invented by Kuzmin. Within Nero's World, Servilius is another older noble boy with whom Nero shares his first sexual experience. The surname of Servili is associated with many high ranking officials in Rome, regional governors comparable to the family of Marie in Pavel's present. Despite the status, Nero would still outrank him, meaning Nero, the younger, holds the power in the relationship.

Lepida (Domitia Lepida) was a Roman aristocrat and Nero's aunt (Father's sister). After Nero's mother was involved in several scandals surrounding the death of Emperor Caligula and attempts to murder the Emperor Claudius, he was sent to live with Lepida to avoid a claim to the throne. During this time, Nero was removed from the line of secession, but later reinstated just prior to his Uncle's death. Kuzmin portrays Lepida as relatively destitute, but historians portray her as extraordinarily wealthy. She is possibly the representation of his family, the noble poor.

Pudentilla (unknown name) is a character invented by Kuzmin. Within Nero's World, she is a maid within the house of Lepida. She is the crasser of the group of women and portrayed as the most Russian. She is likely inspired by the portrayal of a North African woman named Pudentilla in Apuleius *Apologia*. The text centers around Pudentilla, her life, and what will become of her inheritance. Interestingly, at no point in the source text does Pudentilla herself ever speak. Several feminist dramatizations have given her voice since, as a marker of women whose fate lies entirely in the hands of men who decide to speak for her.

Sidonia (unknown name) is an invention by Kuzmin. Within Nero's World, she is a maid within the house of Lepida. Her lines all refer back to Lepida and those in Lepida's life.

Claudius (Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus) was the Emperor preceding Nero. Claudius was the uncle of Emperor Caligula and after the assassination took the throne. Agrippina the Younger (Nero's mother), the sister of Caligula, became Claudius' fourth wife, a marriage between uncle and niece. Agrippina convinced Claudius to adopt Nero, reinserting him into the line of secession. In real life, he had a limp and stammer. Some historians suggest he was murdered by Nero's mother while others suggest he died due to old age and complications from his illness. Within Nero's World, he is already dead when we meet him and he speaks from the grave, eloquent and praising of Nero, a strong contrast to the reality of their relationship.

Seneca (Lucius Annaeus Seneca the Younger) was a stoic philosopher and dramatist who tutored Nero and an advisor throughout his rule. After a falling out with Nero in his final years, Nero forced Seneca to commit suicide. Within theatre history, Seneca is known for his tragedies and rewriting of Greek plays such as *Phaedra* and *The Trojan Women*. Within Nero's World, Seneca does not speak.

The Liminal Space

Margarita (Marianna) is provided no backstory. She appears to understand the dual realities existing but there to guide Pavel away from errors that may lead to his downfall. She is one of the “three Marys”, possibly the symbolic comparison of Mary Salome, the follower, midwife, and recognizer of Christ who is associated with peace. Mary Salome has been removed from some versions of the New Testament, but is a common reference in the Gnostic bibles and a figure in feminist writings about Christ. The criminal group of Pompeo seem to know her, but we learn no specifics and she actively works against them. She is in many ways the same Margarita as in Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita*. Kuzmin originally named the character Marianna, however, later scholarship revealed this play to be a direct influence on Bulgakov’s book and the character comparison between Margarita and Marianna are strong, existing through times and playing the role of the one who guides the author (playwright) into forgiveness and salvation. Her character has been renamed to highlight the theatrical legacy of the playwright and while the play took over a hundred years to be staged, the ideas were canonized into a Russian classic, the renaming makes that connection clear.

Tyche (Girl) is a young girl embodying the Greek goddess of fate and fortune. She is the equivalent of the Roman goddess Fortuna. She is associated with Parthia (Northern Iran); the land Nero conquers. In mythology, she is an oceanid, daughter of Oceanus and Tethys. Various cults along the Mediterranean Sea are dedicated to Tyche as the ruler of urban fortunes and changing politics. She is typified as fickle. In Greek theatre, she is used by Euripides as a dramatic device to shift the path of storytelling. In Nero’s World, she is a living character, a plebian, likely employed in sex work. A doll is made after her, which when lost, leads to Nero’s death. She is the only character to transition between both worlds definitely. She is one of the “three Marys” of the play, the mythology of Tyche was absorbed into the Christian portrayal of Mary, mother of Jesus. Kuzmin’s portrayal, however, prevents her from rebirthing a new Nero through Margarita (Mary Salome) usurping the Christian portrayal.

Fedya (Fyodor Andreevich *Kobyła*) is the younger half-brother of Pavel. Within the world of the play, Fedya’s surname is never established. He would not have taken Lukin, as he was not raised by his father. Fyodor Andreevich, however, is a name well known in Russia. Fyodor Andreevich Koshka is the progenitor of the Romanov family, his descendant Anastasia Romanovna Zakharina-Yurieva would marry Ivan IV (Ivan the Terrible) establishing the Romanov dynasty. Koshka, however, is a diminutive, literally meaning cat. Fyodor Andreevich’s real surname was Kobyla, as Kuzmin based the play upon the Sukhovo-Kobylin case, the connection becomes stronger. The historical Fyodor Andreevich was named Koshka as he was the younger brother and considered extraordinarily beautiful, the same descriptions Kuzmin uses to describe Fedya. The allusion is made, the brother is meant to symbolize a restarting of Russia, therefore society. The two brothers then represent the two Russias, Imperial and Bolshevik. However, when combined, they continue a long practice in Russia and Europe of Aesopian coding, the two brothers are in reality lovers, another example of Voltaire’s *voix du sang* or voice of blood, where reunited brothers meet as a coded symbol for homoeroticism. Within the play, Fedya is unseen and has no lines, but by joining

with Pavel, history is usurped and pleasure reigns over violence, history is queered and rewritten. By rejecting violence and joining with his brother, utopia emerges, far from the fascism of Italy and the communism of Soviet Russia, in the peaceful pastorals of Switzerland.

Notes on Unnamed / Ancillary Characters:

All other characters in the play are unnamed, and little is developed in their character. It is likely intended by the playwright for these characters to be entirely replaceable and lacking identity. The characters then are meant to be stock characters, tropes with flat personalities. Such amplifies the anti-realism approach of the play and emphasizes the characters of the primary twelve in each reality. It is highly likely that Kuzmin intended considerable double castings (if not triple).

There is only one character beyond the core given a name, and that is Lizzie. I have yet to locate the reason for the name Lizzie, beyond being a particularly modern American sounding name, the perfume she references in her lines, Emeraude, was particularly popular in the Americas.

Pronunciation Guide

General Guide to Russian and Latin

Guide to Using Russian Words and Names:

- Russian is a phonetic language, meaning every letter is spoken and each syllable is pronounced as it is written. Because every letter is pronounced, it makes syllables more evenly spaced and audible, as such Russians speak much more quickly than English speakers. Many English speaking actors try to slow down Russian, go the opposite direction after you've practiced the word. To aid in pronunciation, try speaking with a wide smile, the widened cheek muscles make many of the syllables more natural to pronounce.
- Accents change the strength of the vowel but are rarely written and must be memorized. It will be right more than wrong if you place the accent on the third syllable. Accented vowels are intense and the further away from the accent the softer the vowel. (i.e. an accented O is a harsh *oh* with a full circled mouth, while an O three syllables away from the accent will sound more like an *ah*). When unsure which syllable to intensify, check Wiktionary for reference, that is how most language learners memorize if they haven't heard the word spoken.
- When you see English translations with the letter E (e) it is pronounced *yeh* (Ekaterina sounds like Yekaterina). The letter Y (y) does not exist in English and is approximately pronounced *uyh* (Byt' sounds like Buyht or Boo-eet spoken very quickly and gutturally). Those sounds are easy to native Russian speakers but can cause difficulty to native English speakers. You will likely have to drop a half syllable when you see those letters to make it sound right (it will feel like you are speeding up two syllables until you get used to it). I've italicized when that might occur in my pronunciation guide below.
- There is no hard G in Russian, it is always pronounced soft as is goat.
- The letters H, W, and J do not exist as used in English and so any words using those letters will be pronounced differently. H is replaced with a soft G, while W is replaced with a V sound — Hawaii sounds like Guh-vai-ee. J is usually replaced with a combination of letters to approximate as d-zhe (дж) which makes the name John sound more like the word Dijon.
- Many letters become palatalized in Russian (stick your tongue to the top of your mouth and try to pronounce a letter and you'll hear the palatalized sound). That occurs at the end of the word in a few cases, when paired with specific consonant clusters, or when the soft-sign ь is used (shown in English with a *^*). While there are many rules to memorize there are two that are the most common and should be learned:
 - When a G sound ends a word, it is palatalized to a K sound. This is why Russian speakers pronounce the English word “walking” as wah-kink.
 - When a V sound ends a word, it is palatalized to an F sound. This is most often heard in names. (Kristov is pronounced Kree-stohf).
- There are a few letters unique to Russian that English speakers do not have:
 - X is approximated in English as kh while it is closer to an h sound voiced from the back of your throat (i.e. Chekhov sounds closer Chye-hof in Russian).
 - Ж is approximated as zhe but is perhaps closer to the s in pleasure.
 - Ъ is a vowel approximated as y but closer to ooo-eee spoken quickly in disgust.

Guide to Using Latin Words and Name:

- The first note is that Nero would have spoken classical Latin, not ecclesiastical Latin that most people are familiar with today. Classical Latin is a Proto-Indo-European language, meaning that while it has some visual similarity to contemporary languages, it will sound very different. Russian is also a Proto-Indo-European language but belongs to the Slavic family while Latin is proto-Italic (it becomes the Romance languages eventually). Classical Latin will sound more similar to Russian or Greek than Italian.
- General Pronunciation Guide: English is partially built upon the proto-Indo-European standards so some sounds and letters will be similar. I've noted the differences.
 - Vowels:
 - Identical to English except A never makes the a sound as in *cat* or *Kate*, but instead is always ah or uh
 - Combined vowels ae create a hard *i* sound, oe creates an *oi* sound, au creates an *ow* sound.
 - Consonants: mostly identical to English except:
 - C is always a hard K (not the ch in Ecclesiastical Latin)
 - G is always soft like goat
 - I as a consonant acts the consonant Y
 - V is always pronounced as a W.
 - Ph is pronounced closer to P with a trailing h, not an F.
 - Accent:
 - On two syllables words it is always on the first syllable
 - If more than two syllables then it goes on the second to last syllable if the vowel is long or the third to last if it is short
- As a general rule, keep each syllable of similar length and speed and if you start sounding Italian double check your Cs, Gs, and Vs.

Characters and Personages:

A complete audio guide for all name and places can be found at:

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1owk871AFQH3fDwMaTAnpTLFFBsBqv7G ?usp=drive
link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1owk871AFQH3fDwMaTAnpTLFFBsBqv7G?usp=drive_link)

Pavel's World:

Pavel Andreevich Lukin (Pah-vul Ahn-*drai-yuh*-vihtch Loo-keen) / Pasha (Pah-shuh)

Maria Petrovna Rubleva (Mah-ree-ah Peh-troh-v-nuh Roo-*blee-yeh*-vuh) / Masha (Mah-shuh)

Baron Freidrich von Steinbach (Bair-rohn Free-drihkh vahn Stine-bakh) / Fritz (Freetz)

Nikifor Ivanovich Zhilinsky (Nih-khih-fohr Ih-vahn-oh-vihtch Zhih-lihn-skee) / Nika (Nee-kuh)
[The zh is like the s in pleasure]

Elizaveta Nikolaevna Ivolgina (Ih-lee-zuh-*vee-yet*-uh Nih-koh-lie-yev-nuh Ih-vohl-gihn-uh) / Liza
(Lee-zuh) [Note: there is no hard “g” in Russian, always soft as in goat]

Sophia Platonovna Ivolgina (Soh-fee-yuh Plah-tuh-nohv-nuh Ih-vollh-gihn-uh) / Sonia (Sohn-*ee-yuh*)
[Note: there is no hard “g” in Russian, always soft as in goat]

Margarita (Mar-guh-ree-tuh)

Pompeo (Pomh-peh-yo)

Redentor (Reh-den-torh)

Luigi (Loo-ee-gee / Liu-ee-gee)

Ulysses (Oo-lihs-sees / Iu-lihs-sees)

Cesare (Sehy-zar-eh)

Carlo (Car-loh)

Vittorio (Veet-tohr-ee-oh)

Nero's World:

Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus / Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus

(Loo-kee-uhs Doh-mee-tee-uhs Ah-hehn-oh-bar-boos) / (Nehr-roh Clow-dee-yuhs Kai-zehr Aoo-goo-stoos Gehr-mahn-ee-coos)

Nerochnik (Nehr-ohch-neck)

[The American pronunciation of Nee-roh is incorrect but may be chosen for audience understandability. Like Russian, Latin does not utilize the hard g as we do in English]

Poppaea Sabina (Pohp-pie-yuh Sah-bee-nuh)

Sporus (Sporh-oos)

Claudia Acte (Clow-dee-yuh Ahk-teyh)

Phaon (Pah-ohn)

Pertinax (Pehr-tee-nakhs)

Servilius (Schr-vee-lee-yoos)

Lepida (Leh-pee-duh)

Pudentilla (Poo-dehn-teel-luh)

Sidonia (See-dohn-ee-yuh)

Claudius (Clow-dee-yoos)

Seneca (Seh-neh-kuh)

The Liminal Space

Tyche (Tie-khee / Tyoo-keh – Regional pronunciation differences)

Fyodor Andreevich Kobyla (*Fee-yob-dorh Ahn-drai-yub-vihtch Koh-bihl-lah*)

Fedya (*Fee-yed-ib-ah*, pronounced in two 1.5 syllable components)

The Playwright

Mikhail Alekseevich Kuzmin (Mee-khai-eelh Ah-lek-*see-yub-vihtch* Kooz-meen) / Misha (Mee-shuh)

Mentioned People and Figures
(In Order of Appearance)

A complete audio guide for all name and places can be found at:

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1owk871AFQH3fDwMaTAnpTLFFBsBqv7G?usp=drive
link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1owk871AFQH3fDwMaTAnpTLFFBsBqv7G?usp=drive_link)

Fulvia (Fulh-vee-yuh)

Agrippina (Ah-greep-pee-nuh)

Alcibiades (Ahl-suh-bai-uh-deez – The name has been romanticized already from Greek)

Caesar (Kai-zerh / Sey-zarh) [Russians, Germans, and Romans would all pronounce the word in the first case, Italians the second]

Sybil (Sih-buh-luh / Sih-bihl) [Latin versus English]

Cora (Kohr-uh)

Aphrodite (Ah-p-hro-dee-tai / Ah-froh-die-tee) [Latin versus English]

Hecate (Hey-kah-teh)

Dido (Die-Doh)

Ivolgins (Ih-volh-gihnz)

Prokhorovich (Pruh-khorh-oh-vihtch)

Oedipus (Oy-dee-poos / Ee-deh-poos / Eh-dih-puhs) [Greek / Modern Greek / English]

Rublev (Roo-*blee-yef*) [The masculine form of Rubleva, note the v becomes an f when it ends a word]

Data (Dah-tuh)

Isadora (Ihs-ah-dohr-uh)

Papa / Mama (Pah-puh, Mah-muh – accents on the first (For Latin and Russian) unless it is a contemporary Romance language like Italian then the syllables swap).

Vindex (Wihn-deks) – Like the cleaning solution brand

Enobarbus (Ehn-oh-barh-boos)

Gallus (Gahl-loos)

Locusta (Luh-coo-stuh)

Spiculus (Spih-cyoo-loos)

Gounod (Goo-now)

Galba (Gahl-buh)

Places and Things
(In Order of Appearance)

A complete audio guide for all name and places can be found at:

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1owk871AFQH3fDwMaTAnpTLFFBsBqv7G?usp=drive
link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1owk871AFQH3fDwMaTAnpTLFFBsBqv7G?usp=drive_link)

Not all complex words are included, if you aren't sure don't hesitate to reach out

Tableau / Tableaux (Tah-blow – both singular and plural are pronounced the same in English)

Rome (Rohm): Note both Italians and Russians would add a slight *a* at the end (Rohm-*uh*)

Emeraude (Ehm-uh-*roh-d-uh* — the last two syllables blend and the uh is barely heard if at all; it will sound like saying Emerald with a speech impediment)

Cachucha (Kah-choo-chah)

Saratov (sah-rah-tovf) [In Russian, a word ending in *v* is palatalized, the *v* takes on a soft *f* sound, like making a *v* sound without allowing your bottom lip to complete the sound]

Ceres (Keh-rayz)

Esquiline (es-kwee-leen-uh)

Corinth (Cohr-eenth)

Czarina / Tsarina (Zarh-ree-nuh)

Volga (Vohl-guh)

Strezhen (*Struh-yeh-zhehn*) [zh is like the *s* in pleasure]

Switzerland (Swee-tzerhr-lahnd)

[the first vowel is harsher and the last is softer than traditionally pronounced by Americans]

La Belle Hélène (Lah Behl-*uh* Ay-lenn-*uh*) [the last syllable *uh* is very light, almost missing]

puisque ce n'est qu'un reve' (pweesk-*uh* suh-nay kuhⁿ reh^v) [the *uh* in the first word is very light, almost missing, kuhn is a hard *k* followed by a nasally *n*]

Ostea (Ah-stay-uh)

Atellan (Ah-tehl-ahn)

In corpora (ihn corh-porh-uh)

Volosh (Vuh-lohsh)

Thematic Descriptions

Authoritarianism / Anti-authoritarianism: One of the general organizing themes of the play is a critique of authoritarianism. Authoritarianism is generally a form of government under the control of a singular individual or small elite group that maintains rule through the oppression of individual rights and democratic processes. The critique in the play goes beyond the comparisons to Lenin and Stalin, but to the general concept of authoritarian rule. Nero then becomes the cautionary tale or how authoritarian rulers operate with the concept that this is not a historical reality, but something continuously emerging into the contemporary. The play presents both the world of the play, Pavel's reality, and Nero's World, through extreme violence and pleasure. The battle between the two has historically led to violence being the winner, resulting in authoritarian rule. Many characters in Nero's world explore how such violence becomes justified or even normalized. In Pavel's world, Marie sees no alternative and chooses violence to leave the world while Pavel is given an opportunity to escape in life. Many scholars, written around the time of rising fascism, wrote histories of Rome associating its fall with sexuality and homosexuality, rather than the real historical result of violence, war, lavish spending benefitting the ruling elite, and incompetence at supporting a growing urban population. Most of those histories, while common in US households, have been rejected by practicing historians as overtly biased due to religious connections, political propaganda, and are generally poorly researched. The fight between the two becomes the central device of the play, which the queer author advocates for the triumph of pleasure over authoritarianism. See *sadomasochistic performance*.

