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Emerald Thrones and Living Statues: Theater and Theatricality on the Russian Estate

PRISCILLA R. ROOSEVELT

From the reign of Catherine to the emancipation of 1861, serf theater, on estates and in provincial towns, was a major source of entertainment for rural Russia. Estate theater, moreover, markedly differentiated the Russian estate from its European model and, for that matter, from the plantation life of the American South. Large estates became famous for troupes of highly trained actors, musicians, and dancers, while even minor *pomeshchiki* prided themselves on being able to field a violinist or two for guests. Life on the estate also involved master and serf in theatrical rituals or elaborate displays. Some of these rituals were related to gentry hospitality, and thus might be considered an exaggerated form of the entertainment and display of wealth which was an important part of estate life elsewhere in Europe.¹ But others took the form of overt role-playing for private ends: the estate owner masquerading as autocrat, or simply creating a fantasy world for his own pleasure.

The theatrical continuum observable on the Russian estate encompassed serf theater performances, theatrical displays connected with hospitality, theatricality in the material culture of the estate, and the theatricalization or ritualization of private life. Iurii Lotman's important essays on the semiotics of Russian culture

¹ The essays in Albert Goodwin, ed., *The European Nobility in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1953) and David Spring, ed., *European Landed Elites in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1977) provide a starting point for comparative evaluation of estate life. M. L. Bush's more recent *Rich Noble, Poor Noble* (Manchester and New York, 1988) describes a "noble ideal of expenditure" in this period, expressed in the purchase of property and a "massive programme of consumption involving the maintenance of impressive households, stables, and entourages, the purchase of expensive and distinctive clothing, and the generous dispensation of hospitality and charity" (p. 107). Russian consumption patterns equaled this "ideal," though in his passion for and patronage of theater the Russian aristocrat was more comparable to an Elizabethan lord than to his contemporaries. Norbert Elias's *Die Höfische Gesellschaft* suggests possible comparisons in conscious theatricality between the Russian noble and the Versailles courtier. But the peculiarities of Versailles ceremonial life were not echoed in the French provinces (see Robert Forster's *The Nobility of Toulouse* [Baltimore, 1960]).

provide striking insights into the cultural roots of noble theater and theatricality.² By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Lotman contends, the process of Westernization had produced a noble who was a Russian deliberately “acting” the part of a foreigner. In this period also, art “invaded life”: role-playing, and restructuring of one’s life on a theatrical or literary model, became normal cultural behavior.³

For Lotman the estate and country living are one of numerous stages on which the noble indulged in self-revealing symbolic behavior. What follows is an exploration of that stage, as a platform for activities that reflected not only the cultural attitudes of the Russian nobility, but also significant anomalies in its sociopolitical evolution in comparison with other European elites. Recent studies of the latter do not highlight behavior comparable to that which characterized the Russian nobility, partially because no other elite faced comparable problems of cultural identity. But there were other factors, chiefly the institutions of autocracy and serfdom, which made Russian estate owners at once the most dependent and powerful of European nobles, stimulating and playing into the theatrical continuum. The Russian noble’s problems of status and self-definition were as much bound up with these native elements as with the European culture upon which the Russian elite was modeling its own.

Serfdom, of course, was the economic and social precondition for estate theater proper, and for much estate theatricality. Serfs built, decorated, and sometimes even designed estates whose exteriors, interiors, and surrounding garden had multiple elements of theatricality; and they provided much of the estate entertainment. Some late-eighteenth-century estates were, in fact, little more than stage sets: a few grateful recipients of land and serfs from Catherine the Great, for instance, immediately built large houses at which they hosted a lavish week of entertainment for the Empress, only to leave the area and the instant estate to fall into disrepair.⁴ On virtually all country estates of any size, theatricality was expressed in design or decor. In the reign of Alexander I one noble ordered his beloved Liublino to be built in the shape of the order of St. Anna which he had just received.⁵ Ostankino, a theater built to resemble a Palladian manor house, had false windows on its facade. The main house at Kuskovo was built of wood carved to resemble stone; whereas in the garden, the rustic pillars of pleasure pavilions were constructed of brick.⁶

Inside the grand house, reception rooms were decorated with trompe l’oeil columns and bas reliefs. Skillful placement of mirrors brought the garden into the

² See particularly Lotman’s “The Poetics of Everyday Behavior in Eighteenth-Century Russian Culture” in A. D. and A. S. Nakhimovsky, eds., *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History* (Ithaca, 1985), pp. 67–94; see also “The Decembrist in Daily Life,” *ibid.*, pp. 95–149; “Concerning Khlestakov,” *ibid.*, pp. 150–187; and “Theater and Theatricality as Components of Early Nineteenth-Century Culture” in Ann Shukman, ed., *The Semiotics of Russian Culture* (Ann Arbor, 1984), pp. 141–60.

