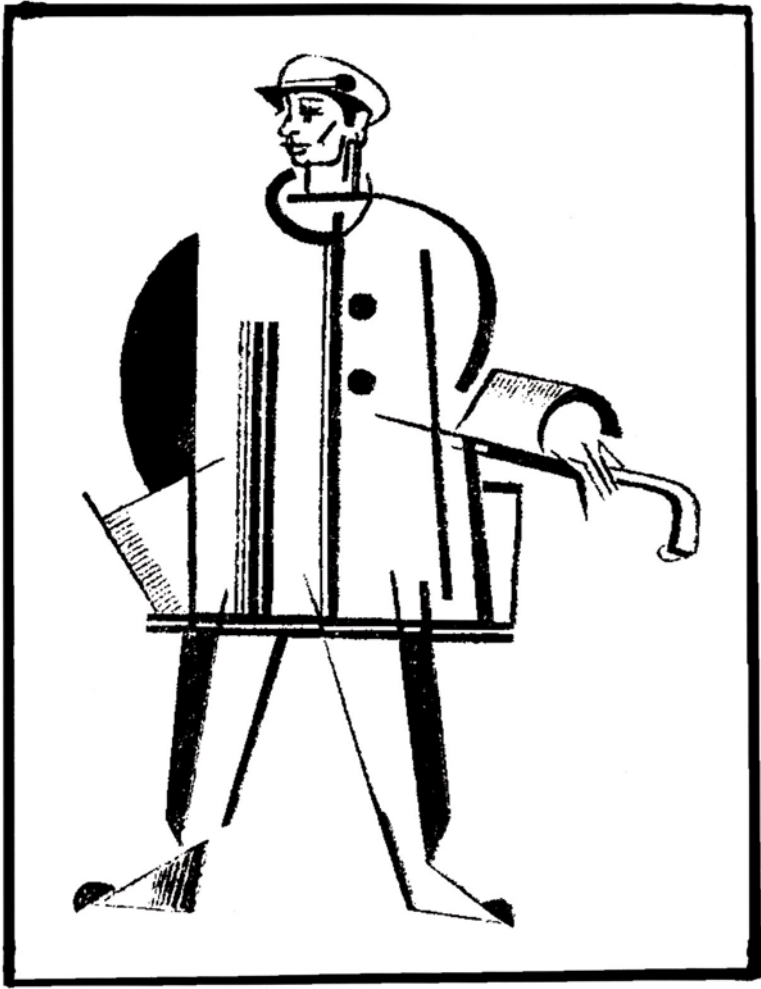


The Major Plays of Nikolai Erdman



The Warrant and The Suicide

translated and edited by
John Freedman

The Major Plays of Nikolai Erdman

Russian Theatre Archive

A series of books edited by John Freedman (Moscow), Leon Gitelman (St Petersburg) and Anatoly Smeliansky (Moscow)

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The Major Plays of Nikolai Erdman

The Warrant and The Suicide

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John Freedman

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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.



Nikolai Erdman in the late 1920s.

INTRODUCTION

Nikolai Erdman is best known in the West for his second full-length play, *The Suicide*, called “a work of genius” by Konstantin Stanislavsky and “empty and even harmful” by the self-proclaimed dilettante in theatrical matters, Joseph Stalin. As is now well known, it was the latter’s opinion which dictated that *The Suicide*, written in the late 1920s, would gather dust in archives and personal libraries for forty years before it could be performed. Following its world première on March 28, 1969 in Göteborg, Sweden, *The Suicide* was staged throughout the 1970s and 1980s by a staggering number of theaters in Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Finland, France, Belgium (in Flemish), Italy, South Africa (in Afrikaans), Canada, England and the United States.