Key Lines:

Pavel (Act I Tableau 10): "The fire will purify you. Only when naked are we free."

Nero (Act II, Tableau 8) "Besides, your lot of people are rubbish. Lazy, passive, keep only to themselves, outside their collective they are nothing, they move from state to state, tend to be cowardly, commit crimes like lying and theft, fraud, and then ask to be forgiven. Such irresponsible people."

Tyche (Act III Tableau 8): "Who was he: man or god, I don't know, but I knew that if I were lying dead and he called to me, I would rise and go to him [...] For how could Nero die, whose very name to me sounds like Gospel?"

Related Sub-Themes:

- **Sadomasochistic Performance:** a theory put forward by Elizabeth Freeman, a queer theory scholar. Freeman posits that when performed, sadomasochism participates in a queering of history. In history, violence has won, but through sadomasochistic performance, history is reframed to imagine a new future usurping pleasure in its place. First, however, we must remember the historical violence and reject it entirely...stop the cycle. The three stages are: Violence and Sexuality in Proximity, Abandoning of Pleasure for Violence, The Triumph of Pleasure. The three acts roughly model this theory and by the end the violence of Nero is rejected in lieu of queer pleasure. In the first act, the entire pathway is modeled as

foreshadowing with Nero's scenes. The goal of sadomasochistic performance is to remind audiences of their participation in violence and their role in upholding authoritarian values. Passivity leads to new Neros but by embracing pleasure and rejecting the heteronormative requirements of society, new futures can be imagined.

- Populism: Authoritarianism often rises through egotistical populism. This play situates Nero as yet another populist leader with devout following in a comparison to religious zealotry. Populism, as situated in this play, is the reemergence of the antichrist figure, the figure center to authoritarian rule capable of gaining a populist following. Alongside Kuzmin's critique of populism is the egotism of savior-complexes or individuals who feel they must save humanity (similar to the critique that saving is a colonialist action). Kuzmin cautions such an approach and argues that queer futures can only exist when individuals reject their requirement to save humanity as a whole (i.e. reject heteronormativity and chrononormativity).

Queerness: Throughout the play Kuzmin engages several forms of queerness. We see Pavel and his wife, in what appears to be an agreed lavender marriage. Kuzmin never fully establishes Pavel's sexuality, but he is likely bisexual as he does sleep with men and is married to a woman and claims to love her. Nero is depicted with a wife who he mistreats and is often shown with male lovers. Sporus exists in a liminal gender space, born male but castrated and forced to live as a woman. The end of the play asks Pavel to abandon his desires to save humanity and save himself instead, by loving his brother, an Aesopian code for a homosexual relationship. Queerness is situated as the opposite of violence, but as Nero demonstrates, participation in queerness does not preclude one from committing violence, but one cannot have both. Nero chooses violence, Pavel chooses queerness.

Key Lines:

Marie (Act I Tableau 2): "I wonder which of us he is jealous of: me for you or you for me?"

Nero (Act I Tableau 7): "Ah, Servilius, that was wonderful, like a shipwreck! Everything swayed and it felt like the earth itself was shaking, my eyes went all dark, and my blood rushed."

Stage Directions (Act II Tableau 5): The bushes on the coast are a frequent code for cruising culture in Soviet literature, between the masculine of the sea and feminine of the land. A liminal gender space used to represent queerness such as gay cruising culture and gender liminality (both transgender and non-binary).

Pavel (Act III Tableau 7): "That is him? Doctor, I have a fever. If I was a believer, I would have thought an angel walked across the lawn. Doctor, am I delusional, does he not resemble me?"

Related Sub-Themes:

- Homoeroticism: Desire between two men, often sexual or innuendo: Nero and his many lovers, Pavel and the Baron, Pavel and his brother Fedya, the marriage of Pavel and Marie, Sporus, etc. Desire between men is a common tool by Kuzmin to explore queerness.
- Aesopian Coding: open discussion of queerness on stage was generally not allowed in Russia or the Soviet Union (some exceptions can be documented). Due to the overt censorship queerness was often coded, recognizable to queer audiences but hidden from the government. Often, that takes the form of literal brothers or comrades in arms that are separated and then find each other. Voltaire called this the *voix du sang* or blood song two hundred years earlier, documenting its usage to avoid the censorship by Cardinal Richelieu in France. They are lovers, not roommates or genetic brothers, but coded for safe transfer of queer knowledge.
- The Creative Queer: in Kuzmin's writing there are often individuals, who initially appear part of heteronormative society that act as catalysts for the gay male figures in the story. These figures create a queer utopia. Without their presence, the utopia may never have been reached. In nearly all cases, the creative queer is a woman who does not wish to be part of heteronormative society, regardless of sexuality, a queer act. I suggest Margarita serves this function in the play. For Kuzmin, gay men are inextricably linked to women who do not wish to support the patriarchy, a usurping of problematic queer portrayals by Victorian era writers (who often villainize the associated women). For Kuzmin, these women are heroes — but it took some time for Kuzmin to mature into this practice (positive and less problematic portrayals become common around 1911. there is an air of incidental misogyny in his earlier works which become less frequent after 1911).
- Biopolitics: Sporus in particular is robbed of his bodily autonomy and right to choose a gender. Born as a male he is forcefully castrated and required to live as a woman, Nero's wife. There is no indication that this was consensual in the play or historically (although Sporus does appear to try to make the best of the life they were given). Nero forcefully ends Poppaea's life and that of her child. The critique being that authoritarianism inherently operates under a policy of biopolitics or regulating bodies and bodily autonomy. Asserting bodily autonomy then is a queer act, a counter-authoritarian choice.
- Temporalities: beyond homoeroticism, Kuzmin queers history and time. By blending two realities and reframing a historical figure with intentional ahistorical references, history itself is questioned. Such follows Sara Ahmed's "queer feelings" that when the intentional ahistorical moments meet our contemporary understandings, history itself becomes queer. Doing so, allows the portrayal of queerness to be more transferrable and recognizable beyond the queer community and by doing so it is often heteronormativity that feels odd.
- Orientalism / Subaltern: one of the problematic aspects of historical queer writing is layered with a sense of racism. Middle Eastern, Asian, and foreign individuals are often used to explore queerness safely. Under Russian and Soviet censorship, a foreign man could be portrayed more overtly queer than a Russian man. Note in this play, it is Nero (the Roman)

who is overtly queer, Pavel, the Russian, is only implied or coded, never directly stated. Eduard Said classifies this as a practice in Orientalism, which frequently has a layer of queer coding interwoven. Other ways this shows up in the play is the African foreigner bringing mystical knowledge. Such portrayals can be problematic and should be handled with care, while the tool was used for safe queer communication, it doesn't remove negative portrayals or associations. Queer individuals, while an oppressed minoritarian group, are not exempt from the societal influence of privilege and intersectionality.

Urban versus Rural / Nature versus Man: throughout the play many of the themes are revealed through natural means rather than man-made, animal or weather. When nature is discussed, it is associated with pleasure or foreshadowing upcoming violence. When man-made creations emerge, they usually coincide with tragedy and violence. The theme builds into the artifice of authoritarianism, rotten at its core due to its belief in the superiority of man over nature. Kuzmin subverts that and argues the opposite, despite the machinations of man, nature will win.

Key Lines and Symbols:

Marie (Act I Tableau I): "How golden the sky is today! I have never seen it like this before!"

The Omen Animals: Dogs, Parrot, Monkey, the Eagle all foreshadow moments that are heading for violence, warnings of what is to come.

Flowers and the Mark of Death: Flowers are discussed throughout and those handling picked flowers are fated to die (Marie, Friedrich, and Nero). Lilacs are almost picked for Pavel, but are then decided against. The metaphor that nature has been killed and therefore carrying dead nature marks one for death.

Fire: Fire take the form of destruction in multiple scenes alongside lightning. Nature can and will destroy humanity if nature is not in balance, the cleanser of rotten culture.

The dacha: a cultural symbol for freedom. The dacha is a simple cottage meant for recovering from the harshness of industrialism and urban life. It is the acceptance of the reality of human-nature and its need to reconnect to nature, a shelter amidst the wilderness.

Related Sub-Themes:

- Queer futurity: the ending is particular trope amongst queer artists, that was partially forgotten during the HIV/AIDs crisis, that of the rural queer utopia. Much literature has been devoted to urban queer culture, but that is a recent phenomenon. Historically, most queer portrayal is of a rural nature, abandoning the oppression of urban culture to create a life in a rural paradise surrounded by other queers. That practice can be traced in nearly all places in the world going back thousands of years in writing. Many contemporary queer individuals are unaware of this practice due to a generational knowledge gap in the 1980s and 1990s due to the impact of HIV/AIDS on queer communities. This practice is a complete rejection of both heteronormativity and chrononormativity (the idea that society improves over time), living alone without the requirements to procreate, just pleasure, and

without the advances of society, choosing to return to simplicity rather than the modern. Queer futurity rejects fascist, capitalistic, and socialistic requirements of production.

- Gardens and Windows: at many points in the play new possibilities and new hopes are foreshadowed through the use of a window and an adjoining garden. Most often, the garden is never shown. It is the hope for a future, for a balance between man and nature. The window is the glimpse, but with a barrier...we cannot get there easily, society must be dismantled first...windows are not doors.
- Wings: Multiple images of wings and winged figures are present from birds portending the future to allusion to angelic figures. For Kuzmin, wings are a reference to the queer symbol of the pigeon, so that we may fly away and start a new life. Many incorrectly translate Kuzmin's winged figures as doves, but are in reality, the mundane urban pigeon (the two share the same word in Russian: *golob*). The pigeon has become a symbol of Eastern European queerness. At the moment, Kuzmin is the earliest recorded writer utilizing the image in the Slavic context (1924), but it is more likely that he is continuing a long-standing queer tradition whose history has since been lost.

Religion (Christianity and Paganism) and Humanity: religion and religious allegory exist in almost every scene. Margarita, Marie, and Tyche build the image of three Marys: Mary Solome, Mary Magdelene, and Mary (Mother of Jesus). Nero is the antichrist. Pavel moves between several possibilities, an antichrist, a Christ figure, then freed through paganism and a return to nature, rejecting the requirement to save humanity. Ante is a Christian. The words most commonly associated with this theme in the play are blessings and gospel (which are the same word in Russian). Kuzmin, in his younger years, was a devout Old Ritualist, a schism from the Russian Orthodox Church. It is unclear whether he remained a Christian in his final years, however, officially, as a Soviet citizen, he was an atheist (religion was banned under Soviet rule). Regardless of personal faith, Kuzmin portrays zealotry and dogmatism as equal in harm as populism and authoritarianism. It is not the figure of Mary, mother of Jesus (Tyche) in her creation of religious heroes or Mary Magdalene (Marie) in her worldly pleasures that save, but the liminal Mary Salome (Margarita), the woman erased from many Western Bibles who guides Pavel. In some canonical bibles, Mary Salome is a temptress while in most Gnostic bibles, she is a disciple of Christ alongside Mary Magdalene.

Key Lines:

Nero (Act I Tableau 9): "If the sweet Gods allow my star on its determined path, I will ascend to great heights. I swear, all will be well; not one minute will be without greatness, no more blood will be shed, I give it all to you, I will be the most merciful judge, no one will be empty handed, no one will hide their face from me, and I'll dance for everyone. I will be joyful, consoling, supportive. The name Nero will resound with blessings!"

Pavel (Act I Tableau 10): "Listen, listen, everyone. This is the dawn of freedom. I give all of myself to you. Blessings. Blessings."

1st Madman (Act II Tableau 3): "Gentlemen, what is on this piece of paper has been extracted over many long years, lifetimes, generations. The secret to immortality and

happiness. And it is called “Gospel”. Please do not confuse it with evangelism, or blessings, which in translation, also mean gospel. I decided to give this as a gift to all of humanity. Gentlemen, please get in line for the Gospel.”

Marie (Act II Tableau 5): “Humanity can’t be saved without seeing the people within. But he could never see: not me, not you, no one. To him, we are phantoms, numbers, grains of sand. Oh, how I hate that word: humanity.”

Related Sub-Themes:

- **Symbolism / People of the Sun and the Moon:** During his early years, Kuzmin participated in several communities of Russian Symbolists. The symbolists sought to create a ritualistic theatrical experience as a replacement for religion. Christianity then blended with paganism, often drawing on Russian folklore, Dionysian, and Bacchanalian practices. For many Westerners, such a practice might appear purely pagan or even sacrilegious. Rozanov, a Russian philosopher, argued that there were two types of people: People of the Sun and People of the Moon. The People of Sun were procreators, meant to be productive and have children to benefit society. The People of the Moon were either homosexual or asexual and meant to be productive by creating art and bettering society through cultural means. He positioned Jesus as a “Moon Person”. He argued that it was sinful to behave as the opposite, in other words it was sinful for a gay man to marry and have children as it would be equally sinful for a straight person to abandon their family to create art. The duality appears throughout the script where pagan ideas blend with Christian symbols and various sexualities are associated with the creation of art.
- **The Christ and the Antichrist:** these figures are meant as stand-ins for authoritarianism and populism. Within the play, both are false pathways. The play argues that humanity cannot gain salvation through savior figures, such a route always creates an antichrist as Christ figures are always co-opted (and operate in a colonialist fashion). Instead, man must save themselves. One man cannot save another directly. In essence, ‘it is not for queers to save humanity, awakening must be a choice’. In contemporary queer theory, this idea is hypothesized by scholar Jose Muñoz and to a lesser extent, Lee Edelman. Muñoz introduces a concrete utopia that dismantles systematic oppression, often by completely abandoning productive elements of society that fellow queer theorist Jack Halberstam calls, “Queer Failure.” Lee Edelman takes a Freudian analysis on the topic noting that queer individuals have a death drive, see no place for themselves in society and therefore see value in destructive tendencies. Muñoz contends that many queers are hopeful, just not in heteronormative spaces. Remove oneself from the space and/or time and hope returns, queer futurity. The choice between Christ and the Antichrist, for queer futurity, is a false one as both lead to oppression.
- **Wanderers / Shepherds / Demons:** initially in the play, Nero is referred to in terms of Christian mythology. As the play progresses, slowly, he is referred to as a demon, in reference to several pagan beliefs such as Ala (which became Baba Yaga). Pavel retains his

wanderer status (the shepherd, the same trope that is used in the Christ mythology), while Nero transitions into the anti-wander (the wolf), losing his ability to walk. At the end, Pavel must cease wanderings and learn to coincide again with nature (in the arms of his brother – i.e. embrace queerness).

Minor Themes and Symbols:

- **Numerology:** Several important numbers include 33 (the age of death for both Christ and Nero), 28 (the number of a cycle in the Julian calendar that Russia used until 1918 – the play is 28 tableaux and the play is split into 2 and 8 in scene organization), 5 (5 years of change, Stalin’s 5-Year Plan, etc.), 7 (years of luck and famine, Old Testament reference to Joseph), 17 (spirit and creativity), 41 (power and future).
- **Gold and Red:** both gold and red are used to describe greatness and beauty, often a façade.
- **Purple:** the color of excess
- **Light Blue:** in Russian, *goluboi*, used as both a slur and a reclamation for queerness, associated with fellow queer symbol of the pigeon (*golub*).
- **Pregnancy:** procreation and productive imperative, both a threat to patriarchal rule and a requirement for progeny. To Kuzmin, it is not the pregnancy itself that is the problem, but the procreative requirement within a patriarchal society (bodily autonomy).
- **Water:** water is associated with death, loss, and weakness, akin to the last supper, water betrayed Nero as it stole his doll Tyche, his protector. Water is used to subdue Pavel. The line, “Ugh, you are so wet” is a motif.
- **Fire:** fire is a violent cleanser associated with populism and authoritarian rule.
- **Unreliable narrators:** most characters are unreliable, the truths they share are not necessarily dishonesty, but mask intention and full truth.
- **Capital / Populism / Military:** money is never the word of choice by Kuzmin, but instead capital. While the playwright disliked the Bolsheviks, he initially supported the revolution and was not a capitalist. For capitalists, corruption came through money, for communists, through populism, for fascists, through military violence. All can lead to authoritarianism.
- **Art as Emancipatory:** all of Kuzmin’s work extol art. In this play, all the primary characters are artists or connected to art. Art and power, however, are incompatible within the world of the play. Nero fails because he abandoned art and pleasure for violence and power. When Pavel escapes, he is asked to relearn how to live and how to create art.
- **Shoes:** shoes are continually referred to as a reference to the ability to be a leader and an allusion to the Christ / Antichrist figures. As Nero descends, his shoes begin to fall off making it difficult to walk.

