



**Key Words**  
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edited by  
**David Alderson**  
**Catherine Clay**  
**John Connor**  
**Tony Crowley**  
**Emily Cuming**  
**Ben Harker**  
**Angela Kershaw**  
**Phil O'Brien**  
**Liane Tanguay**  
**Claire Warden**



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Editors: David Alderson (University of Manchester), Catherine Clay (Nottingham Trent University), John Connor (King's College, London), Tony Crowley (University of Leeds), Emily Cuming (Liverpool John Moores University), Ben Harker (University of Manchester), Angela Kershaw (University of Birmingham), Phil O'Brien (University of Manchester), Liane Tanguay (University of Houston – Victoria), Claire Warden (De Montfort University).

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Books and other items for review should be sent to Dr Ben Harker, English, School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, Samuel Alexander Building, University of Manchester, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK.

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## Recoveries

### Nikolai Evreinov, *V kulisakh dushi* (1912)

In the words of J.L. Styan, Nikolai Evreinov (1879–1953) is a playwright who ‘caused a furore in [his] time but [...] now rest[s] among the forgotten’.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, although Evreinov’s work reflects a significant moment in Russian modernism, his profile today is not equal to that of many of his avant-garde contemporaries. His 1912 play *V kulisakh dushi*, translated into English in 1915 by Christopher St John and Marie Potapenko as *The Theatre of the Soul*, is a significant example of Evreinov’s work, embodying his key concerns as both a playwright and theatre theorist.<sup>2</sup>

*V kulisakh dushi* is a monodrama, a form that Evreinov employed to demonstrate his provocative attitude towards the relationship between theatre and life. The one act play concerns a man torn between his wife and his lover, and places the audience in a unique position of identification with this character through representing on-stage the inner workings of his soul. Theatricality, or *teatral’nost’*, is at the heart of the play: the theatrical provided Evreinov with an alternative to ‘ugly, boring, grey and uninspired’ reality, and he consistently advocated performance as an instinct that needed to be reawakened in the individual.<sup>3</sup> For Silvija Jestrovic, Evreinov’s work typifies an approach to theatricality where theatre is seen as a tool for living, ‘an almost anthropological category and an organic part of being human’.<sup>4</sup> *Teatral’nost’* is embedded in *V kulisakh dushi*, not least in Evreinov’s choice of title. In St John and Potapenko’s version, the choice of *The Theatre of the Soul* as translation highlights the connection between the individual and the theatrical, but makes less of the metatheatrical connotations apparent in the original Russian. The word *kulisy* has distinctly theatrical overtones, and can be translated variously as ‘wings’, ‘flats’, or ‘behind the scenes’.<sup>5</sup> An alternative translation of the title is offered in Carnicke’s *The Backstage of the Soul*, which avoids the reduction of the text to a purely metaphorical ‘theatre’,

1 J.L. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Volume 3, Expressionism and Epic Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 91.

2 Sharon Carnicke’s comprehensive study of Evreinov’s theatre identifies his influence on contemporary theatre practice through the centrality of his notion of the theatrical instinct. See Sharon Carnicke, *The Theatrical Instinct: Nikolai Evreinov and the Russian Theatre of the Early Twentieth Century* (New York/Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 1989).

3 Carnicke, *The Theatrical Instinct*, 64.

4 Silvija Jestrovic, ‘Theatricality as Estrangement of Art and Life in the Russian Avant-Garde’, *SubStance* 31, nos 2 and 3 (2002): 43.

5 Russian is an inflected language, and *kulisakh* is the prepositional form of the noun *kulisy*.

## Recoveries

in favour of a much more explicit reference to the mechanics of theatrical production. Evreinov frames his play as an event in a theatrical context, allowing the spectator to consider the man's dilemma as an experience steeped in theatricality.

The play supplements this theatricality with references to contemporary psychology. It opens with an introduction by the Professor, who calls the production 'a genuinely scientific work', and explains the function of the human soul using the mathematical formula 'M = M1 + M2 + M3 ... Mn', where M is the man, M1 is the Rational Entity of the soul, M2 its Emotional Entity, and M3 its Subliminal Entity.<sup>6</sup> Following the Professor's monologue, the curtain rises to reveal the 'interior of the human soul', within which M1 and M2 discuss the choice between wife and lover (16). Theatrical representation and human subjectivity combine in the characters of the wife and lover: each is presented in two variants. For M2, the lover is a captivating beauty:

M2. (*enchanted*.) Oh, rapture! The whole universe is not worth such joy!  
Those legs, those feet! (21)

M1's response, however, suggests a very different woman:

M1. [...] It is all imagination. She is not like that. You kiss a painted face,  
you caress false hair. (21)

What is striking is that the women are not merely described from these two perspectives, but represented on stage by two separate performers who embody the differences that M1 and M2 describe. Evreinov notes in his stage direction that:

*At the beginning of [M1's] speech, the first concept of the woman vanishes R [stage right] whence M1 summons up the second concept of the singer, ludicrously aged and deformed. (21)*

The result is a play-text that is fundamentally unsettling, underwritten by questions of subjective perception which are theatrically manifest rather than simply discussed. That the text is intended as an embodied and performative experience is also reflected in its setting. Evreinov outlines a scenographic schema for the production that creates a striking visual aesthetic. The Professor describes the setting by drawing a plan on a blackboard:

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6 Christopher St John and Marie Potapenko, *The Theatre of the Soul*, translated from Nikolai Evreinov (1912), *V kulisakh dusbi* (London: Hendersons, 1915), 14.

This plan, ladies and gentlemen, represents as no doubt you can see, a large heart, with the beginning of its main red artery [...] Here you see a little system of nerves, threads of nerves, pale in colour, and constantly agitated by vibration which we will compare with a telephone. (15)

When the curtain rises, the stage direction indicates that ‘the interior of the human soul is seen, as it has been described by the professor’ (16). Evreinov envisages a setting which is not only ostensibly abstract (as indicated, for example, by the metaphorical analogy between the nerves and the telephone), but is also animated (the heart beats, the lungs breath, the nerves vibrate), a form of living scenography in the most literal sense. Ironically, this living onstage organism comes to its theatrical peak at the close of the play, when the Man commits suicide:

A great hole opens in the diaphragm from which pour out ribbons of blood [...] M2 struggling convulsively falls under the heart drowned in the streamers of red ribbon. The heart has stopped beating. The lung has ceased to respire. (27)

Although, as Susan Harris Smith notes, the play ‘was a critical and popular success in Russia and abroad’, its production history in the West has been chequered.<sup>7</sup> St John and Potapenko’s translation was produced by Edith Craig and the Pioneer Players twice (1915–16, 1931), in productions where the embedded visual potential of Evreinov’s play became, in Katharine Cockin’s words, ‘the means whereby the patriarchal text could be re-written’.<sup>88</sup> Although the wide availability of St John and Potapenko’s translation make accessing Evreinov’s play-text relatively straightforward, its visual potential raises the question of whether this is enough in engaging with the playwright’s ideas; ultimately, perhaps it is not just this play-text that needs a recovery, but also its staging, bringing out the metaphorical and metatheatrical potential in Evreinov’s theories of performance.

*Amy Skinner*  
*University of Hull*

7 Susan Harris Smith, *Masks in Modern Drama* (Berkeley, CA and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 99.

8 Katharine Cockin, ‘The Pioneer Players: Plays of/with Identity’, in *Difference in View: Women and Modernism*, ed. Gabriele Griffin (London: Taylor and Francis), 121–31, 123.