Less known is Erdman’s first major work, *The Warrant*, Vsevolod Meyerhold’s staging of which went down in history as one of that director’s most successful. Touted by a long line of cultural luminaries as a new Gogol, a brilliant stylist and the founder of a new drama, Erdman saw *The Warrant* become one of the most controversial and most frequently-staged plays in the Soviet Union. After its première at the Meyerhold Theater on April 20, 1925, it was produced in over thirty theaters and clubs in the 1925–1926 season alone. The following season, that number grew to forty. It was translated into German in 1926 and performed the following year at the Renaissance Theater in Berlin. But, due to a confluence of complications which arose at about that time — Stalin’s rise to power, the negative reputation garnered by *The Suicide* and Erdman’s censorship trouble with other works — *The Warrant* soon faded from view. Aside from a short-lived production at the Moscow Film Actors’ Theater during the Thaw in 1956, it was relegated to the status of a footnote in Russian theater history. It resurfaced, this time in the West, only after the discovery of *The Suicide*. Although it enjoyed modest success in Europe, especially in Germany, *The Warrant* has been produced in English only a handful of times.

Erdman was born on November 16, 1900¹ in Moscow, the son of a Baltic-German father and a Russian mother. He made his literary debut in 1919 as a poet, publishing a few unusually well-crafted poems in obscure maga-

¹ Erdman’s birth date is often given erroneously as 1902 due to a typographical error in the 1934 edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. Pleased at having gained two years, Erdman never corrected the error.

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zines connected with the group of poets who called themselves the Imagists and who were led by the bad boy of Russian poetry, Sergei Yesenin.

It wasn't long, however, before the young poet was drawn to the theater. After a stint in the Red Army—where he served as a scribe and did his best to avoid the line of fire that raged as the civil war neared an end—he began writing humorous topical songs and skits for a host of Moscow's most popular nightclub entertainers. In March 1922 he was invited by his Imagist friend Vadim Shershenevich to compose rehearsal texts for the Experimental-Heroic Theater. Just three months later, his adaptation of an operetta by Jacques Offenbach, entitled *Madame Archduke*, premièred at Mastfor, an experimental theater run by the legendary director Nikolai Foregger.² In the next two and a half years, Erdman produced some twenty short-to-medium-length plays or sketches which were staged at several of Moscow's most fashionable cabarets and small theaters.³

His first major success came when he was asked to co-author the first play for the newly-founded Moscow Theater of Satire. Together with David Gutman, Vladimir Mass and Viktor Tipot, he wrote a revue in five acts entitled *Moscow from a Point of View*. Premièring on October 1, 1924, it quickly became one of the hottest tickets in Moscow and exerted a significant influence on scores of other directors and playwrights, Vladimir Mayakovsky included.

Erdman was then engaged by the Vakhtangov Theater to write a modern adaptation of *Lev Gurych Sinichkin*, the classic Russian vaudeville by Dmitry Lensky. Its premièred on December 16, 1924, confirmed that a new playwright of unusual talent had emerged. *Sinichkin* remained in repertory at the Vakhtangov for ten years, being dropped only after Erdman was exiled to Siberia.

What few knew at the end of 1924, however, was that Erdman had already been noticed. And the observant eye belonged to none other than Vsevolod Meyerhold. The fact is that Erdman had already been putting the finishing touches on a new full-length play as early as January of 1924. Perhaps through the intercession of Erdman's good friend Vladimir Mass, who worked for a time as Meyerhold's literary director at the Theater of the Revolution, it came to the attention of Meyerhold himself. The Master, as he was called by those who worked for him, wasted no time in passing judgement, and the theater signed a contract with Erdman for *The Warrant* in the spring of 1924. When Meyerhold moved on to create his own theater that fall, he took *The Warrant* with him, making it the second premièred at the new

² *Madame Archduke* may have been based on Offenbach's *La Grande Duchesse de Gerolstein*, although we cannot know for sure, since no text has survived.

³ Translations of some of these and other sketches can be found in *A Meeting About Laughter: Sketches, Interludes and Theatrical Parodies by Nikolai Erdman with Vladimir Mass and Others*, which is the second volume of the *Russian Theatre Archive* series.