Interactive Script

Due to active translation, editing, and formatting requirements, the interactive script will be housed separately until archived. You may access the script using the links below or reach out to the dramaturg.

Interactive Script (with footnotes):

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PPfhy2VV95rA3RmPJyubmFdFxpqyMrNL/view?usp=drive_link

Acting Edition (footnotes removed):

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1pqBt07qEX93VZox4ppSL1tx99y3gD26a/view?usp=drive_link

Section 2:

Critical Analysis

and

Visual Guides

The Historical Setting

Nero's World (Rome)

Rome began its founding around the same time that Greece entered its classical era, between the 5th and 6th centuries BCE. It took around 300 years before the Romans spread widely across the Mediterranean after the Punic Wars in the 3rd century BCE. The expansion was again halted in the civil wars years (between the 2nd and 1st century BCE), the subject of Shakespeare's plays. Between 31-27 BCE, the Roman Empire was formally unified, granting the leader the status of Imperator to Octavian (the term later became Emperor). While dictators by contemporary definitions, Romans considered the role democratic. In the century preceding Nero's birth, the Empire of Rome saw some of its largest expansion but also had constant battles over the line of succession, which officially ended with Nero, leading to the era of the "Five Good Emperors" - Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius. During the first century, the Roman Empire covered most of the Mediterranean. The Empire reached its pinnacle of expansion in 117 CE, covering most of Western Europe, a majority of the British Isles, Asia Minor, and North Africa.

While it is commonly believed that Rome widely persecuted Christians, the truth is more nuanced. Christians were indeed persecuted during a two decade period of Roman history, the rule of Diocletian (284-305 CE). However, their religion was not the concern as uniformity of religion was not expected, it was instead their refusal to join the war. A central tenet of early Christianity was pacifism, and such practices put followers in violation of Roman law which required conscription. The persecution was short-lived as Christianity became the formal religion of the state with Constantine I in 324 CE. Over the next century, the Roman government would establish the canonized texts of the Bible, mostly what we have today in the form of the Old Testament and the New Testament. However, prior to the 4th century, Christians followed varied practices carried down through a variety of writings and oral history, many of which were intentionally excluded in the formation of the Bible, those prior texts are now referred to as the Gnostic Bibles. Many were assumed destroyed by the Catholic church, but the discovery of several writings in the 19th and 20th century made clear the pacifism of the early religion. The rediscovery of these texts have been met with mixed responses, some like the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Thomas have been largely ignored beyond academic study due to their nuanced discussion of gender, establishment of a personal practice rather than formal religious structure, the placement of Mary Magdalene as the 13th apostle, and the direct criticism by Jesus of Matthew and Peter for their inability to understand his teachings using misogyny to reject Mary Magdalene (their writings are considered the foundation of Western Christianity). The Gnostic Bibles are considered more historically accurate compared to the canonized texts, but as with all writings, still subject to bias and human error. I note these historical moments to communicate that Christianity, as we experience today, would be unrecognizable to Christians in the first century. Historically, Rome persecuted non-Christians and pagans at higher rates than Christians when its entire history is considered. Christian persecution was common for roughly 4-5% of the Roman Empire's existence, or just over 1% if you include the Eastern Empire's rule. Nero's reference to Christ as a back-water rabbi, within the world of the play, accurately describes how Christianity would have been viewed in the first century, his followers would be seen as an innocuous group of pacifists.

The century just prior to and including Nero's rule is critical in the history of the Empire as it formally established the frontier of the Empire as under the rule of the Emperor under newly established provinces, similar to statehood in the US, with less direct representation. The provinces continued to self-rule, but could now be overruled by the Emperor. Prior to the unification, citizens were required to live in and around Rome, but this new status greatly expanded citizenship. Citizenship remained rare as it must have been granted, been born into, or earned through military service. This new reality created the plebian class, equivalent to our classification of the "working poor." Plebians were the largest group within Rome. The enslaved class, making up approximately 10-20%, were a mix of former citizens and conquered peoples from the colonized lands of Rome. Non-plebians usually had 3-4 servants who were enslaved. In the city of Rome, during the time of Nero, it is estimated that as many as 300,000 individuals were enslaved, roughly 25% of the population.

The Julio-Claudian dynasty, of which Nero was the final member, was a period of intense political upheaval. Tiberius' rule was typified under a state of paranoia, where many Senators and citizens were executed. Caligula came next and while his rule started peaceful, after his mental state declined, he began some of the cruelest years in Rome including torture, assassinations, and secret police. While Caligula was Nero's uncle, some believe he may be the father as he was suspected of having slept with his sister, Agrippina the Younger, Nero's mother. Caligula was assassinated. Claudius, Tiberius' brother and uncle to Caligula, took the throne afterwards and while he began to set Rome back on a successful pathway, the family around him conspired resulting in his death and placing Nero on the throne after he married his niece, Agrippina the Younger and she insisted on establishing her son as the heir. When Nero ascended the throne, he was 16 years old and had been living in exile in the provinces due to his mother's many assassination attempts. While he initially credited his mother with his rise, they fell out of each other's favor, and Nero eventually stabbed her to death. Nero began to equate the Emperorship to the status of a god and ordered a palace built for himself in honour (called the Golden House – *Domus Aurea*). He spent much of his life pursuing the life of an actor, historical accounts said he was amateur, but due to his status often headlined. The Great Fire of Rome occurred during his reign, and his palace was built atop, leading many to believe Nero started the fire. Nero attempted to blame Christians for all his faults (which did not have the impact on the public he hoped, who cared little about the obscure religion). He was ousted in a military coup, ending his life by suicide. His last lines are believed to be, "In me, the world has lost a great artist."

Maps



Figure 10 - Roman Expanse prior to unification (60 BCE)

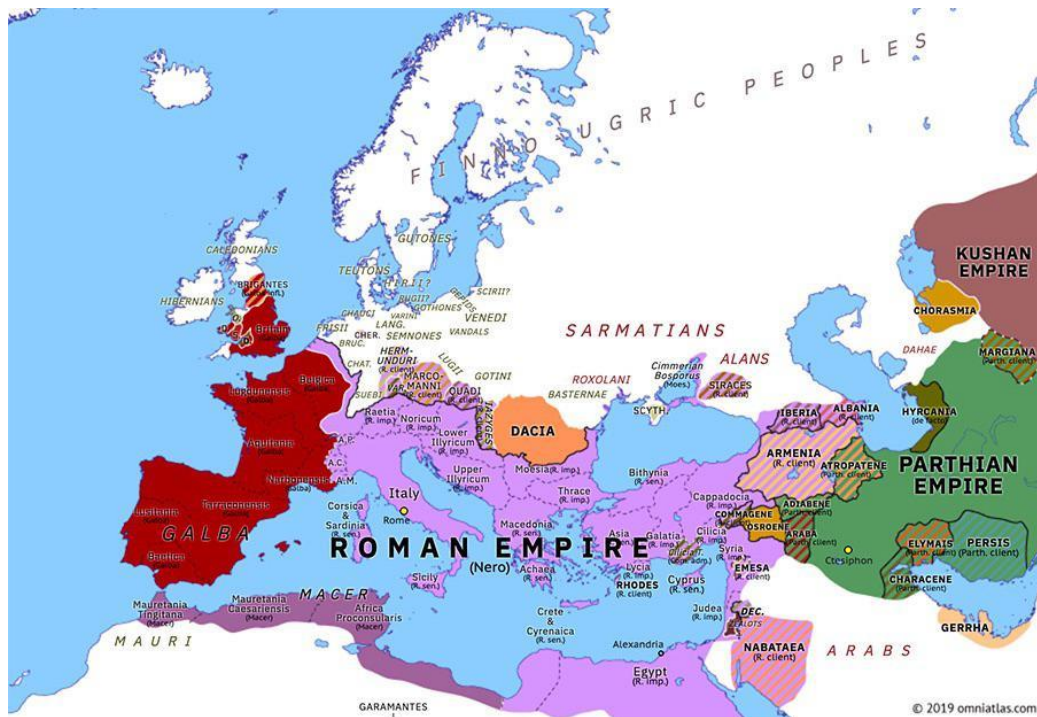


Figure 11 Map of Rome during Nero's rule



Figure 12 - Rome during the August Expansion 24 BCE



Figure 13 - Rome in 69 CE, the end of Nero's rule. Wikimedia

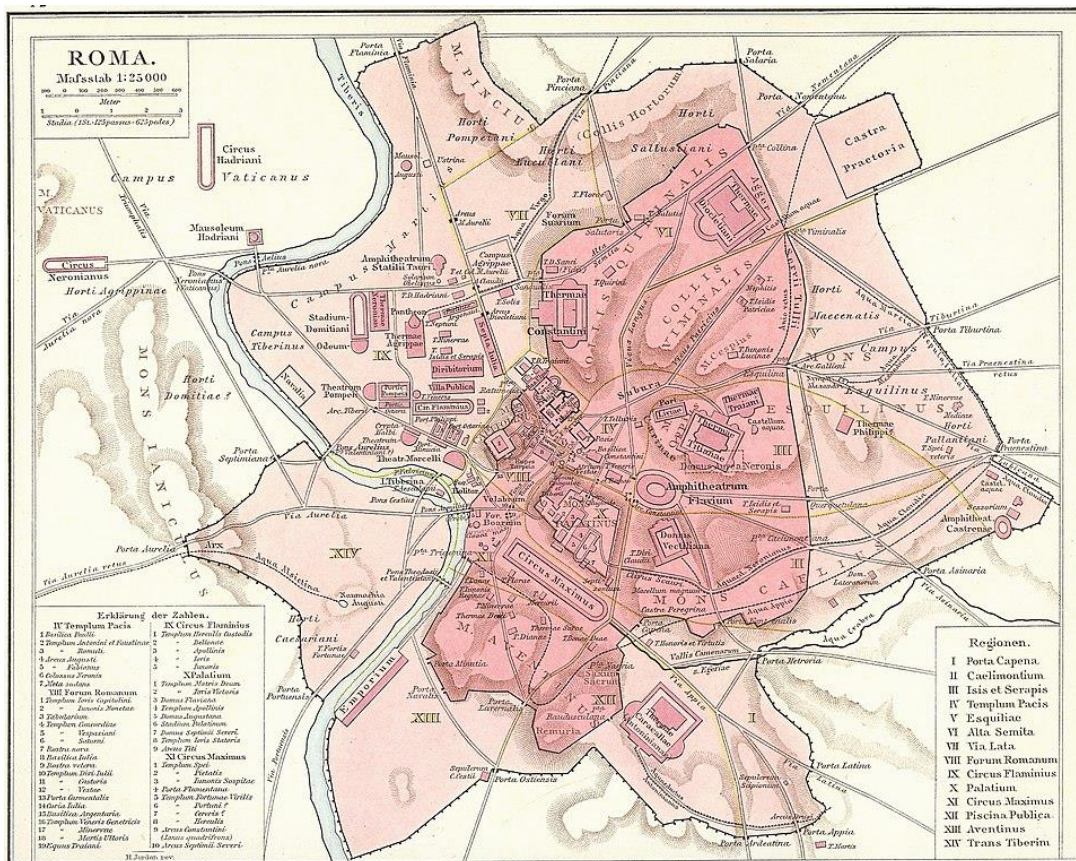


Figure 14 - Map of the City of Rome, post Domus Aurea

Architecture

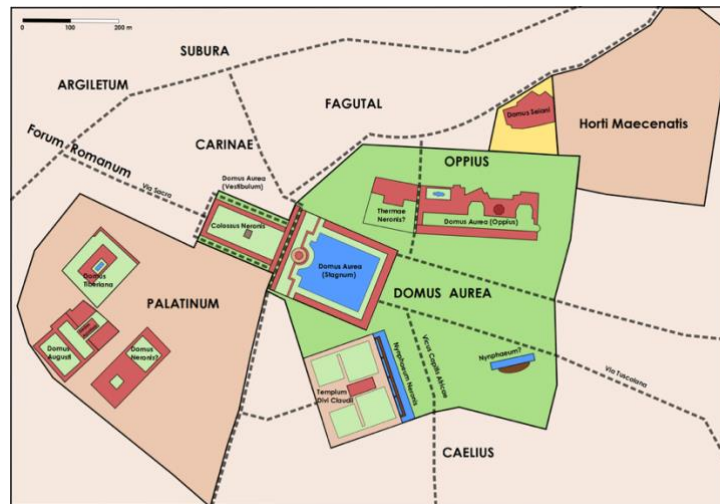


Figure 15 - Rough Rendering of the Domus Aurea



Figure 16 – Remains of the Domus Aurea



Figure 17 - Fresco recovered from the Domus Aurea

Domus Aurea 3D Recreation:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5b1xKrVEM0c&t=188s> (Exterior Tour)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTXtJ7mMa3A> (Interior Tour)

Attire During Nero's Time

By Roman law, your attire must communicate your class when in public. That meant what you wore told others more about how you were to be treated than we might be used to today.

- Male-presenting Aristocratic and Second-tier Citizens: The Toga or *toga virilis* was a semi-elliptical cloth measuring roughly 6 by 12 feet. The commoner toga was white or off-white, while the nobility were dressed in bright vivid colors. Freedmen, priests, and magistrates wore a white toga with purple edging and a tunic with two wide vertical purple stripes. Second tier citizens wore a shorter white tunic with a purple-red wrap or two narrow vertical purple stripes. Only the highest of officials and Emperors wore entirely purple togas, which were often adorned with gold embroidery. The longer the toga, the higher class.

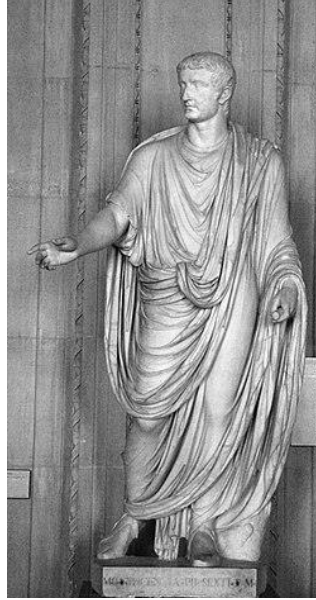


Figure 18 Emperor Tiberius in a Toga

- Female-presenting Aristocratic and Second-tier Citizens: Most female presenting citizens wore a *stolae*. A *stolae* was comprised of two rectangular pieces of cloth affixed with a brooch and buttons allowing the cloth to drape freely over the body. Some citizens wore a *palla* over the stole, which was a 11 by 11 foot cloth draped over the left shoulder and under the right and then over the left arm. In inclement weather, the extra cloth was raised over the head like a cloak. Hair was bound up in a style called *tutulus*. Noble women wore a purple striping along the hem and/or mantle. All women outside of the house were expected to be veiled. Women accused of adultery were forbidden from wearing a *stolae* and were expected to wear a woman's toga.

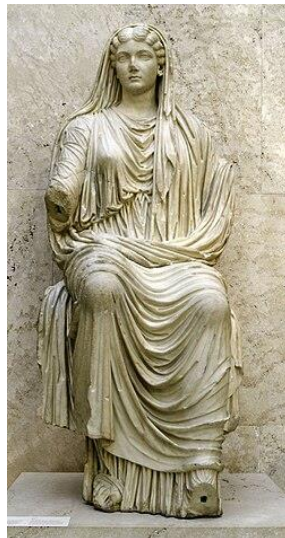


Figure 19 Statue of Livia Drusilla demonstrating the stolae and palla

- Plebians and Freedmen: Plebians wore the shortened toga appropriate to their rank. However, as most were laborers, few bothered and a simple tunic was the most common. Freedmen were explicitly forbidden to wear a toga and donned the tunic.

