

ALEKSANDR BLOK'S TRILOGY OF LYRIC DRAMAS

*A Puppet Show, The King on the Square
and The Unknown Woman*

Translated and edited by
Timothy C. Westphalen

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

**Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details**

ALEKSANDR BLOK'S TRILOGY OF LYRIC DRAMAS

Aleksandr Blok's Trilogy of Lyric Dramas gathers together for the first time in English translation the first three plays by Aleksandr Blok, the pre-eminent poet of Russian Symbolism and one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century. The three plays that constitute the trilogy – *A Puppet Show*, *The King on the Square* and *The Unknown Woman* – are pivotal documents in the development of modernist drama.

In his productions of *A Puppet Show* and *The Unknown Woman*, Meyerhold first began to work out the basic tenets of his approach to grotesque and constructivist theatre. Moreover, *A Puppet Show* provided the inspiration and much of the foundation for Meyerhold's theoretical writings. As a result, these plays are indispensable to any student of Meyerhold or modernist theatre. The plays are presented in the context of the poetry from which they issued in order to suggest how Blok developed the themes and motifs of the plays in other genres.

Timothy C. Westphalen graduated *magna cum laude* from Knox College, and went on to earn an M.A. and a Ph.D. in Slavic Languages and Literatures from Harvard University. He has published in leading academic journals and has received awards for excellence in teaching. He is currently an Associate Professor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Russian Theatre Archive

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First published 2003
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001
Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group
This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003.
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-203-21681-4 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-27287-0 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-415-28050-8 (Print Edition)

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1. Aleksandr Blok in 1891–92

Courtesy of Union of Theater Workers' Library, Moscow

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

The Russian Theatre Archive makes available in English the best avant-garde plays from the pre-Revolutionary period to the present day. It features monographs on major playwrights and theatre directors, introductions to previously unknown works, and studies of the main artistic groups and periods.

Plays are presented in performing edition translations, including (where appropriate) musical scores, and instructions for music and dance. Whenever possible the translated texts will be accompanied by videotapes of performances of plays in the original language.



2. Aleksandr Blok in 1911

Courtesy of Union of Theater Workers' Library, Moscow

INTRODUCTION

Exit from lyric isolation

I From lyric to drama

The dramas before you mark a break with the past. In them, Aleksandr Blok reappropriated his own work. As strange as it may sound, at the time he started writing these plays, Blok found his own image increasingly alien. Although the reading public had hailed his early poetry and recognized him as the best of the younger generation of Symbolists, this acclaim had come at a price: for the reading public refused to see him other than as the poet of a single, particular persona, the singer of the “Beautiful Lady.” This persona, which grew quite naturally out of his first collection *Verses about the Beautiful Lady*, became a kind of cell Blok sought to escape from. The persona of his lyrics effectively set the bounds of the relation between his work and the world. After the 1905 Revolution, Blok felt stifled by these boundaries and began to seek a truer relation to the world. What he sought in the theater, he told the director Vsevolod Meyerhold, was “an exit from lyric isolation.”¹

The lyric isolation from which Blok sought an exit stemmed from a creative impasse. The poetry of Blok’s first period is a poetry of mystic mood and incantation. Intimations of other worlds take precedence over this earth, over the here and now. Although Blok had already found his own voice, the influence of Russia’s later Romantic poets, Afanasy Fet and Yakov Polonsky, is palpable. The defining influence on Blok’s early poetry, however, is the poet and philosopher Vladimir Solovyov’s cult of the World Soul, or the divine Sophia. Solovyov’s Sophia was, for Blok, both revelation and enigma. On one hand, the early poetry is permeated by the poet’s desire to reach Sophia, who mediates between God and man. On the other, her elusiveness engenders doubt.

Problems of a personal nature further complicated Blok’s predicament:

1 Aleksandr Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh* (Moskva-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1960–63), vol. 8: 170.