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Meyerhold Theater, following Alexei Faiko's *The Teacher Bubus*, which opened in January of 1925.

It is hardly exaggerating to say that Erdman became an overnight sensation. But what is more interesting is the difficulty people encountered in describing his style. Meyerhold's claim that he was poised to carry on the great tradition of Russian comic drama, established by Nikolai Gogol and Alexander Sukhovo-Kobylin, was picked up and repeated frequently. Anatoly Lunacharsky, the commissar of education, lavished praise on Erdman, saying, "Erdman derives from Chekhov, he is a pupil of Chekhov."⁴ Pavel Markov, one of Russia's finest theater critics and scholars of the 20th century, was not satisfied by such formulaic approaches. He called *The Warrant* "the beginning of a new theater."⁵

Expanding on his views at a public discussion just a few weeks after the play's premiere, Markov asked, "Where did this play come from? By the very fact alone that it arose from the restoration of old theatrical forms we can oppose it profoundly to all other attempts of contemporary drama. It arises from that theater which for seven years has been breaking down theatrical forms Now Erdman with his *Warrant* is building a new comedy out of broken dramaturgical forms. Whatever traditions we may try to find for this playwright — here we are intentionally and stubbornly seeking resonances in this play from Gogol and Sukhovo-Kobylin — I believe that the significance of this play is not to be found in resonances of Gogol and Sukhovo-Kobylin, or in resonances of an old-style dramaturgy. When one talks about [*The Warrant*], one must think not only about the tradition which is fundamental to it — as obvious and clear-cut as that may be — but about the new possibilities that are provided by this play"⁶

Erdman himself wasted no time in preparing to develop those new possibilities. Immediately after the premiere of *The Warrant*, he signed a contract with Meyerhold for a new play, and, on May 22, 1925, the Moscow Art Theater announced that Erdman had agreed to write a new play for them for the 1925–1926 season. But the new play turned out to be a long time in coming. While there is reason to believe that parts of *The Suicide* were composed as early as the winter of 1925, the first surviving manuscripts date to late 1926. They are scribbled on the backsides of the script Erdman was writing for a film comedy, *Mitya*, also featuring a character who cannot decide whether or not to kill himself.

By the time Meyerhold began imploring Erdman in 1928 to deliver *The Suicide* as soon as possible for production at the Meyerhold Theater, the at-

⁴ A. V. Lunacharsky, "V. G. Korolenko. A. P. Chekhov," in *Ocherki po istorii russkoi literatury* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1976), 425.

⁵ Quoted in John Freedman, *Silence's Roar: The Life and Drama of Nikolai Erdman* (Oakville, Canada: Mosaic Press, 1992), 88.

⁶ Quoted in *Silence's Roar: The Life and Drama of Nikolai Erdman*, 71–72.

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mosphere in the country had changed drastically. Erdman's old friend Sergei Yesenin had either committed suicide or had been murdered by the secret police; the rigorously ideological Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) had seized almost total control in the sphere of literature; Lev Kamenev had become one of the first of Lenin's old guard to be expelled from the Communist Party; and Joseph Stalin had solidified his position as the most powerful man in the Soviet Union.

Whether he knew it or not (it would appear that he did), Erdman's career was already on the wane. While work on *The Suicide* progressed slowly throughout 1928, Erdman entered into a partnership with Vladimir Mass that lasted until both were arrested in 1933. They wrote a series of satirical music hall revues, all of which were subjected to wicked attacks from censors and in the press, and many of which were banned. *The Suicide* was probably only completed in 1930, when readings of it took place in April at the Moscow Art Theater and in September at the Vakhtangov Theater. It was banned for the first time on September 25, 1930.