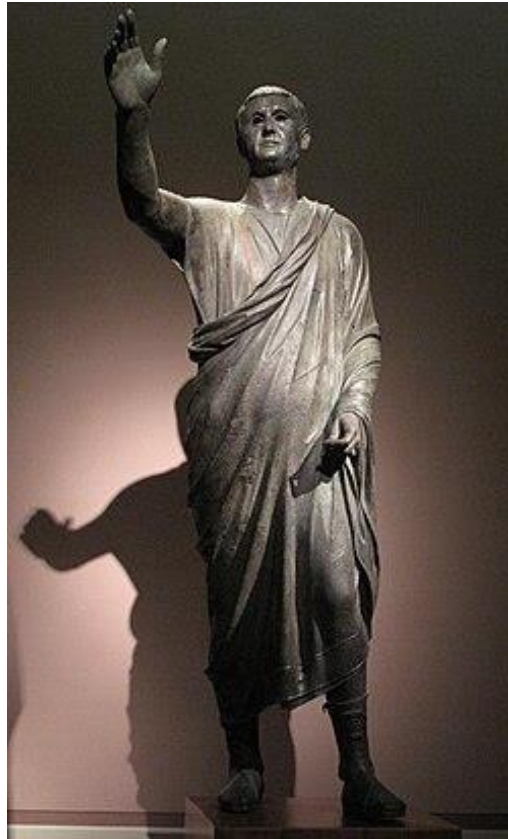


Figure 20 A lower Etruscan senator in a toga, notice the shorted length

- Enslaved people: Rome established no formal attire for enslaved individuals. Those working for wealthier individuals might own a simple tunic or livery. Seneca, Nero's tutor, notes that it would be unthinkable for an enslaved individual to be dressed as well as his master.
- Children: children, both boys and girls wore a shortened toga or tunic, depending on class. Boys often wore a *bulla* while girls wore a *lunula*, amulets meant to repel evil and sexual predation.
- Military: the majority of military wore a simple tunic, possible with a small, draped cloth. When in battle, a leather jerkin might be worn for protection. Some histories tell of soldiers wearing togas, but this appear to have disappeared prior to the unification so would be ahistorical for Nero's time. Status in the military is dictated by the *sagum* or cloak. All soldiers would drape some sort of cloth, the larger and more purple the cloth, the higher status. The exact design varies greatly by region and time. As soldiers were expected to pair for all of their own gear, it was most typically quite simple. The later depictions with a *cuirass* did not emerge until the 2nd century.



Figure 21 Military tunic shown for standard soldiers.

- While there is significant writing declaring purity status to women and young boys and attiring them to maintain that, there is little evidence that many cared or bothered beyond the most elite of individuals.
- Footwear does not have the same separation in gender, almost entirely sandals or simple boots. Sandals came in variety of styles both with and without a heel. Footwear was often a mark of status so more elaborate footwear was associated with high nobility and many plebians and lower went barefoot.

Pavel's World (Rome)

The city of Rome, in 1919, was under the rule of the Kingdom of Italy under the leadership of Victor Emmanuel III, a member of the house of Savoy and Prince of Piedmont. The house of Savoy has been the subject of several of Kuzmin's plays due to several rumors of homosexual leaders throughout their rule since the 17th century. While Kuzmin would not live to see his reign, Victor Emmanuel III's third son, Umberto II, was openly gay and would be Italy's last King, reigning for less than two months. While the Savoy family gained significant support due to their defeat of the Hapsburgs, allowing Italy to unite, they also have been overly criticized for their neutrality on Mussolini and the rise of fascism. While the family eventually displaced Mussolini, the populace saw the connection as too strong, and the monarchy was abolished in 1946. Placing the play in 1919, is interesting due to the political climate in Italy, which to put it lightly, would be fraught.

For five years prior, Italy would have been involved in World War I as a member of the Allies. The war ended in 1918, one year prior to the setting of this play. After the war, due to economic instability, the working classes experienced considerable hardship leading to the rise of a new populist political leader, Benito Mussolini. That name now synonymous with fascism, was just another political entity vying for power in an unstable political environment in 1919. It was not until 1922, when Mussolini would march on Rome to gain his hold on the country. Pavel's story, however, mirrors that of Mussolini and can be seen as a warning for what was to beset the country shortly, knowledge Kuzmin would have access to writing between 1924-1928. While Pavel is not a fascist (likely closer to a socialist, unlikely to be a Bolshevik style communist), he is co-opted into an uprising that is blamed upon the fascists.

The placement in Italy and the fight against fascism is critically framed through Pavel, interestingly, a Russian, not an Italian. Russians, at this time, were generally feared in Europe and America, due to the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. Many countries worried that the Bolshevik revolution would spread, eradicating the monarchies of Europe and the capitalistic states in France and the United States. The revolution in Russia can largely explain the Democratic Socialist spread in Northern Europe, much of which remains today, as a response to abate any further revolutions.

The rise of the Bolsheviks in Russia, however, is often mischaracterized by Western media. The revolution began as early as 1905, and although that revolution failed, it caused major reforms by the Tsar. However, as the decade continued, missteps by the autocratic ruler made the Imperial government even more unpopular. Tsar Nicholas II, based on poor advisors, started a war with Japan while simultaneously sending soldiers to aid on the fronts in World War I in Europe. As the economic systems of Russia were declining, soldiers quickly grew agitated and in the winter of early 1917, abandoned the European and Japanese front, largely due to starvation. In March, the people rose up against the Romanovs in St. Petersburg and while it appeared like the revolution would again fail, the abandoning soldiers arrived and joined the communist groups (Bolsheviks and Mensheviks) forcing Nicholas II to abdicate. The Romanovs were sent to live in exile in Ekaterinburg after their closest family connection, the House of Windsor (British monarchs), denied their request for asylum. Six months later the Bolsheviks shot and killed the immediate family, although many of their cousins escaped to Odessa, then Paris, and as such several Romanovs within the line of succession

remain alive today. The revolution caused shockwaves throughout the western world, as the Bolsheviks established the Soviet Union as a communist state. I need to note, however, that by all accounts the Soviet Union was only communist for weeks at most. While the revolution took place in March of 1917, no formal government remained until the Bolshevik's overtook the provisional government in October. The Bolshevik's held an election in November and Viktor Chernov, of the Socialist Revolutionary party, won with 37.6% of the vote. The Bolsheviks, who only had 23.3% of the vote, disbanded the Russian Constituent Assembly, and placed their leader Vladimir Lenin as head of the government. Contemporary historians consider this the first and only free election in Russian history, but no democratic government ever took hold. As Communism requires democratically elected officials (and is generally wary of single party systems), the Soviet Union was only a communist country until the results of the election were rejected, roughly three weeks. The newly established Bolshevik government, under Lenin, was based on Marxist principles, but by rejecting democratic leadership became a state controlled one-party system of authoritarianism with some communist tendencies such as collective agriculture. That distinction is important to this play, as Kuzmin was initially in support of the revolution, but it was the usurping of democratic power and near deification of both Lenin and Stalin that became his critiques. By placing the play in Italy, it makes clear that authoritarianism on both the right and the left are equally problematic and populism is the route in which these systems corrupt.

The might sound like a lot of Russian history to discuss in Italy, but Pavel, being a Russian, in Italy, would come with that baggage. There are several moments in the play, where Pavel's Russian identity, makes him the target of suspicion. Most European countries and the United States treated Russian visitors as a threat, which may not be entirely misguided as in Germany a decade later was far more likely to become Socialist than Fascist largely due to Russian influence. The battle between the Fascists and the Socialist would overtake both Italy and Germany. While Italy went Fascist early on, Germany was set to become a Socialist state before the Nazi party (fascists) violently attacked the communists ensuring that no fair election could occur (and the Communists, Socialists, and centrists still received enough of the vote to form a coalition government). The political upheaval of these early 20th century political parties would be felt strongly in Rome in 1919. The Rome that Pavel was visiting would have been political fraught and a hotbed of discourse, both civil and violent. Such an environment made it easy to use Pavel as a tool for propaganda, a playwright's words a way to manipulate, his wealth also would have been a benefit.

In 1919, in particular, there is one event that would have been making headlines, and that was the Royal family and their negotiations with the Catholic Church, who at that point was at odds with the family due to their neutrality in the war with Austria and their refusal to recognize Rome as the capital of Italy. When the Prime Minister attempted to forge a treaty, the King blocked him, claiming the church were greedy and oversexed hypocrites who used religion against the people they claimed to serve. A decade later, Mussolini would be granted permission to settle the question and did so successfully. What that means, in terms of our play, is that Rome, as we imagine, was not the tourist hotbed we think of today. Instead, it was a chaotic city being pulled being two different political systems and, in a battle over religious belief. We oft think of Berlin in the 1930s as typifying that feeling, but Rome, a decade and a half earlier showed many of the same patterns.

Maps

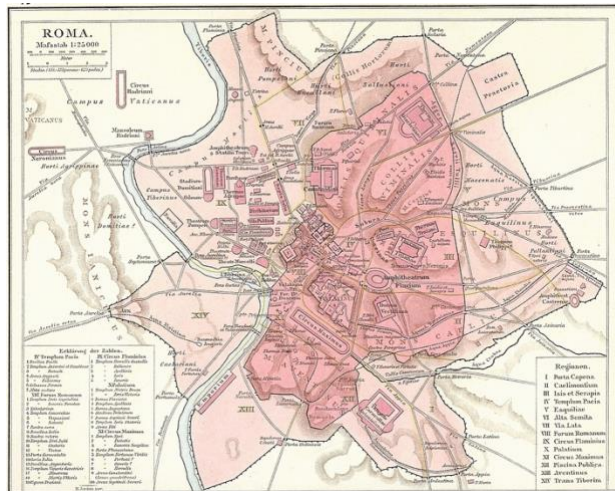


Figure 22 Plan for Roma 1886 - Wikimedia Images



Figure 23 Kingdom of Italy (1919) - Wikimedia

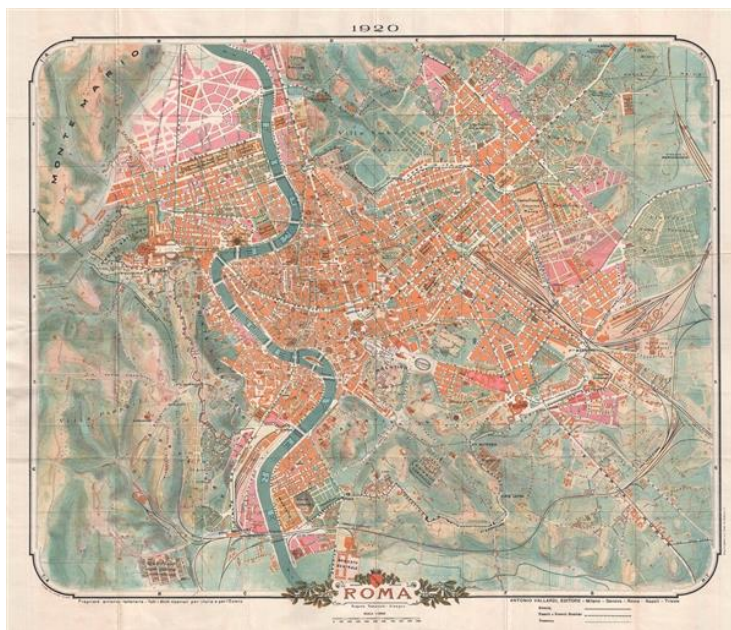


Figure 24 Map of Roma 1920 – Geographicus

Architecture

Architecture immediately after World War I showed a stark split between the Modernist movement of Art Nouveau and the harsh techniques of the fascist followers. Below are some samples of buildings from the area. The hotel where the play takes place would have more likely been the fashionable Art Nouveau or Liberty Style, but many buildings near the ruins in Rome would have been in the process of rebuilding that the fascist party began in 1919 but would continue for several

decades. Nero's Palace itself was rebuilt into a fascist monument in the 1930s. What results is a blend of intricate patterns blending nature and Neoclassical design with harsh minimalism.

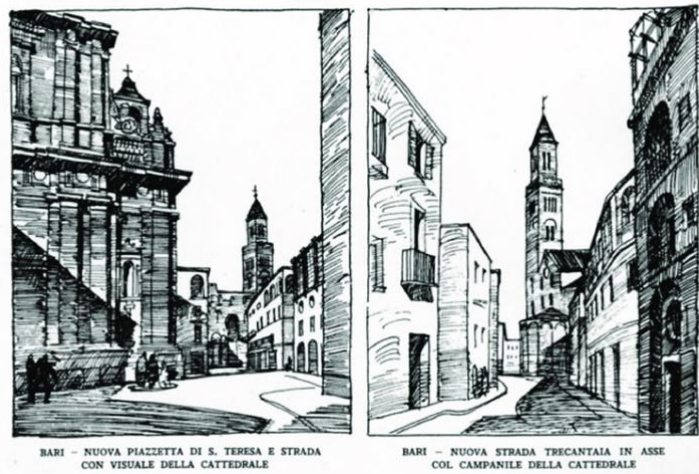


Figure 25 Gustavo Giovannoni (1932) *Reconstruction of a Neighborhood - Rappresentazione dell'architettura e dell'ambiente urbano.*



Figure 26 Painting by Gustavo Giovannoni - *Wikimedia Images*



Figure 30 Villa Calderai, built 1910 - Wikimedia Images



Grand Hotel Plaza, 1920s

Photo: hotelphotoarchive.com

Figure 29 - Grand Hotel Plaza, Rome, built in 1880 - HotelPhotoArchive.org



Figure 27 - Casa Finoglio la Fleur, built in 1902 - Wikimedia Images



Figure 28 - Casa Galimberti (Milan), built in 1903 - Wikimedia Images



Figure 34- Casa del Fascio Primogenito (Milan), Tower Added in Roughly 1922 - Wikimedia Images



Figure 35 Victory Square, built in 1926 - Wikimedia Images



Figure 33 Casa del Fascio (Como), built in 1932 - Wikimedia Images



Figure 32 Aerial photo of the EUR taken in 2007, Site of the Mussolini Park, Intended Site of the World's Fair and Monument to Fascism. Harsh reinterpretation of Neoclassicism.



Figure 31 - Oppian Hill Park, Original Site of Nero's Domus Aurea, Retooled into a monument to fascism, Colosseum is adjacent.

Attire in Italy Post World War I

Fashion underwent a considerable change after World War I in both Italy and in Russia. In most of Europe, after the war a “barrel-like” dress-skirt emerged for women which contrasted greatly with the more art-nouveau styles only a decade earlier. For men, the three-piece suit remained popular, a shift away from the more dandy-esque attire of the Edwardian era. I should note, however, men like Pavel, would likely have followed more Edwardian styles. In Italy, however, while French designs were still worn, the rise of fascism changed attire considerably. In 1919, the *tuta* was invented as a pair of overalls for either gender.



Figure 38 Dress from 1911, France - Fashionhistory



Figure 36 Dress from 1918, France - Fashionhistory



Figure 37 Men's Fashion 1900-1929, The MET Gallery

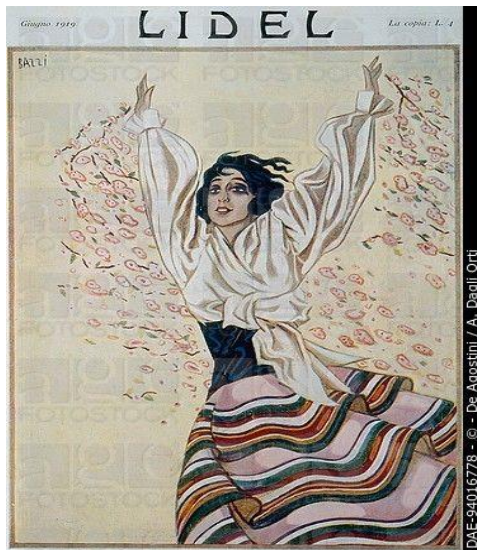


Figure 40 National Congress of Clothing (Italy), 1919



Figure 39 Tuta, 1913-1920 - Tbayat's Tuta

Lire Notes (1919):

Italy primarily used a coin based system, however in the government began issuing paper money in 1882. The amounts were in 5 and 10 amounts initially, later (1895) a 25 lire note was added. 1 and 2 lira notes were added incrementally until 1922. The Bank of Italy issues notes beginning in 1896 in amounts of 50, 100, 500, and 1,000 notes. In 1919 a limited run of 25 lire notes were made. One lira in 1919, would be roughly equivalent to \$2.12 today, however Italy was under severe economic burden at the time so the purchasing power makes it worth closer to \$2.50.



Figure 41 - Front of 50 Lira Bank Note 1919



Figure 42 - Back of 50 Lira Bank Note 1919



Figure 43 Front of a 25 Lira Banknote 1919



Figure 44 Back of 25 Lira Banknote 1919

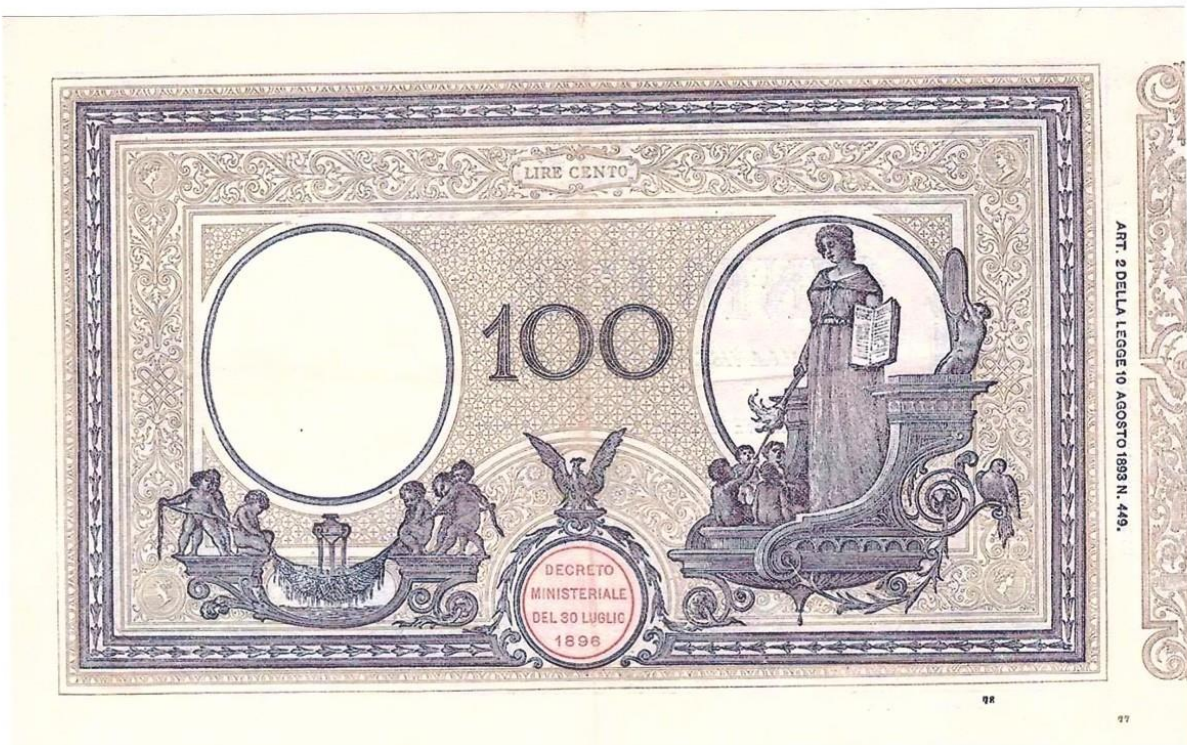


Figure 45 A 100 Lira Banknote 1919

Pavel's World (Saratov)

The city of Saratov was established sometime in the 16th century, built upon the ruins of the ancient city of Uvek, destroyed by the Golden Horde. The city is situated on the banks of the Volga river about 900 km (560 miles) southeast of Moscow, while the Ukraine border is only about 600 km (370 miles) away, and the Kazakhstan border is only 350 km (215 miles) away making it the primary transit route into Russia at the Ozinki-Taskala crossing. Throughout its history the city has traded hands from the Russians, the Kalmyks, and the Cossacks. Originally it was ruled by the government in Kazan, then Astrakahn, then finally established as its own viceroyalty in 1797. Throughout Russia's history, the city has been used as a relocation site for Polish and German immigrants. Catherine the Great, a German herself, introduced an edict allowing Germans to remain in the city and establish relative autonomy. As such, even today, it is not uncommon to hear German spoken on the streets and there are many German schools and churches, including a Catholic diocese. During World War I, the Russian government established the city as part of a deportation convoy route, forcibly relocating ethnic Germans, Jews, Hungarians, Austrians, and others of Slavic decent whom the government viewed as a threat. During World War II, ethnic Germans were forceable removed from the city that the government had previously designed for their usage. The city is a major port for the Russian government and is the location of major shipping routes via the unique train-ferry system. At the time of the play the city's population would have been roughly 220,000, but fell sharply in the 1920s due to famine (40,000+ died). Today, the city is home to 2.4 million people, now a thriving urban center.

The location in Saratov separated them from European connections, making them less of a threat. Due to the European nationals living there, the city is a bed of artistic expression, a unique mix of folk Russian art, European classical styles, and avant-garde groups. It is the home of the Saratov Drama Theatre (formerly the Karl Marx Drama Theatre) and the Saratov Neo-Gothic Conservatory, some of the oldest in the country.

Due to the very warm temperatures in the summer and its placement along the Volga river, it is a popular tourist destination for urban Russians seeking to escape the city life of Moscow and St. Petersburg. During the Soviet era, many dachas, or country cottages, were built nearby the shores to allow those from the urban centers to vacation and recover. These dachas typically had a small garden space. In literature, these sites have become the subject of queer writings, rural escapes from the harsh urban realities that allowed sexual exploration. While dachas were originally gifts to the nobility, they became havens of the working class during the Soviet years.

Maps



Figure 46 - Map of Saratov, 1903 - Wikimedia Images

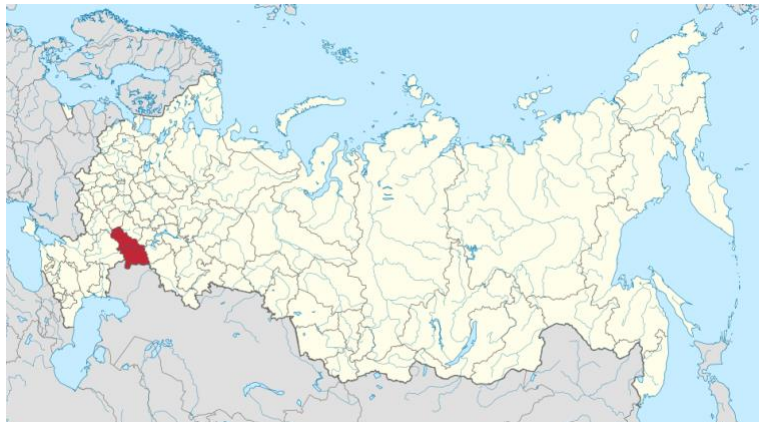


Figure 47 - Saratov Oblast in comparison to Russia

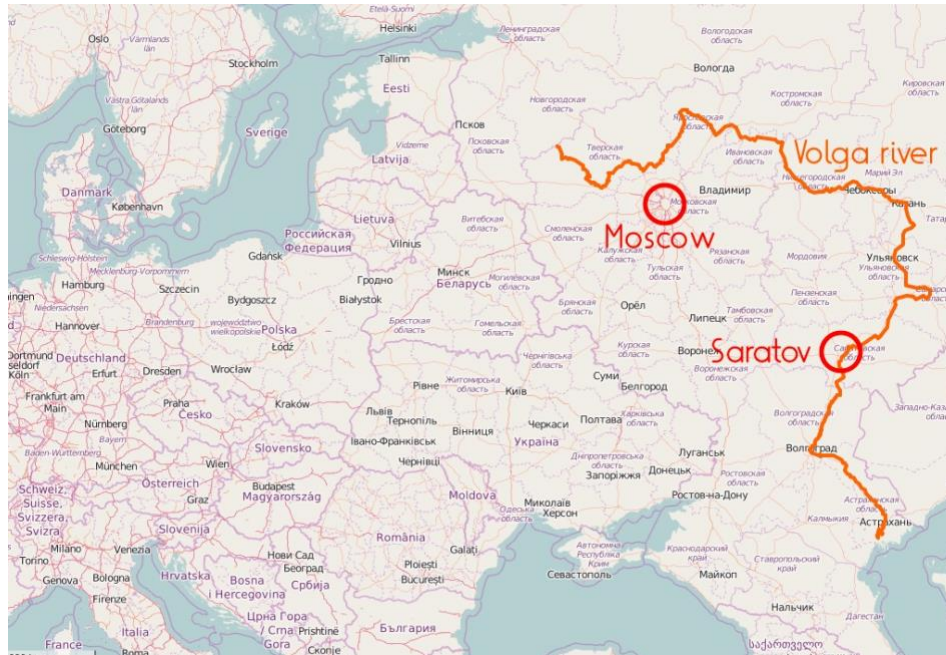


Figure 50 Saratov and Moscow on the Volga River, in comparison to Central and Eastern Europe

Architecture



Figure 49 Saratov Aerial Photo - Wikimedia Images



Figure 48 Saratov from the Water - RussiaBeyond



Figure 55 Saratov Neo-Gothic Conservatory - RusMania

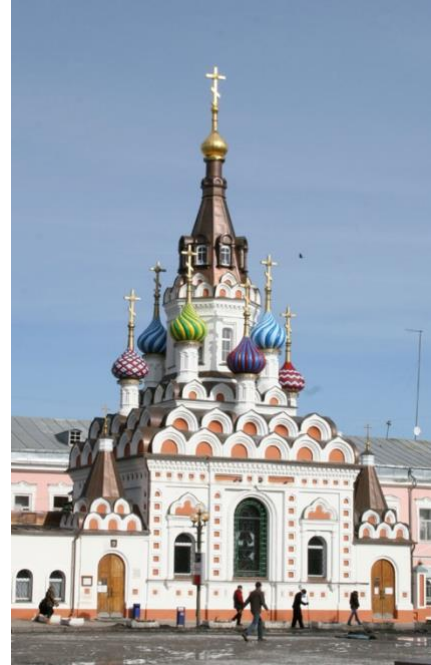


Figure 54 Soothe My Sorrows Church



Figure 53 Dacha in Saratov - SummerinSaratov



Figure 52 Dachas on the Volga - Wikimedia Images



Figure 51 Dachas on the Volga - RussianNotes



Figure 56 Cliffs of Stepan Razin, Volga Coast - Wikimedia Images

Additional Info about Saratov:

Saratov Architecture Around 1910

Urban:

The urban environment of Saratov was just booming during the early 1900s. It would have felt similar to many booming cities on the West Coast of the United States during that time. As a city with heavy European influence due to the high German population, the architecture was very similar to that of Northern Europe. It would have slight Neo-classical design blended with a bit of Art Nouveau. See the image below of the main street through the city taken around that time. You can see many brick buildings with accents that mimic neoclassical architecture blended with a bit of nature. Many buildings were accented with the kokoshnik arch (crescent) or the Ogohn arch (flame) around windows influenced by Turkish and Indian architects.





In the image above you can see both the kokoshnik (crescent) arch above the window and the ogohn arch (flame) on the roof. A similar arch can be seen in the train station built in 1910 in Saratov below:





Saratov is a blend of urban and rural. While it has many urban amenities, nature is a central part of the city and you do not have to go far to get to a rural feeling. In 1910, before the boom of Saratov, the dacha culture began right at the borders of the city. Within minutes you could be in a modern city and then a complete rural environment. Saratov was relatively poor (at least in comparison to other vacation sites), so dachas were relatively simple cottages rather than the ornate architecture in the urban center.







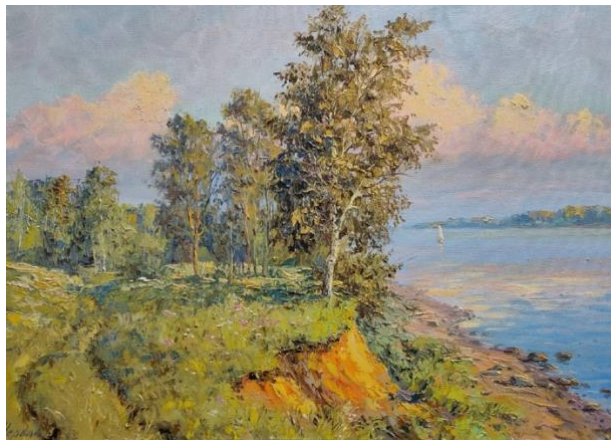
Below is a contemporary photo, but it lets you see the simplicity of the dachas on the Volga near Saratov. As dachas were meant for the lower middle class, they were simple wooden cottages often being overtaken by nature. Architecture could vary greatly, but were only ornate for the wealthy. If portraying an environment like this focus on overgrown nature.





Nature in Saratov:

Plantlife on the Volga was relatively simple but a few plants would have been extremely common (the ones overtaking the homes). They include the volga carnation and reeds (the carnation only exists in this spot in the world). It is one of the most biodiverse areas of the world in terms of trees, pretty much everything grows there except palms from coniferous to deciduous plants.





Ruble

The ruble was an incredible unstable currency in the year 1919 due to the Russian revolution. If traveling abroad it is likely Russians would convert their money as it was actively depreciating over time. To demonstrate the rate of inflation due to the revolution, \$1 in 1917 was worth 11 rubles, however by 1919 it was worth 72.46 rubles. By 1923 inflation was so out of control that \$1 was equivalent to 2,352,941 rubles, the highest conversion rate on record.



Figure 57 - 10,000 Ruble in 1919 Front



Figure 58 10,000 Ruble 1919 Back



Figure 59 50 Ruble Note 1919, Front



Figure 60 1,000 Ruble 1919, Front



Figure 61 1000 Ruble Note 1919 Back

Attire in Russia and the Volga

Fashion in Russia prior to the revolution was an exercise in art itself. Many sought to display themselves in the most fashionable attire. The playwright, Kuzmin, was notorious for his Edwardian



Figure 64 Russian Woman, 1914
- Lily Absinthe



Figure 62 Dress with Greek
Influence - Lily Absinthe



Figure 63 Dress with
Chinese Influence -
Lily Absinthe

dandy-esque vests and bright colorful fashion. The shifts towards color was stark, as prior to the turn of the century Russian attire was considerable morose by European standards, lots of blacks with heavy fabrics. For men, attire was accentuated with colorful accessories (vests, ties, and pocket-sleeves), while the pinnacle of fashion expression for women were hats (and to a lesser extent necklaces). As the revolution approaches, sculpted dresses became more common for women, in Russia, influences from Greece and China were particularly popular.



Figure 68 Family on Vacation, Recolorized - MAMM Collection



Figure 67 Portrait of a Crimean Woman, 1913 - MAMM Collection



Figure 66 Men in Saratov, 1900s - RussiaBeyond

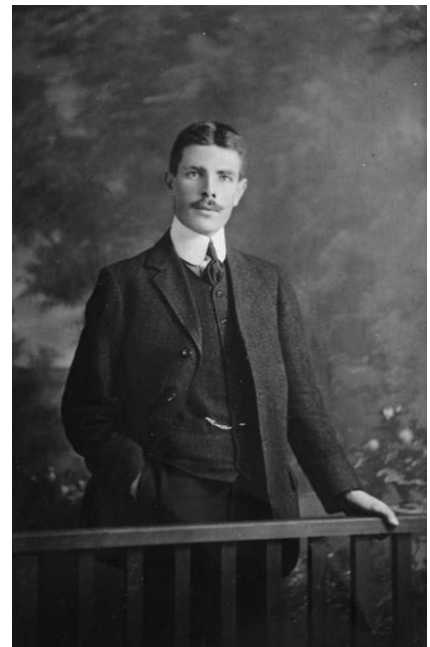


Figure 65 Russian 3-piece Suit, 1900s - VintageEveryday

After the revolution clothing became considerably more standardized and less colorful. Styles were still generally fashionable by world standards, but the colors were replaced with more greys, whites, and creams to save on costs. Women began wearing shorter dresses and skirts and with the rise of Soviet feminism, pants were not uncommon. Men maintained the three piece suit or went with a cap and coat.

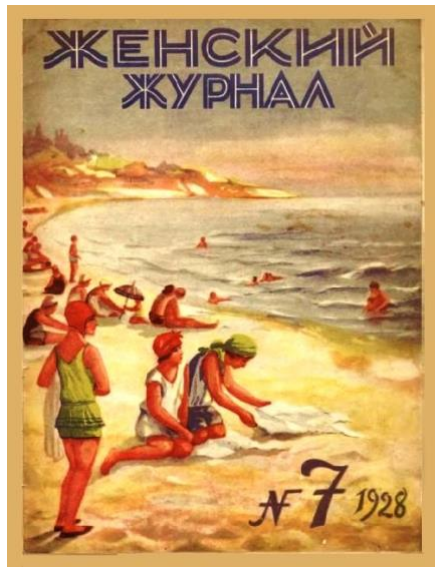


Figure 72 Women's Journal Cover, 1928 - Soviet-art.ru



Figure 73- Soviet Women's Fashion, 1920s - Soviet-art.ru



Figure 70 1920s Women's Uniform



Figure 71 "New Life"; Normal Dress for Men - TheCharnellHouse



Figure 69 1924 Young Pioneers Uniform

Pavel's World (Switzerland and the Dacha)

We spend only a single scene in Switzerland, in a cottage. It is unclear if Kuzmin spent much time in Switzerland and the way he describes the country home is more akin to a Russian dacha than a Swiss chalet. I've included some samples of Swiss chalets and Russian dachas for comparison. What little Kuzmin does state, speaks of snow, sheep, and an oddly high amount of men.



Figure 74 Swiss Chalet (Cottage) in the Mountains - ManiaforBeetles



Figure 75 View of the Rosenlani Glacier with the Wellborn and Wetterhorn, Gabriel Lory Père - Swiss National Library



Figure 76 Garden in Front of a Dacha - GardensinRussia



Figure 77 Russian Dacha - TheGuardian



Figure 78 Russian Dacha Garden - DachaGardening



Figure 79 Russian Dacha - MatadorNetwork

The Sociocultural Context

Russian Modernism

Modernism, as an artistic movement in Russia, was perhaps more impactful than many other parts of Western Europe and the United States. Theatre History texts sometimes treat this era in Russia as synonymous with Konstantin Stanislavsky and Anton Chekhov, when in reality, the majority of artists were not the least bit concerned with the realism they were attempting. In contrast, most theatre artists were considerably avant-garde trying new approaches in anti-realism, physical theatre, and what we now term immersive theatre. It was also a time of sexual and gender exploration. In many ways, St. Petersburg and Moscow, in terms of experimental art, were just as vibrant as the scenes in Berlin or Paris.