With the help of Maxim Gorky, Stanislavsky succeeded in getting Stalin to overturn the ban in November 1931, giving *The Suicide* a momentary second life and unleashing a series of vicious responses from those who did not like Erdman or his play. Stanislavsky's chosen director, Vasily Sakhnovsky, led rehearsals from late December until May 1932, although he never got further than the first two acts. Just eleven days before the Art Theater gave up on *The Suicide*, Meyerhold finally set to work on it. But his hopes of including the play in repertory were dashed after he gave a closed showing of the play's final three acts to a contingent of high-placed bureaucrats in October. Lazar Kaganovich, one of Stalin's right-hand men and the country's top censor, nonchalantly told Meyerhold afterwards, "There's no need to work on this play."⁷

A year later, on October 10, 1933, Erdman was arrested together with Vladimir Mass in the resort town of Gagra on the Black Sea where they were taking part in the filming of the movie *Jolly Fellows*, for which they had written the script. The official explanation was that they had written a series of anti-Soviet fables, but it is clear now that the real culprit was *The Suicide*. Mass, as Erdman's close associate and frequent co-author, probably fell victim to the authorities' need for a less controversial pretext to put an end to Erdman's career.

After spending about a week in prison in Moscow at the Lubyanka headquarters of the NKVD — the secret police — Erdman was shipped off hurriedly to the Siberian town of Yeniseisk where he spent his first year of exile. The last two years of his three-year sentence were spent in Tomsk.

⁷ Quoted in Yury Zayats, "Ya prishyol k tyagostnomu ubezhdeniyu, chto ne nuzhen" [I Had Come to the Painful Conclusion that I Wasn't Needed], in *Meierkhol'dovskiy sbornik*, issue 1, vol. II (Moscow: Tvorcheskoy tsentr imeni Vs. Meierkhol'da, 1992), 125.

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During these years he worked sporadically on a new comedy, *The Hypnotist*. But it soon became evident that his days as a serious playwright were over. He was not fated to complete this play. Just three months after Erdman's exile ended, Meyerhold's theater was closed, one of the justifications for which was the director's previous attempts to stage *The Suicide*. Erdman's talent for comedy was not only "unnecessary," it had become dangerous.

From 1937 until his death in 1970, Erdman led a quiet, if uneasy, existence writing filmscripts, stage adaptations, libretti for operettas and sketches for stand-up comics. Almost everything he produced bore the distinct stamp of his unique talent, but he was always the first to admit it was nothing more than a means to earning a living. After Stalin's death in 1953, when scores of "forgotten" names were rehabilitated, Erdman was passed over in near total silence. A plan to publish *The Warrant* in 1954 was abandoned in the early stages, while the play's revival in 1956 was closed down just a few months after it opened. Two plans to stage *The Suicide* in 1956 — at the Vakhtangov Theater and the Mayakovsky Theater — never got beyond preliminary discussions. In 1965, Yury Lyubimov worked on the play for a month at the Taganka Theater before the Soviet Minister of Culture told him not to waste his time any further. In 1968, *The Suicide* was already typeset and corrected for publication in the December issue of *Theater*, but a directive came from above at the last minute to pull it out.

Erdman learned that *The Suicide* had survived the efforts to condemn it to oblivion just a year and a half before his death, when it received its world première in Sweden. What he didn't know was that another production had been fast approaching dress rehearsals even in the spring of 1968. The city was Prague and the timing couldn't have been worse. When Soviet tanks rolled into the Czechoslovakian capital, the première of *The Suicide* was not the only thing to be sacrificed.⁸ However, the text quickly found its way westward, and so it was that the Swedish première directed by Johan Falck at the Stadsteatern was the event which finally sparked intense worldwide interest in Erdman's work.

The Suicide first appeared in English in 1976, when Alan Richardson staged it at the Theatre Compact in Toronto, Canada. That was followed by the U.S. première in 1978 at the New York Farce Company, under the direction of Robert O'Rourke. But it was Ron Daniels, with the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon, and Jonas Jurasas, with the Trinity Square Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island, whose productions in 1979 and 1980, respectively, caused what can be called the English Erdman boom in the early 1980s.