The first major artistic movement to be aware of are the Russian symbolists. Like the symbolists of France, their art added a mystical element. The art movement revolved around Valery Bryusov, Fyodor Sologub, Zinaida Gippius, and Vladimir Solovyov in the first generation. They believed art had a critical role in the construction of society's future and drew on mystical religions such as the Jewish Kabbalah, Christian Gnosticism, and Hellenic faiths. They believed that the world would end soon and rise under the wisdom of the Eternal Feminine. The second generation, of which Kuzmin was acquainted, involved Vyacheslav Ivanov, Alexander Blok, and Andrei Bely. They met in Ivanov's tower and wrote poetry, plays, and painted in order to express their new symbolist ideas. Many of the members were also part of the salon created by Sergei Diaghilev called The World of Art. They focused on Gnosticism blended with Dionysian ritual in order to create what they called "theatre as temple" to replace the need for religion in society. While the effort would be short-lived those involved became key contributors to this era of Russian art and include famous poets such as: Mikhail Kuzmin, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Anna Akhmatova, Alexander Blok, Osip Mandelstam, and others.

There is only one symbolist play that gained significant traction, that being Alexander Blok's *The Puppetshow* (1906), acted and directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold and music by Mikhail Kuzmin. The show was the antithesis to the work at the Moscow Art Theatre with cardboard sets that fell over, trope characters, and cranberry juice as fake blood. It was based on the Italian and French styles of *commedia dell'arte* and emphasized the importance of clowning and physical theatre. It was a treatise against realism and through its artifice hoped to advocate for an art that was conscious, aware, and stylized. Today's audiences might refer to it as Brechtian, but this is two decades before the rise of Bertolt Brecht in Western Europe.

After the symbolists, Russian theatre artists began to experiment with short-form dramas or interludes. Vsevolod Meyerhold and Mikhail Kuzmin opened a new theatre called The House of Interludes where avant-garde art was performed with an emphasis on physical theatre, dance, music, and vaudeville. The theatre was short lived but was quickly replaced by cabarets such as The Comedian's Halt in St. Petersburg and The Bat in Moscow. The new cabarets focused on experimental works including Kuzmin's mime-ballets, the *commedia dell'arte* works of Meyerhold, and the pre-absurdist writings of Mayakovsky. Right up until the revolution it appeared as if St. Petersburg and Moscow might become the new artistic centers of Europe.

After the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, there was intense pressure from the new Soviet government to avoid anything that could be considered *bourgeoisie* theatre, such as the majority of the entertainments found in the cabarets. Led largely by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Nikolai Evreinov, and film-maker Sergei Eisenstein, theatre and performance began to shift towards even more experimental methodologies, with a particular emphasis on production and labor. The largest movement amongst this group were the Futurists with Constructivism. Futurism, in Russia, was spurred by the revolution to disavow the past with a celebration of machinery, violence, youth, anti-intellectuality, and urbanism. In theatre, such is the clearest with Meyerhold's *The Death of Tarelkin* which replaced traditional scenery with machinery or even *The Government Inspector* reimaged on the backs of truck beds that came in and out of the stage. During those experiments, Meyerhold developed his *biomechanics* method of acting training, imaging the human body as a machine to be manipulated by the actor, a stark contrast to the early writing of the psychologically based Stanislavsky method (by the 1930s Stanislavsky and Meyerhold both agreed on the importance of physical methods of acting, but it is the often misinterpreted psychological approach that became popular in the U.S.).

Futurism also led to a reimagining of what theatre could be. Perhaps exemplified no better than Nikolai Evreinov's agitprop style theatre. One such public event resulted in a complete restaging of the storming of the winter palace involving nearly 15,000 actors, live naval battles, and active tanks. The event drew over 100,000 spectators and served as propaganda for the newly established Bolshevik government under Vladimir Lenin. Evreinov sought to create a "complete theatre of life", an expansion of the symbolist idea of theatre as temple. Similar agitprop work can be seen in the early films of Eisenstein, such as *Battleship Potemkin* and *Ivan the Terrible*.

Alongside these moments, another group, unsatisfied with the way their colleagues capitulated to the new government, began to experiment with a new form of theatre that was

inherently anti-realistic and flirting with nihilism, one might even say absurd. That group called themselves the Association for Real Art (OBERIU). As leftist groups became more marginalized under the new government, they sought to create a revolutionary art. It is generally considered the precursor to Theatre of the Absurd. The theatre created by this group was nonsensical, full of non-sequiturs, and overly theatrical. The most famous play from this group being *Elizaveta Bam* written by Daniil Kharms. Historically, the group has been credited to Kharms, but recent scholarship by Nikolai Bogomolov instead situates Mikhail Kuzmin as the uncredited center of the group, which helps to classify the otherwise unclassifiable post-revolutionary plays *The Death of Nero* and *Che-Pub-Kha* (meaning nonsense), both of which seem to blend German Expressionism with absurdist traits. Kuzmin, during this time, wrote his manifesto on *Emotionalism*, which ended up in various forms into the manifesto for OBERIU and shows surprising similarities to theatre theorist Antonin Artaud.

As the revolution neared its decade anniversary and Stalin rose in power, theatre became repurposed entirely for the purpose of propaganda. Formally and legally, Stalin established Socialist Realism (a propaganda version of what Stanislavsky developed in his works with Chekhov) as the official theatre of the state, all of forms were disallowed. Avant-garde movements nearly entirely disappeared beyond private gatherings and Russian theatre become inextricably linked to realism, a complete rewriting of history. It was not until the 1980s that theatre historians began to rediscovery these avant-garde works, recreating archives lost after the Artist Purge of 1937 under which most of these artists were killed.

Linked Articles from Russian Modernism (do not share beyond production and cast):

- [Avril Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism*, Cambridge University Press, 1994. \[Chapters 2, 4, and 7\]](#)
- [Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky, *A History of Russian Theatre*, Cambridge University Press, 1999. \[Chapters 13, 14, and 15\]](#)
- [Nikolai Bogomolov, "Mikhail Kuzmin and the Underground," *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture*, ed. Mark Lipovestsky, Oxford University Press, 2021. \[Updated in 2024\]](#)
- [Mikhail Kuzmin, Anna Radlova, Sergei Radlov, and Yuri Yurkun, "Declaration of Emotionalism" trans. Keenan Shionalyn. Abraksus, 1923.](#)

One of the dilemmas of translating queer works is the assumption that queerness operates similarly across geographies and times. Most often, it is American-centric views of queerness that get enforced. There are many beautiful things that American queerness offers, but there are also many things it limits. As a translator, that dynamic presents a dilemma, not only am I shifting language from source to target, but I am also shifting understandings of gender and sexuality that do not always map cleanly. Queerness, by definition, resists normativity and standard definition, so a queer translation must do so as well. The reason I have included this brief section is to inform about the reasoning for some translation choices that may not be apparent.

The primary issue that I encounter when I translate from Russian to English is that the U.S. operates on an identity based queerness, meaning being queer is “who you are” not “what you do”. That manifests in things like a scene where two men share affections is going to immediately be read as gay, and it might well be, but that is sometimes not the case. The reason being that during Kuzmin’s time, sexuality was viewed in St. Petersburg as an expression of gender. That shows up throughout his works when men make statements that “they feel like a woman” and those states may be permanent or temporary. For many queer individuals in Central Eastern Europe, especially trans and gender non-conforming individuals, the enforcement of Western identities has resulted in a marginalization that did not previously exist. Seeing sexuality as an expression of gender, instead freed oneself from forced marginalization. It is also the reason why Poland was one of the first countries to grant legal recognition to transgender individuals as a public health concern (so people could freely express gender). While it might feel regressive for those of us in the United States, the choice to engage in same-sex relationships being compared to becoming the opposite gender opens the possibility for a variety of gender experiences and experiments (at the turn of the century women in particular were dressing and experimenting with life as men, some seeing no conflict with remaining in their heterosexual marriage). Prior to the fall of the Soviet Empire, it was not uncommon for heterosexual men to have multiple same-sex, intersex, or transgender partners. Doing so did not threaten their heterosexual status because sexuality was not an identity, just something one did, like clothes do for gender and it was widely accepted that gender expression varied over one’s lifetime. It is widely believed the same was true for women and transgender individuals, but sadly archival documents rarely include such notes, so it is only speculative.

What that means in translation, is that Russian and Central Eastern-European plays might read to Westerners as very heteronormative when they are in fact queer as fuck. To Westerners, characters might appear closeted, in heterosexual marriages, or in denial of their sexuality. In rehearsal and character development, resist those urges. To me, this is why Kuzmin's plays are so fun, because gender and sexuality are an open playing field. Just because Westerners have decided Kuzmin wrote plays about gay men, doesn't necessarily make that true. In reality, he wrote plays about male-presenting figures who experience what they describe as emotions of women and therefore experience new possibilities for existence. That is not to say these characters aren't gay, they just aren't limited to that strict Western definition. Play with gender, play with sexuality, and resist the binaries of Western society — live in the queer liminal space between.

The second issue that occurs is that queer language does not always translate. If I were to say “light-blue” or *goloboi* in casual conversation, no one is going to think anything odd. In Russia, you might get a knowing look, especially from queer (*keir*) individuals. English has its own phrases, of course, but there is a cultural connection to those Russian phrases that should not be lost. As such, I've intentionally left the Russianisms in the script and tried to notate them to assist actors. Kuzmin documents queerness through color (light-blue or lavender), animals (birds, wings, and specifically pigeons), and cruising (including swimming, coastal fringes, bathhouses, etc.). In Russia, there is a debate on whether to even use queer (*keir*) or gay (*gei*) or use distinctly Russian words. Translators have made various choices over the years which privilege either the Russian or English versions. I made choices that are neither and fall in line with the queer translation approach posited by Brian James Baer, who argues that queers have no homeland so choosing between “East” and “West” is a false choice, instead let us live in the liminal space between them and discover what meaning emerges when we reject the binary, allow the translation to be both Russian and American.

The third issue is that Kuzmin is writing from divergent times, meaning in his earlier years he was freer to express queerness openly, but as the Soviet years progressed, he had to be increasingly careful about how he expressed himself. *The Death of Nero* is a fascinating example because, on the surface, it is Kuzmin's least queer play. Peel back a layer, however, and queerness oozes from every pour. In literary practice, he is using *Aesopian Coding*, using metaphor, symbols, images, colors, or insider language to mask what would otherwise land him in trouble with the censor or other government figures. Aesopian coding has a long practice in European plays, documented as far back as Voltaire working against Cardinal Richelieu's censorship. For contemporary and western audiences, however, queerness is not immediately recognizable because

the meaning of the symbols has been lost to time (and worsened by the HIV-AIDS crisis). For Kuzmin, I've identified code in the form of colors (light-blue and lavender), animals (birds, wings, specifically pigeons), brotherhood, and euphemisms (enthusiast, refined, etc.) There are likely more, enjoy the search. To aid in this work, I've included Yevgeniy Fiks' *Dictionary of the Queer International*.

The final issue that emerges is that the interpretation of Kuzmin himself is fraught with errors. Dan Healey, a scholar of Russian queerness, calls this effect "heteronormative voice" that results from, usually well-intentioned, scholars and artists presenting a work through their own biases. For the Russian context, that usually means hiding queerness. In the Western context, that is imposing divergent views of gender and sexuality. Both equally contribute to erasure of the artist. When working with an artist like Kuzmin, it is important then that we center queerness as they understood it. Be mindful that how queerness is defined in the U.S. is NOT universal, ideas of queerness did not begin at Stonewall, and queerness is more diverse than our perspectives.

Linked Articles from Sexuality and Translation (do not share beyond production and cast):

- [Yevgeniy Fiks, *The Dictionary of the International Queer*, Guelph, 2022.](#)
- [Dan Healey, "Writing and Remembering Russia's Queer Past," *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017, 149-176.](#)
- [Brian James Baer, "Beyond Either/Or: Confronting the Fact of Translation in Global Sexualities Studies", *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer*, Routledge, 2018, 38-57.](#)

Ballroom Culture

Ballroom culture has a long history. In the United States, it is mostly associated with a group trans-inclusive queer artists in New York City during the 1960s to 1980s. Particular to the New York scene, these artists were mostly people-of-color, creating a scene of queer expression due to their exclusion from the mostly white gay bars and discos. The ballroom culture in New York city is another example of decadent cultures emerging during times of oppression.

Ballroom culture itself is fascinating in the way it subverts the ruling class. The ballroom experience itself draws on the roots of Rococo culture (18th and 19th century) and extends it beyond its expected white center in France. Rococo was an artistic movement reacting against the neoclassical conservative Baroque of Western Europe and in many ways was drag itself. The movement attempted to imitate the extravagance of royalty, specifically the opulence of the Palace of Versailles. While many participants would be considered wealthy, they were typically not in the inner circle of royalty. To mimic the styles, artists used cheaper alternatives to create the extravagant feel, often through layers of plaster and stucco. What might appear luxurious is often a façade, like the icing on a cake. The pastels and plaster look extend from architecture, to the visual arts, clothing, make-up, and hair. The images were pastoral and often erotic. Many artists of the time labelled this art as hedonistic.

It was the label of hedonism and the accessibility to imitate extravagance that drew queer artists. Over the next century several queer communities began to appropriate Rococo culture. The most obvious example being Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley in their salons in England which were sumptuous, erotic, and expensive looking. Kuzmin, our playwright, is often classified as a decadent of Russia (though I question such a classification), but nonetheless draws on French extravagance in many of his works, particularly in the years from 1911-1915. The practice, at the turn of the century, developed into what we now term maximalism, or the use of art to show excess.

What emerged was a protest form of art that was meant to empower. As Rococo allowed extravagance to be achieved not through authenticity but through cheap imitation, it was accessible. I didn't need my vase to actually be gold; it just needed to look gold. It is from this idea that many of the elements of ball culture emerged, at least on the aesthetic front. The plastered make-up, the royal attire, the pastel colors, and the over-the-top everything. While disco gave freedom to mostly white gay men and cisgendered women, the less privileged said, "fuck-it, let's party like queens" as in literal queens. For Rococo promises one thing, anyone can be royalty if you make it look that way. It is for

this reason it is not uncommon to see recreations of royal attire in ballroom events, for example a black trans Catherine the Great voguing down a runway.

In general, Rococo has a huge following amongst queer communities, most often the most marginalized and intersectional. It can be seen in the ballroom of the 1980s, the film and tv-show *Interview with a Vampire*, the paintings of Salman Toor, and even the music videos of Sam Smith. Where queer culture becomes intersectional, you are likely to find ballroom culture. I want to emphasize, however, that ballroom culture is not the same as disco and clubbing. Ballroom culture is about creating a family and treating oneself like royalty, disco is about freedom through dancing and music. Within the ballroom community, Sara Ahmed's 'queer feelings' appear in familial structure. Houses were often structures around a mother and children, mimicking straight culture but rejecting its heteronormative reproductive requirements. For queer and trans individuals of color, coming from small towns, mostly in the south, and rejected by their families, the family structure allows a security and safety. It was a familiar structure to imitate without reifying the problematic aspects of heteronormative culture. Amongst gay men, this practice has been traced back hundreds of years in what is termed an Antiochan mentorship (an elder queer mentors a youth queer with varying levels of sexual intimacy). Ball culture families differ, however, primarily in their more diverse structures but also in their general rejection of patriarchal structures. Both are examples of how queer communities have usurped heteronormative models to build safety, structure, and communicate intergenerationally.

Ball culture also brings with it movement that draws on Black and Latinx cultures alongside a bit of appropriation from Eastern Asia (just as the queer modernists did) and Eastern Europe (the part of Europe that is often excluded from whiteness). Voguing, as it is referred to now, is a series of movements similar to pantomime or as Kuzmin called it 'mime ballet'. Through these dance moments, houses could compete, settle differences, and critique each other productively (i.e. 'throwing shade' or 'reading' people). Voguing is split into three distinct eras. The Old Way (before 1980) is focused on symmetry with hard lines and angles. It is more reminiscent of Egyptian portrayals of humans in profile and blended break-dance, Eastern style movements, popping (a common post-modern dance move not that dissimilar from some Fosse movements), and posing. The New Way, emerging in the 1980s and becoming common in the 1990s loses the rigid angles for more fluid motion, blending elements of contortionism and creating illusions with the hands and arms, a more circus like performance which occasionally draws on the performance practices of Eastern Europe. In the mid 1990s, the Vogue Fem style started to emerge drawing on the rigid lines

and angles of the Old Way but adding a sense of feminine presentation with a focus on the hands and adding in elements such as the catwalk, duckwalk, dips, and floor work. What most people think of as Vogueing today is Vogue Fem as is the most common style in contemporary drag art and ballroom culture, and exemplified in the *Cats: The Jellicle Ball* on Broadway now. All three styles continue to be practiced in different subgroups, and it is important to note that this work emerged amongst queers of color, but did appropriate from cultures worldwide (both white and non-white).

- [Marlon M. Bailey, "Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture," *Feminist Studies*, 37, 2, 2011.](#)
- [Albert Solanas Valldaura, "Mother has Arrived!: Queer Kinship, Care Practices, and Reconfigurations of \(M\)otherhood within Ballroom Culture.," *Junctions*, 8, 2, 2024.](#)
- [Malcom Rio \(Rio UltraOmni\), "Architecture is Burning.: An Urbanism of Queer Kinship in Ballroom Culture," *Thresholds*, 48, 2020.](#)
- Also see the film: *Paris is Burning*, directed by Jennie Livingston, Second Sight Films, 2009. Available on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJ7r5FaqBx8>

Drag as a Performance Tool

Drag has a long history both within and beyond the queer community. Drag has been practiced as long as theatre has been around. As a history often connected to queer communities it is also a history that is impossible to write, due to erasure of archives and the ways in which it often resists gender and sexuality, intentionally masking its presence. I don't wish to relay the entire history of drag, but there are a few key elements that I wish to highlight as we discuss how it became a queer art. One of the earlier examples from Theatre History is Aristophanes *Lysistrata* which some consider feminist for some odd reason as it was in reality a bunch of men in drag mocking women. In its earliest usages, drag was oppressive and not yet a central part of queer culture until more recently. As we enter the enlightenment era we see the foundation of the Court structure. Within the courts (specifically French and Russian), we see the emergence of dragged ballrooms. Several times a year, the royal court, along with an evening of theatrical performance called *ballet du cour*, would don the attire of the opposite sex and allow all sorts of shenanigans to ensue. Such an event is assuredly queer, but also extremely privileged. Contemporary scholarship now documents several royal rulers throughout European history who seemed to hold an extraordinarily large amount of these balls, which we now consider it their attempt to find socially acceptable ways for their queer gender expression (almost every European country documents a scandal of royal drag events being linked to queer sexual expression). As we enter the vaudeville years, however (late 19th and early 20th century), drag begins to take on new meaning in performance specifically with female impersonators, many now known to be queer. It wasn't uniquely queer, however, as it was a common practice amongst relatively heteronormative groups and was not seen as subversive...yet. During the vaudeville years, drag became a route for actors of color to find work in the United States, though it was not uncommon for white actors to mimic their performances often extended into racist mockery, thereby gaining their own popularity. Such often required actors of color to match the racist portrayals in order to gain an audience, a part of the problematic history of minstrelsy.

Beginning in the 1920s, as the United States began to follow several conservative tactics, drag began to be associated negatively with the queer community and labelled a subversive performance style. Utah has a particularly long history of creating that oppressive culture by becoming one of the earliest locations to ban drag performance, particularly that of Julian Etlinge, a close friend of B. Morris Young, locally known as Madame Pattirini (in an odd moment of synchronicity Etlinge became the subject Kuzmin's drag play *The American Phenomenon*). Just recently, Utah was part of a federal ruling requiring drag to be allowed as a form of free expression (Southern

Utah Drag Stars v. City of St. George). Drag is now often maligned as part of the culture wars and several US states have attempted to ban the art.

By the middle of the 20th century, drag culture became intimately intertwined with the queer community as a form of liberating art and it is well documented that drag queens and trans women of color contributed greatly towards the gay liberation movement in the United States that began to gain traction in the 1950s and 1960s, despite the often anti-trans and patriarchal rhetoric from some gay communities. Drag is now fairly ubiquitous but has not fully lost its history in problematic usages. Many queer theorists have strong criticisms of mainstream drag such as RuPaul's drag race as a contemporary form of minstrelsy, but strong and emancipatory expressions of drag exist in nearly all parts of the country both rural and urban.

In order to understand how drag functions in performance and why many queers are critical of certain forms of drag, we first need to understand what the term refers to separate it from the problematic elements that connect it to minstrelsy. Kareem Khubchandani, the academic alter-ego of the drag queen known as LaWhore Vagistan, states it eloquently:

[drag] comes less from the fantasies of crossing gender, and more from the *invention of gender* and the *creation of alternative worlds*. Also, gender is *not* the only or primary identity or politic being staged: race, nation, language, religion, are all salient parts of drag, as are the multitude of visual, literary, and media references cited by performers in their music, dress, movement, and make-up.

Drag is not just about gender; it is about intertextual transgression. It is about taking ideas and pulling on them, exaggerating them, and creating something entirely new to say something. It embeds cultures both queer and beyond. Historically, drag has been largely centered on critique or experiences of gender crossing, but has since become something much more. No where in that description does it state drag must be done by those presenting male, certain body types, or abilities. When something, anything is dragged, it is extended and placed in front of audiences to look at it anew, and any body can do that.

If you haven't noticed, I have failed to define drag and that choice was intentional. So now that you have a background in history and how drag works, let me use Khumchandani's definition:

Drag is a genre of performance practiced [. . .] by and/or for gender and sexual dissidents — primarily the people who fall under the category of queer and transgender, but also many others at the margins of normative gender and sexual configurations. Drag artists exploit the aesthetics of gender in mainstream culture [. . .] to transform themselves.

It is the very concept of exploitation here that I want to focus on. When we drag, what we are really doing is taking advantage of pre-established cultural norms, refracting them, and asking our audiences to see something ridiculous, funny, stupid, gross, disturbing, or just plain entertaining in its existence and possibly even rejecting those norms by doing so. When we say we are dragging this show, that doesn't mean we are just exaggerating genders (though of course we will do that). We are dragging authoritarianism, populism, savior-complexes, marriage, Christianity, gender roles, white privileged gay men, the entire Russian literary canon (which theatre in the West has largely accepted), and of course gender and sexuality. There are so many layers to the drag in this show that it will take a lot to fully unpack and critique.

So how does one "drag" a play. First, we have to understand what the play is trying to accomplish. There is a reason the dramaturgical packet for this play is so intense, drag is brain work, because you first have to understand that which you wish to dismantle. As we enter the first few weeks of rehearsal, consider what it is this play is putting front and center to critique, observe, mock, disturb, or subvert. Then imagine what that thing or idea is in society today. Then take it to the extreme, what does that thing or idea mean if we amp it up to 100 or remove the barriers society has placed to keep it under control. What does the *worst* version of gender, politics, sexuality, populism, or religion create and how do we then perform that on our bodies. Consider what tools you have: gestures, facial expressions, movement, tone of voice. Then consider what things you can add such as make-up, hair, costumes, props, etc. Lean into maximalism here, drag is not understated. Interestingly, these are also the tools of theatre. Finally, consider your audience. Drag is by and/or for queers. Heteronormative people will be in the audience, but this art is not for them. What messages, what insider knowledge, what jokes, what local references, what whatever you can add to make this touch the queers in the audience. When we ask you to drag a play, we are asking you to put aside your belief in the power of Stanislavsky style acting and instead start playing with your own body to amplify the themes of the story to make it relevant to the queer community nearest. Don't relive trauma on stage, there are plenty of plays about queer trauma, instead subvert and through the violence and sexuality and the disgust...create joy.

- Mark Edward and Stephen Farrier, "Dragging Up the Past: The Impossibility of a Drag History", *Drag Histories, Herstories, and Hairstories: Drag in a Changing Scene*, Methuan Drama, 2020.
- [Kareem Khubchandani and Bhakti Shringarpure, *Deconolize Drag*, OR Books, 2023. \[Chapter 1\]](#)
- [Palak Jayswal, "Drag in Utah is Older than the State," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 18 Apr 2023.](#)

The Scholarly Context

The Death of Nero in the Russian Context

The Death of Nero is an all but unknown play in Russia despite Mikhail Kuzmin's name being relatively known due to his poetry. Despite theatre being the playwright's primary field, few are aware of his theatrical work. Furthering complicating, the stage, in Russia, has never received the benefit of loosened censorship that publication has. Kuzmin's plays have been censored for a variety of reasons but most often for overt homoeroticism (for things like a kiss between men) or discussing the clergy (which was illegal on stage until the 1917 revolution). Layering on the complexity, Putin passed the anti-gay propaganda law in 2014, furthering expanding it in 2022, making study of queer cultural figures by Russian nationals incredibly difficult. Most of the writings on Kuzmin since, have been attempts to further relegate him to the dustbin of history. Due to the anti-authoritarian criticism, *The Death of Nero* would have been illegal to stage during Kuzmin's time (the homoerotic element would have been technically legal in the 1920s, but would have drawn attention which most theatres were attempting to avoid). After 2022, the play would once again be illegal to perform in Russia, at least without significant adaptation. The one Kuzmin related production, produced by Gogol Center in 2017 and 2020, resulted in the government arresting the Artistic Director (on made-up charges).

In 2020, Lada Panova, a Kuzmin scholar wrote an op-ed for the online Moscow based journal *Colta*, "*On the 90th Anniversary of Mikhail Kuzmin's On the Death of Nero: Is it Not Time to Stage It?*" In that article she draws comparison to Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, notes the critiques of authoritarianism, and marks the play as perhaps the best modernist play from Russia, necessitating performance and further study. Now six years since that article, due to the war with Ukraine and increasing global tension, Russia is under another era of intense authoritarianism. No production of the play occurred and in the current political environment, it is impossible.

Few scholars in Russia write about Kuzmin's theatre in general, although it is quite common to read about his poetry. The work related to Kuzmin, however, owes a great debt to P.V. Dmitriev and A.G. Timofeev, archivists and scholars who gathered many of Kuzmin's plays, archived them in the St. Petersburg Theatre Library and published them in the West (through Berkeley University Press). Neither scholar has not contributed anything in the past several years, the reasons are unclear and attempts to contact have not been returned (it is not abnormal for Western scholars to be ignored by Russian scholars, either due to safety concerns or nationalistic views).

Within Russia, two scholars are actively writing and publishing. The first Lada Panova, who was recently working from UCLA and continues to advocate for a production of *The Death of Nero*. She recently published a new version of the play (which ours is translated from) alongside new archival materials shedding light on unexplored aspects. She is one of the few scholars within the Russian context who acknowledges the queerness of Kuzmin's works as center to the art rather than a peripheral footnote. The second, Veronika Zuseva-Ozkan, examines Kuzmin from the perspective of his female characters. Her claims note misogyny and ask to dismiss the playwright entirely, though her definition of misogyny is never given and therefore her claims cannot be tested and as such I have not included her writings in this packet (but am happy to share if you are interested). Lada Panova classifies Kuzmin as a writer with a "misogynistic slant" due to navigating queerness within a patriarchal society. I am mostly in agreement with Panova, in that when queerness is centered misogyny becomes less frequent, but there remain problematic elements to be mindful of such as antisemitism, Orientalism, and the occasional disparaging comment about women within the context of his own same-sex relationships.

Linked Articles from the Russian Context (do not share beyond production and cast):

- [Lada Panova, "К 90-летию пьесы М. Кузмина «Смерть Нерона»: не пора ли ее поставить? \[On the 90th anniversary of Mikhail Kuzmin's play 'The Death of Nero: Is not it time to stage it?'\]", Colta.ru, 2020. \[Machine Translated\]](#)
- [Lada Panova, "The Death of Nero by M.A. Kuzmin as Political Theater." *Zvezda*, 10, 2022. \[Machine Translated\]](#)

The Death of Nero in the Western Context

Beyond Russia, Kuzmin's theatre has received a bit more attention, but is still a peripheral foot-noted figure. His poetry is studied in most Russian Literature graduate courses, but his theatre is mostly unknown. What has been written has also been written primarily by literature scholars, not theatre or performance studies scholars which introduces problematic elements (words on the page in theatre do not always mean the same thing on stage as most theatre artists know). Exemplifying this concern, George Cheron, in the 1970s, wrote the first major analysis of Kuzmin's theatre for his dissertation. Many problematic elements emerge such as making the claim that misogyny was central to all of Kuzmin's plays, completing ignoring that nearly every moment he cited was in fact a moment of queerness (i.e. nearly all cases were gay male characters seeking to remove their lover from a bisexual love triangle or attempting to communicate to women they were not sexually interested). Cheron's dissertation has been cited as the evidence for all further analysis immediately relegating Kuzmin's works to the periphery without scholarly agreement on the issue (to date only Panova and I have questioned this thesis). I discuss this in the next section, but the work typifies what Russian queer scholar Dan Healey calls "heteronormative voice," that ignores the queerness of the artist, makes faulty assumptions about relationships (i.e. "they were roommates", "how dare he dismiss that beautiful woman, he must hate women") or places western concepts of queerness onto non-western subjects (i.e. "he slept with a man so must be gay", "that woman he always hangs around must be a fag hag"). As such, even Western scholarship must be treated with a lens of skepticism when discussing this playwright. Specifically with *The Death of Nero*, most scholarship entirely ignores the queer plots by focusing only on the historical critique.

A few scholars, almost entirely women or queer, have contributed positively to the study of Kuzmin and this play. The first is Marie-Louise Bott, who made the audacious claim that *The Death of Nero* directly influenced the famous and canonized novel, *Master and Margarita*. When she made the claim, nearly 40 years ago, she was almost entirely dismissed. However, Panova and I have now traced the lineage of the scripts and the thematic similarities and have supported her original thesis, and anecdotally academics now appear less dismissive. Bott also claimed that Kuzmin wrote overtly political theatre, which every other critic at the time either ignored or disagreed with focusing only on a small subset of light comedies. Bott's work is now foundational to the study of this play, and her pioneering effort must be acknowledged. Since Bott, only one other Western scholar besides myself has addressed this play. Judith Kalb specifically wrote about the embedded political critique

within the work and its complexity. Kalb acknowledges the queerness, but focused her analysis on the ties to Lenin and Stalin.

My dissertation and upcoming publication on the play (currently under peer-review with *Canadian Slavonic Papers*) is the first to directly examine the layers of queerness in the work which I classify as a form of sado-masochistic performance (borrowing from the queer theory put forward by Elizabeth Freeman). I mark the play as modelling the three stages of sadomasochistic performance through the acts (Act I is mixing pleasure and violence, Act II abandons pleasure and is purely violent, Act III rejects violence and allows pleasure to win). Additionally, Lada Panova continues to publish on the play in both Russia and the West.

Linked Articles from the Western Context (do not share beyond production and cast):

- [Marie-Luise Bott, “On the play by Mikhail Kuzmin ‘The Death of Nero’ 1928-1929”, *Studies in the Life and Works of Mixail Kuzmin*, ed. John Malmstad, Wiener Slawistischer Almanach, 1989, 141-152. \[Machine Translated\]](#)
- [Judith Kalb, “The Politics of an Esoteric Plot: Mikhail Kuzmin’s The Death of Nero”, *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 20, 1, 1993, 35-49.](#)
- [Keenan Shionalyn, “Sex and Violence in Leningrad: Queer Temporalities and Historioplasticity in Kuzmin’s Post-Revolutionary Drama”, *Canadian Slavonic Papers: Special Issue Writing Back from the Periphery* \(Expected in Spring 2027\)](#)

Queer Theory: Reparative Reading, Metamodernism, Futurity, Failure, Feelings, Temporalities, and Mourning

While Queer Theory can and often is, intimidating in its depth and scope, I wanted to provide a brief overview of a few critical areas of queer theory that may help this production. It is impossible to cover all of queer theory, which is as diverse as queerness itself, but I hope this serves as a brief guide. If you want to know more, reach out, this is my specialty. The first thing to make clear is that queer is not a sexuality, it is a state of being. To be queer is to reject normativity or the traditional societal ways of being in the world, to queer something means to reject its normal interpretation and find something new. Non-normative sexualities are inherently queer by definition, but heterosexual individuals might be queer also, Kuzmin was particularly drawn to the heterosexual women who aligned themselves with gay men in rejecting patriarchal society. [Warning: Queer theory is DENSE, even experienced scholars struggle, be kind to yourself]

Reparative Reading and Metamodernism

One of the foundational texts within queer theory is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading. Sedgwick argues that the *modus operandi* for scholars is to read from a paranoid standpoint. Such a take comes from post-modernistic theories that ask us to deconstruct everything down to its core and find as many problematic elements as possible. When reading through such patterns, everything becomes [identity]phobic and by the end there is no art in which to enjoy. That urge directly created the cancel culture that we are all now intimately aware of, which is inherently an anti-intellectual and conservative tactic. Such a tactic has its merits in questioning power structures and dynamics to help dismantle oppressive systems; however, it can equally be oppressive itself, which is what Metamodernism as theory postulates, alongside the reality that American scholars largely misinterpreted post modernistic theory, specifically Lyotard and Foucault.

Reparative reading, as posited by Sedgwick, asks us to consider the possibility of what may emerge within a work when it is not just a singular thing, but instead a part of a larger ecosystem. Such a tactic is essential when reading works by historical figures who are queer as they are navigating systems considerably different than our own and sometimes what reads today as problematic was essential to their survival. Key to the practice of reparative reading is centering the identity of the artist. We do not treat Kuzmin as an artist who happens to be queer (footnoting it), but ask what it means for queerness to be central to his work. The idea is, especially for queer individuals, we cannot separate ourselves from that existence so to read our art as distinct from that reality is futile. For Kuzmin, that means we read his works through a queer lens, seeing and allowing

all aspects of queerness, positive and negative to emerge. When moments of misogyny appear, we don't dismiss, but start by asking "how does misogyny operate for Kuzmin, why did he make such a choice, what does that communicate to us about queerness at that time?" But reparative reading goes one step further to ask, "How does Kuzmin's art change **if** misogyny is not a central tenet, but merely as side-effect of his reality?" That shift alters our perception of the work and allows even problematic elements to do queer work. This work allows artists to be flawed humans and frees queer and minoritarian individuals from being set-up upon pedestals with standards that even most of us today would fail to uphold. Sometimes reparative reading allows us to read works well beyond what the original artist intended, for example a few years ago I reworked a Kuzmin play about two gay men into a transgender coming-out story due to the possibilities of how queerness was expressed in the Russian language. In my opinion, reparative reading is what good theatre has always done, imagined life to a work beyond its original intent, new vision, new ideas, new futures.