⁸ This information was first made public by Andrea Gotzes in her article "Postanovki p'es N. Erdmana na nemetskom yazyke v zerkale kritiki" [German-Language Stagings of N. Erdman's Plays in the Mirror of Criticism], *Sovremennaya dramaturgiya*, No. 5 (1989), 244.

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Daniels's original work at The Other Place was transferred with equal success in 1980 to the RSC's small London venue, The Warehouse, and then was expanded in 1981 to suit the RSC's main stage at The Aldwych. All three garnered international acclaim. Jurasas's production at Trinity Square brought him an invitation to mount the play in October 1980 at the old ANTA Theater, where Derek Jacobi made his Broadway debut in the role of Semyon. Simultaneously, several of the best regional theaters in the United States, including the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., the Goodman Theater in Chicago and the Yale Repertory Company, staged their own versions.

After an aborted attempt to stage *The Suicide* in Moscow in 1982 (the Moscow Theater of Satire performed it six times before it was banned), Erdman's plays finally began reappearing in his homeland in 1987. By 1989, *The Suicide* was the fourth most-staged play in the Soviet Union.⁹

But even in success, Erdman's plays were still haunted by the political specter which hung over him for most of his adult life. In the West, one of the stock phrases repeated in almost every review of *The Suicide* was, "It's no wonder this play was banned." Informed by the Cold War mentality, Western audiences were titillated most by the image of a playwright who had been so "daring." Similarly, when they finally got a chance, Soviet audiences rushed to the theaters to see a politically charged play by a legendary "dissident." But as the Soviet Union was rocked by an unending stream of sensational historical disclosures and then finally collapsed altogether, the "politics" of Erdman's drama were naturally unable to compete with what was transpiring in the real world. By 1993, in the newly independent Russia, *The Warrant* and *The Suicide* had acquired an awkward reputation as indecipherable hieroglyphs. Few doubted their brilliance, but no one knew what to do with them.

The end of the Cold War, however, and the end of the artificial separation of Russian culture into "official" and "dissident," or "Soviet" and "émigré," afford a new luxury. For the first time, Erdman's plays can be staged, performed and evaluated as they were intended: as works of dramatic art. What has to be understood now is, just what was Nikolai Erdman up to?

We can start by stating what he was not up to. The purpose of *The Warrant* was no more to ridicule the petty bourgeoisie than the purpose of *The Suicide* was to attack the Soviet Union. Like any talented writer, Erdman's goal was to create an artistic universe which, naturally, would enter into dialogue with the real world he inhabited, but which ultimately would func-

⁹ Vitaly Dmitrievsky, "Repertuar perestroiki" [The Repertory of Perestroika], *Sovremennaya dramaturgiya*, No. 3 (1991), 134. For glimpses at some of these productions, see John Freedman, "Three Soviet Suicides," *Soviet and East European Performance*, No. 2 (1991), 37-45; and Scott T. Cummings, "The Suicide Comes 'Full Circle' in Cleveland," *Slavic and East European Performance*, Nos. 2/3 (1992), 44-48.

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tion according to its own laws.¹⁰ No other proof of this is needed than to note the two predominant approaches to *The Warrant* and *The Suicide*. Both were praised or criticized, at times, for being attacks on what once were called “former people,” representatives of the tsarist bourgeoisie, while both were praised or criticized, at other times, for providing them with an eloquent defense. The ambiguity of the plays’ alleged “political” orientation is a self-contained answer to every question it poses. The point is not whom the plays attack or defend, but what they say about the human experience and how they go about saying it. That is what Pavel Markov was driving at when he called *The Warrant* “the beginning of a new theater.” Had Erdman been free to continue his experiments — what he once called “an extremely difficult technical and formal task”¹¹ — he might have made our own task in understanding them easier. History, however, dictated otherwise and now we are left to make do with what we have.

Two enigmatic observations by Meyerhold and Stanislavsky shed a ray of light on Erdman’s unique dramatic method. During rehearsals of *The Warrant*, Meyerhold cautioned the actors against speaking their lines too loudly, telling them to penetrate the play’s meaning through its “secret passageways The text,” he continued, “is so constructed as to be very easy to approach.”¹² Stanislavsky also picked up on what Meyerhold called Erdman’s “secret passageways,” although he was baffled by them. Recalling one of Erdman’s famous readings of *The Suicide*, Stanislavsky wrote Erdman’s “reading is absolutely marvelous and is very instructive for a director. There is some new quality hidden in his manner of speech which I could not quite decipher. I laughed so hard that I had to ask him to take an extended break or my heart would have given out.”¹³

Erdman’s “manner of speech,” of course, was not merely the legendary, dead-pan tone in which he read. More importantly, it was his total subordination, as *performer* of his own play, to the unusual structure of language, characterization and situation that marks his major works. The poet-turned-playwright was working towards an innovative style of drama that moved beyond the traditional character- and plot-oriented theater text. His was a holistic approach in which the central themes of the play are suggested or inferred rather than stated or demonstrated.

¹⁰ For an excellent account about how *The Warrant* reflected and parodied contemporary political demands, which, in their own turn, exerted a distorting influence on the reactions to the play, see Mikhail Smolyanitsky, “Postanovki p’esy N. R. Erdmana ‘Mandat’ v teatre imeni Vs. Meierkhol’da (epizod iz obshchestvennogo soznaniya serediny 20-kh gg)” [The Staging of N. R. Erdman’s ‘The Warrant’ at the Meyerhold Theater (an example of the social consciousness of the mid-’20s)], *Zerkalo istorii* (Moscow: Rossiiskiy gosudarstvenny gumanitarny universitet, 1992), 109–122.

¹¹ Quoted in Zayats, “Ya prishyol k tyagostnomu ubezhdeniyu, chto ne nuzhen,” 125.

¹² Quoted in *Silence’s Roar: The Life and Drama of Nikolai Erdman*, 60–61.

¹³ Quoted in *Silence’s Roar: The Life and Drama of Nikolai Erdman*, 158–159.

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The Warrant comprises a melange of styles that includes the 19th-century European vaudeville, traditional Russian "serious comedy," the slapstick of cabaret humor and the grotesque of the tragi-comic farce. On the surface, the action revolves around the wacky adventures of two families, the Gulyachkins and the Smetaniches. Before the cataclysms of the revolution deprived them of their livelihood, and more importantly, of their sense of identity, the former were petty merchants, while the latter were wealthy landowners and industrialists. The play progresses as these two displaced families struggle to find a place for themselves in alien and hostile surroundings. Each exists under the illusion that the other can help them do that, and, as is often the case in comedy, marriage is the means.

Deprived of a source of income, Nadezhda Gulyachkina wants to marry off her daughter Varvara to Valerian, the son of the still-wealthy Olimp Smetanich. As a way to entice the millionaire, Nadezhda tells him that her son Pavel is a communist who can provide protection should he ever need it. That is just the kind of "dowry" Olimp is looking for. At first, Pavel balks at his mother's insistence that he join the Communist Party. But when he realizes that this step will endow him with a sense of power, he composes a phony warrant (stating that he lives in the building in which he lives) and takes to bullying everyone around him. Everyone's plans are turned inside out when a friend of Nadezhda asks her to caretake a dress which once belonged to the empress. A series of comic interludes involving the dress leads the Smetaniches to believe that Nastya, the Gulyachkin's cook, is the tsaritsa Anastasiya Nikolayevna, and, encouraged by the reappearance in Moscow of a member of the royal family, they begin making plans for the fall of communist rule. More comic misunderstandings cause Nastya to think she has been offered Smetanich's son's hand in marriage and she accepts (having already accepted a marriage proposal from Ivan Shironkin, the Gulyachkin's boarder). Thus, three weddings involving three people are arranged in the span of two days. When all of the confusion and deceptions are cleared away in the riotous final scenes, the stunned characters are caught in a no man's land, a breach between destruction and self-discovery.