Such is the key cornerstone of Metamodernism as theory and art, which is intimately connected to queer theory. Metamodernism, as put forward by Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm, asks us to take on a *zetetic* outlook, which means to not know. Instead of requiring everything to have an answer, we lean into the doubt to find what new knowledge we can discover. It also asks us to consider new ways of knowing beyond archives (hylosemiotics), allowing things like the environment, our bodies, our emotional responses, gestures, and animals to inform our thinking. He builds upon Sedgwick's thinking and asks what new knowledges emerge when learning itself can come from anything in our environment. Interestingly, Metamodernism, while a new theory developed only within the past decade, shares much with Kuzmin's concepts of *Emotionalism*. Perhaps, queer knowledge has been doing more work historically than we give it credit for.

Queer Futurity

One of the central theories that I have utilized in my study of Kuzmin is Jose Muñoz' concept of queer futurity. Muñoz is often compared against the work of Lee Edelman, much in the way Meyerhold and Stanislavsky are pitted against each other in theatre. Edelman looked at queer culture and noticed a destructiveness or rather a lack of care toward future and consequences. Using Freudian analysis, he argued that queers had a death drive interest due to their rejection from society. Since society has rejected us there is no point in production and therefore, we must live entirely in the moment — a 'fuck-it-all' attitude. Jose Muñoz did not necessarily disagree with Edelman but by looking at more intersectional aspects of queerness noticed that that did not hold

universally true. Specifically, when small communities of queerness formed, a hopeful attitude reemerged. Muñoz then hypothesized about queer utopia, stating that queer utopias can be reached or at least approached, however, we must first dismantle the systemic barriers preventing our joy. Most often, that is in the form of heteronormative expectations of reproduction and capitalistic production. When those barriers are removed a concrete utopia is formed that is not idealized, it is realized. Systemic oppression is destroyed and queer joy emerges. Most helpful in creating queer utopia is a recognition of queerness beyond the white experience through what he calls *disidentifications*, where heteronormativity is neither rejected nor accepted, but individuals live in the liminal space between, co-opting heteronormative structures for survival (not joy) until the entire system can be safely dismantled. *Disidentifications* are not unique to people of color but help to bring nuance to a queer world that would have us believe queerness is only acceptable for rich white gay men (a function of capitalistic patriarchy).

For the past two decades queer scholars have largely oscillated between Muñoz and Edelman, that is until recently. As the queer research subgroup of ASTR (American Society for Theatre Research) met in Denver last year, we, as queer theorists, were undergoing another schism within queer theory (there have been many). The shift in the field has become darker, exemplified by Anohni's quote, "You're doomed and I'm doomed and your children are doomed," the time for hope is over, the beauty we once had is dead and no amount of hope will change that, hope is a distinctly heterosexual privilege. What we can do, however, is mourn and preserve what remains so there is less to mourn in the future. We are no longer interested in continuing the society that led us here and lied to us about progress but live with an intense desire to share queer knowledges with queers of the future, whose better world we cannot guarantee. What intrigues me about this discussion, is that the trend was observable not only in contemporary art across the globe, but in the art scholars were writing about, as those ideas were just as prevalent in the intense global transitions of the 1920s. Perhaps, queer history is refracting.

So where does that leave us with futurity. Are queer utopias even possible? I am inclined to agree with Kuzmin, yes, but society as a whole must be rejected first. We cannot "save" humanity, we only create small communities of queerness and care for each other on the individual scale. To save is to act as a colonizer of joy. To return to Anohni, the Great Barrier Reef is dead ("society"), hope does not change that. We can and should mourn its loss and the future we are now robbed of, but we must now determine what it means to be in a world in which it does not exist. For queers, we cannot continue to place our trust in historical progress and must form our own communities so

that the knowledge of those who do not survive this crisis can be shared with the queers of the future. I know that is dark, but it is where queer researchers are, in our moment in time. Perhaps it will change, but seeing Kuzmin's thoughts a century ago suggest we are more likely to repeat. The solace is not in changing society, but in finding our community and documenting queer legacy.

Queer Failure

One thing that heteronormative capitalistic society requires is production. We must contribute to society through reproduction or through productive capacity by generating capital. Under such a model, capital generation must be optimized and continually growing. Queer failure, an idea put forward by Jack/Judith Halberstam rejects such an idea inherently. Halberstam wrote alongside Muñoz, documenting the way queerness operates within society to disrupt and dismantle heteronormativity. Unlike a lot of academic theory, Halberstam does so by exploring popular, not “great” forms of art. To Halberstam we can learn just as much from SpongeBob as we can from Da Vinci. Particularly for queer failure, Halberstam examines the camp film *Dude, Where's My Car*, examining the way the film portrays both heterosexuality and homosexuality. Specifically, they notice that queerness seems to become societally acceptable once individuals have already been judged as failures due to their stupidity, forgetfulness, and negation (note: this is gendered, it is only white men who get this privilege, but it can be co-opted). As stupid men, they fail to contribute adequately to the capitalistic production model so therefore it is safe for them to explore queerness, and how they do. After being shown to be failures, the two are free to engage in considerable homoeroticism from body rubs to making out with each other to intimidate riders in another car, which is funny not because they are gay but because they are stupid. In doing so, however, queerness ceases to be a threat, despite all the many problematic elements of the film. Halberstam, from that portrayal, generated the theory of queer failure, as in ‘failure is something queers do and have always done, exceptionally well’. Instead of seeing such as a negative trait, it is a celebration, it is route through that doesn't rely on naïve hope but emancipatory rejection of the systems themselves. By refusing to define success by the standards set by our society, but instead by ourselves, we allow ourselves a pathway toward queer futurity, a concrete utopia. Stupidity and forgetfulness are just some of many pathways to do so not apart from society but from within. Such is not to say that all queers must now be stupid, but rather than celebrating failure, refusing to require perfection or capitalistic gain, joy can be found even within a world set upon oppression. No amount of policing will return a failed queer to production, so it isn't worth the capitalistic cost to reform. In theatre, that means

comedy is a far more powerful tool for societal change not because it reforms society as tragedy attempts to do, but rather imagines a new world without the need to reform in the first place (another great example is *Schitt's Creek*).

So how do we, as artists, then embrace queer failure. Primarily, it means we set aside productive requirements. The success of *The Death of Nero* is not going to be defined on how many tickets we sell, how great the reviews are, or how much Salt Lake City will change (spoiler alert: not much if any). Instead, we define success ourselves. Your definition might vary. For me, the translator and dramaturg, success is that Kuzmin's knowledge has a chance to exist across time and space, we get to create something new, and in doing so we have a chance to once again build a small queer community creating moments of joy. That we present a story about violence and authoritarian rule, and we playfully laugh while doing so in direct rejection of the oppression we are supposed to feel. The rest is material. I am sure writing such is not what most producers want to see, but I am confident such mentality is in line with Three Penny Theatre's goals. I hope by doing so, it also allows you to find joy in failing, in allowing your designs/directing/acting choices to not reach the perfect image in your head and enjoy it for what they are, perhaps even celebrating when they go spectacularly wrong. Perfection is heteronormative, finding joy in failure is queer.

Queer Feelings and Temporalities

Related to both Halberstam and Muñoz is contemporary queer theorist Sara Ahmed, who proposes 'queer feelings' and 'sodomasochism' as queer states. To Ahmed, 'queer feelings' occur when traditional heteronormative structures are made queer. In the case of our play, we are rewriting Emperor Nero through drag and homoeroticism. Was Nero bisexual? Historically, yes, but that isn't the queerness this play is about. What makes our Nero queer is the mockery of his character as something desirable to emulate. Recently, multiple surveys have shown that up to 43% of men think about Rome every day. Showing Nero, who epitomizes what Rome really was, an autocratic authoritarian kleptocracy through drag, usurps that idea. In reality, by dragging such a history we are saying, "Look at Nero, see how queer he was...this...this is what you are thinking about multiple times per day...that is pretty queer, welcome friend." The very act of drag (which in this case might be closer to Burlesque) makes expected heteronormative structures queer and opens the door to question all sorts of things (i.e. If Ancient Rome was really queer, is my understanding of history correct? What does that mean about my support of similar authoritarian leaders today?)

To Ahmed, 'queer feelings' becomes a celebratory act for queer individuals and absolutely terrifies individuals intent upon enforcing heteronormativity. It is also just really fun. However, Ahmed goes further and postulates that while 'queer feelings' can be fun, there are practices enacted by otherwise heteronormative individuals that make such practices even more impactful. Ahmed notes particularly, how sadomasochism functions in such a role. By blending violence with sexuality, historical trauma is engaged but subverted to become pleasurable. Freudian analysis would consider this a compulsion or maladaptation, but Ahmed finds it an intentional choice. Ahmed suggests it has been so successful historically, that sadomasochism has now entered mainstream society through a variety of media. What was once something for the gay and lesbian perverts in leather outfits is in every heterosexual marriage or relationship in need of a bit more spice.

Elizabeth Freeman, another queer scholar questioning how history and time function, finds another purpose for sadomasochism. For Freeman, sadomasochism is less about sex than it is about the expression of pleasure. In that expression, lies potential. According to Freeman, when history is considered as a whole, society is constantly torn between violence and pleasure as the *modus operandi* for a functioning society. It is of no surprise that in many histories of the fall of Rome, it is an obsession with sex and homosexuality that gets the blame for the fall of society. As such, pleasure has now come to be synonymous with the word decadence, which in reality refers to the fall or destructive habits of society (something Lee Edelman believed queers embraced). However, when subverted through performance, history can be rewritten, according to Freeman.

The general concept of sadomasochistic performance is that history as the average person believes, communicates that society is progressing and that the world for our children will be better than the one we had. That belief is called *chrononormativity*. Any reasonable historian will tell you that is absolutely false and that while societies do make progressive leaps, they are almost always followed by intense retractions and violence almost always wins. In the long scale of things, we are about as progressive as we ever been, advanced in some areas and retracted in others in a constant negotiation of freedoms. Queer theory suggests, rather that history tends to cycle, not progress. What limited progress has been seen has been quickly retracted and only ever existed for the most privileged in society, most of the world and the global majority are experiencing one of the most restrictive moments in history largely due to the lasting impacts of colonization. Such a view of history becomes clear the moment ones begins reading beyond the prepared canon of art (the canon was specifically chosen to reinforce a very particular narrative). That is not to say we are at the

lowest point the world has ever seen, but rather stating that our current oppressive state is rather normal, not an oddity. In the fight between pleasure and violence, violence has won historically.

Through performance, however, history can be rewritten and pleasure can win. Freeman situates sadomasochistic performance into three stages. The first is the juxtaposition of pleasure and violence. You see such in Act 1 of *The Death of Nero* where queer pleasure and violent acts are discussed side by side. Of particular note, in sadomasochistic performance, such pleasure and violence are always in the near past or near future, which creates a sense of anticipation (yes, Rocky Horror knows this part of queer history). The importance for Freeman, is that such violence is historically referent. In our play, that is the real violence enacted by Nero. The second step is abandoning of pleasure, allowing violence to win, mimicking the reality of history. In Act Two, Nero ceases to experience true pleasures and always returns to violence. Pavel and Marie form a love out of cruelty and power, not pleasure on its own. Specifically, Pavel is shown to be determined to save humanity, which according to Kuzmin and queer theory is a false pathway. The third act is where queerness intervenes. Under sadomasochistic performance, pleasure must win, utopia must emerge. However, in order to do so we must confront our complicity with historical violence. In *The Death of Nero*, Nero must die. Historically, Pavel would then step in as the next Nero, continuing the cycle, but instead he abandons society entirely. Marie and Nero choose violence, Pavel chooses pleasure, but only allowed to see that pathway through the help of Margarita, queerness always has a friend. Pavel's life begins away from society, in a *dacha* in Switzerland with his queer lover (i.e. his brother). The final scene reminds that historical violence WILL still try to reemerge, queer utopia is fleeting.

Queer Mourning and Death

We are now in the most uncharted territory of queer theory, so much so that it hasn't even reached publication. Within theatre studies there are about 10-15 of us writing about this new direction, but it is living entirely in the land of observations and theory...so bear with me. Instead of theorizing Queer Death, which needs more space than I wish to bore you with, instead I want to consider the moral of our play, *The Death of Nero*. What are we supposed to take away from the play? The obvious answer is also perhaps the least satisfying, "we must prevent future Neros." Of course we must, but we've been learning that lesson since grade school. We all read *The Diary of Anne Frank*, yet history repeated once again. So instead, I want to resituate our approach entirely.

By all means, if and when possible, stop authoritarian rulers from gaining power, doing so extends the possibilities of queer utopia, but they WILL get power again. Instead, I want to reframe

into a state of mourning. Instead of hoping the inevitable will never occur, instead I want to consider what we do when the thing we fear most does indeed happen. When, once again, it is no longer safe to be queer, how to carry that history forward. Kuzmin's solution is simple, community. Kuzmin is not alone in that thinking, in reality, it is an extremely common trait amongst queer writers historically.

The issue is that heteronormative society finds that answer unsatisfactory, it doesn't fit the narrative of chrononormativity. Such an act is unneeded if society is getting better...but as queers know, society is indeed not getting better, so it is entirely necessary. Through history, heteronormative voice appears in scholarship around queer writers documenting this concern as it is almost always phrased in the most selfish of terms. Queer artists are labelled 'aesthetes', only concerned with art itself or 'decadents' bringing about the fall of society through frivolous art. I want to instead invite you to consider Richard Dellamora's alternative, something he notices after looking at the writings of Vernon Lee and Oscar Wilde. If Lee Edelman's death drive analysis were true, then in each case, 'aesthetic' or 'decadence' might make sense. However, what Dellamora notices is that in these moments of abandoning society, queer writers never leave their characters alone. They have a brother, a close friend, or journey to new lands with new people. As Dellamore states, "genius requires a friend." The reason so much of this genre of queer art appears unclassifiable is that it isn't written for the society in which it emerges, but for a future queer community in a different time and space. Kuzmin didn't write *The Death of Nero* for Soviet Russians, he wrote it for future queer communities, obvious in the reality that he never bothered to try to publish (much like Bulgakov with *Master and Margarita*). Instead, new queer theory, which is actively developing, is reclassifying these writers as participants under the umbrella of 'the queer comradeship of outlawed thought', with a nod to Oscar Wilde for the phrasing. In essence, we aren't documenting the fall of society, we are mourning it, but we as queers know that our history must be preserved, so we share it. We also know what we are writing and sharing isn't popular, easy to digest, and often illegal, so we communicate it very carefully. We write our stories, we perform our plays, and we leave our characters with a friend. These friends travel, they cross borders, they resist white supremacy, and they build new utopias, even if it takes another hundred years...and who knows how many times we read these stories to children at bedtime, safely hidden for future generations wrapped in a coded bow of a fairy tale.

So now, queer scholars are worried about documentation not reform. How do we archive knowing that governments will destroy what we save (Kuzmin is an example for that), how do we

create a network of sharing that resists oppression. If one of is lost, how do we ensure the story continues. The answer to me, is why productions like this are important. By performing *The Death of Nero*, we are imagining a future in which the authoritarian cycle is broken and queer joy flourishes, even if just between two people. Performance is more powerful than archives because it takes an ensemble. Everyone involved is now a human archive. The stories are carried forward through each designer, each director, each producer, each actor, and each audience member. While this may be a dark ending to this mini-essay, I want to quote a friend I met at the previously mentioned ASTR conference, whom I will leave unnamed for safety, “some of us are going to die and won’t make it through this moment, how will the rest of you carry forward our stories.” For Kuzmin, this play reached us because close friends recognized its importance and hid it away for years only to emerge when it was a bit safer. My hope is that we form a small community here and if the worse does happen, some of us are able to carry forward this story alongside our own. By placing it upon our bodies through acting, design, or just sharing space, we resist the violence of history and advocate for pleasure to be the eventual victor. We must mourn our society, for there remains beauty within it, but it is dead, and we must now tell our stories for future queerness in all its forms to flourish. It is for that reason that Jose Muñoz states, “Queerness is not yet here.”

Linked Articles Included from Queer Theory (do not share beyond production and cast):

- [Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You”, *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, Duke University Press, 1997.](#)
- [José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York University Press, 2009. \[Introduction\]](#) Also see his book: *Disidentifications*
- [Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Duke University Press, 2004. \[Chapter 1: The Future is Kid Stuff\]](#)
- [Jack/Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Duke University Press, 2011. \[Intro, Chapter 2 and 3\]](#)
- [Elizabeth Freeman, “Turn the Beat Around: Sadomasochism, Temporality, History”, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Perverse Modernities, 2010.](#)
- [Sara Ahmed, “Queer Feelings”, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Edinburgh University Press, 2014.](#)
- [Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm, *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory*, The University of Chicago Press, 2021. \[Chapters 5 and 6\]](#)

Section 3:

Dramaturgical

and

Production

Archive

[Files to be updated over the course of the production. Items already planned for archive include production photographs, cast photos, marketing materials, press releases, and reviews (if any). The archive however, can be whatever want and/or think represents this show and the people involved.

If there specific things you'd like to include (i.e. drafts, notes, etc.), let me know!]