Despite the thick layer of slapstick comedy, Erdman's intent was anything but merely to fill his play with wisecracks. In fact, what some have called a contrived plot is the result of a complex dramatic structure which, no less than characterization and action, carries the kernel of the play's themes. The primary building block in Erdman's drama is the word. But, instead of being an expressive tool and a means of communication, it usually serves to confuse or to mislead. The crazy adventures of this strange dramatic world are the inevitable consequences of carelessly uttered or improperly understood words. Both Valerian and Nastya, for instance, twice find themselves getting engaged to be married, not so much because they want to, but because the dialogue dictates it.

Erdman reversed the relationship that is commonly assumed to exist

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between people and the language they use. In his drama, as is often the case in the plays which make up what we now call the theater of the absurd, it is not the former who command the latter, but just the opposite. All of the characters in *The Warrant*, at one time or another, fall victim to the seductive simplicity of the slogans, signs and catch-phrases of mass culture. Pavel is seduced by the signs of power, Varvara — by the signs of chivalry, and Nastya — by the images she appropriates from romance novels. The play develops in the atmosphere of a war among superficially identical, but fundamentally different, vocabularies which obscure meaning, rather than explain, define or clarify experience.

Employing the form of the farce, Erdman pointed toward the danger lurking in such a state of affairs. Pavel may be a mild-mannered simpleton, but when he becomes obsessed with an idea, he immediately takes on the characteristics of a budding tyrant. His demand in the first act that everyone in his household fear him, transforms into symptoms of megalomania in the final act. The point here, of course, is much broader than the mere problem of communism or totalitarianism in Russia. What intrigued Erdman was the false grandeur of the Word. Being a skeptic, he realized that man's deeds seldom match the highfalutin words that describe or justify them.

Erdman effected the shift away from the strictly political or social level by sidestepping the traditional dramatic clash between the old and new worlds. Never in *The Warrant* does there appear a bona fide representative of the new order, the closest thing to it occurring at the end of the play when Ivan Shironkin runs off stage to call the police. But they refuse to appear. All we ever get is the characters' reactions to an undefined, incomprehensible and changing world. As a result, the dramatic conflict unfolds as a tug of war among three rather amorphous states of mind: memories of life in tsarist Russia (which is now extinct), perceptions of life in the Soviet Union (which the characters themselves cannot define and which the spectator never sees) and, finally, the psychological limbo in which all the characters of the play exist. The first scene of *The Warrant*, as Pavel and his mother hang various paintings which will express different attitudes to different potential circumstances, immediately establishes the uncertainty and inner chaos which reigns in the play. It is the internal level which forms the real "setting" of the play, making of it an inquiry into the nature of the unstable relationship between humans and the society which surrounds them, rather than a mere exposé of a particular social order.

Erdman continued to develop his new vision of dramatic structure in *The Suicide*, which comprises a spectacular mixture of the ridiculous and the sublime. Semyon Podsekalnikov is discouraged by his inability to find a job, and a chance comment he makes to his wife Mariya leads her to think he might try to commit suicide. She brings woe upon everyone by appealing for help to Alexander Kalabushkin, an unscrupulous neighbor who is the first to "break the news" to Semyon that he is a potential suicide. After

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Semyon's grandiose and pathetically misguided plans to become a professional tuba player fail resoundingly, Alexander gathers a motley group of malcontents who encourage the unsuspecting Semyon to dedicate his suicide to various social causes. Aristarkh represents the intelligentsia, Viktor represents art, Pugachyov represents commerce, and two ladies of ill-repute, Cleopatra and Raisa, represent spiritual and physical love. But all of them make essentially identical appeals in which eloquence is reduced to crass sloganeering. Despite having no desire to commit suicide, the weak-willed Semyon finds himself being pushed towards it from all sides by these insistent supplicants. Properly speaking, the play is the study of a man who is forced to discover for himself reasons to live, rather than reasons to die.

Semyon's hard-earned discovery comes at a terrible expense, however. Just as the absence of the outside world in *The Warrant* is symbolized by the refusal of the police to make an appearance, a crucial role in *The Suicide* is played by a character who never appears, and about whom we know nothing beyond Viktor's characterization of him as "a marvelous type, a positive type." This is Fedya Petunin, who "fell in love" with the idea of suicide after being told of Semyon's supposed plans, and who takes his life off-stage just as Semyon is finally rejecting the idea for good on-stage. The black irony of the situation is carried in the play's very title: is this a play about Semyon or about Fedya Petunin? After all, Petunin is the real suicide.

The destructive power of mishandled language is everywhere present in *The Suicide*. Not only does Semyon unexpectedly wind up on the road to suicide as the result of a simple misunderstanding, but he finds himself moving inexorably closer to the dreaded act as he is repeatedly seduced by elegant turns of phrase. In the second act, Aristarkh captures his fancy with a wonderful vision of a funeral at which Semyon's body will be borne by "splendid horses in white horsecloths." (Semyon's wide-eyed response is to exclaim, "Holy Moses! Now that's what I call living!") Later in the same act, as Semyon hesitates to set a time for his suicide, the group of supplicants seals the deal by getting him to agree to a farewell banquet. It does not occur to the dazed Semyon that, by consenting to the banquet, he is consenting to commit suicide as well. Of course, Fedya Petunin is the play's supreme example of language's potential insidiousness. Obsessed with what he has been told about Semyon's "suicidal" tendencies, he unwittingly turns lies into a tragic, irreversible deed.

The power that words wield, however, can cut two ways. Semyon's susceptibility to the sublime, which very nearly does him in, is just what saves him at that very moment when he comes closest of all to taking his life. While searching in a frenzy for the best place to shoot himself in the fourth act, he realizes he will never be able to go through with it if he cannot distract himself from what he is doing. In order to bolster his courage, he strikes up a happy song. But, just as he prepares to pull the trigger, he "hears" the wailing of a trombone. That wonderful, lively sound is so enticing that he

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drops the pistol in total frustration.

This scene, contrasted with the two mentioned above, highlights two of the primary forces at work in *The Suicide*: the lyrical, life-confirming nature of the individual, internal world and the harsh, hostile nature of everything outside it. It is no accident that Semyon is inclined to reject the idea of suicide when he is in isolation, and is drawn closer to it when he is under the influence of others. What little harmony there is in this topsy-turvy world exists only in isolation from social impulses. Semyon's monologues — especially his famous parodical reformulation of Hamlet's speech of "to be or not to be," which he delivers in the eerie presence of a deaf-mute — are masterful examples of the way he works in his own clumsy way towards sublime revelations.

The Suicide is a plea for the autonomy of the individual, although that is not to say it is an apologia for everything the individual stands for or undertakes. Semyon is hardly a traditional, sympathetic character. His abrasive behavior towards his wife and mother-in-law and his tacit complicity in the death of Fedya Petunin both exclude that role for him. At the same time, there is no doubting that he ultimately wins our sympathy. The reason for this can be found by viewing Semyon's predicament in the light of a quote from *Hamlet*, which Erdman lovingly burlesques throughout *The Suicide*. Says Hamlet bitterly, after he has narrowly escaped the deadly designs of Claudius:

... What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.

But Semyon — who "falls in love with his stomach" as he lies terrified for two days in his coffin, and who can be accused of lacking heroism, character, wisdom, talent and any number of other "positive" traits — is not a beast. He is confused, disenfranchised, and an outcast, but he is no less human for that.

Avoiding anything so formulaic as defenses or accusations — both plays in this volume end on highly paradoxical notes — Erdman sounded the unpopular alarm that heroism cannot be enforced and that the aims of the "crowd" are almost invariably antithetical to the needs of the individual. The themes of *The Warrant* and *The Suicide* — the failure of language as a reliable tool of communication, the degeneration of the human element brought on by the onslaught of mass culture, and the extraordinary, if not always heroic, resilience of the individual human being — remain as contemporary and universal as ever.

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