³ “Poetics,” p. 69, “Theater,” p. 145.

⁴ V. I. Kurbatov, *Sady i parki* (Petrograd, 1916), p. 620.

⁵ N. Vrangeli, *Venok Mertvym* (St. Petersburg, 1913), p. 51.

⁶ V. Turchin et al., *V okrestnostiakh Moskvyy* (Moscow, 1979), p. 91.

house and created tunnel effects out of linear suites of rooms. *Faux marbre* was used on wooden columns. The walls and ceilings of a room might be painted to resemble an arcadian bower, or a wonderful “window” with pastoral view painted to open up a dark corridor.⁷ Every estate house, grand or humble, had clearly demarcated reception and entertainment areas, set apart from family apartments. As Lotman points out, nobles assumed different roles in different areas of the house, altering their behavior to fit the setting. The “theater” for entertaining guests was of great importance. One memoirist regarded it as a family tragedy when her parents turned the drawing room of Pospelovka, their small, one-story estate house (with only five windows), into their daughters’ bedroom, thus losing their entertaining space.⁸

The English or “irregular” garden which surrounded the manor house in late-eighteenth-century Russia was deliberately designed to act as a series of stage sets. At each turn of the garden walk a contrived vista, intended to create a particular emotion in the viewer, would unfold. The different parts of the garden were, in effect, scenes in a play, provoking the spectator alternately to pathos, fear, tranquility, or exhilaration. The use of props in the garden increased its theatricality. Kuskovo’s garden, for instance, full of playful and ingenious elements, made use of “shams.” These were adroitly painted, oil-on-wood, two-dimensional, life-sized figures: foreign images, such as Spanish grandees or French peasant girls, placed in the Kuskovo birch grove to startle visitors on holidays.⁹

Such theatrical elements of house and garden were all European in origin. Their abundance on eighteenth-century estates indicates the skill and speed with which the Russian elite assimilated to this model, following the lead of its Empress’s early expressed preference for “Italian” (neoclassical) architecture and English gardens. Similarly, the nobility took its cues from imperial performances at the Hermitage theater (designed by Quarenghi) and the Chinese Theater at Tsarskoe Selo. “Not a week passes but there is a fête at the Hermitage,” reported one English visitor in 1790. In a letter he described a “grand play” the Empress had written, entitled “Olga”:

It is a tragedy with chorusses, like the ancients, with a kind of Greek music: there are no less than thirty personages in the play; two emperors, and the rest of proportionate rank; the suite consists of *six hundred* people, who are all to be upon the stage at once: it must be a marvellous sight, I think. This morning, as I was looking out of window, I saw the *clouds* and the turrets of Constantinople going to the theatre, in a cart. It was

⁷ An excellent collection of detailed photographs of such decorative motifs is to be found in the William Brumfield collection of the Photographic Archives at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

⁸ The memoirist recalls as a child seeing an elegant coach on the road, and engaging the coachman in conversation. He told her that he and his *barin* were going to spend the night at a neighboring merchant’s house which, unlike her own, did have a guest area. Clearly aware of the connection between hospitality and nobility, he took pains to assure her that the choice of lodgings was regrettable, and that his master would have preferred to stay with them rather than with the *declassé* merchant. O. I. Kornilova, *Byl’ iz vremen krepostnichestva* (St. Petersburg, 1890), p. 7.

⁹ See Olga Baranova, *Kuskovo* (Moscow, 1983), illustrations nos. 60 and 61.

acted on Tuesday, before the Empress, at her private theatre; and on Sunday will be exhibited to the profane.¹⁰

Catherine's lavish productions were emulated in the private noble theaters of St. Petersburg, Moscow, and, by the late eighteenth century, on many estates. Of these, the Sheremetev theaters were probably the most impressive. The serf troupe formed in the 1760s by Petr Borisovich Sheremetev (1713–1788) performed both in his Moscow house theater and at his suburban estate of Kuskovo. By the early seventies the Kuskovo theater was reckoned on a level with that of the court theater in St. Petersburg, and far superior to the leading theater in Moscow.¹¹ Petr Borisovich's son Nikolai Petrovich (1751–1809) surpassed his father in his passion for theater. When given the troupe in the mid-seventies he immediately began plans for a theater large enough to accommodate the French and Italian comic operas he had fallen in love with during a trip abroad during 1769–73. The result was the wooden theater at Kuskovo (which supplemented the previous open-air theater), the stage of which was larger than that of the royal Swedish theater and the Dresden opera house (though smaller than the Paris Opera). It was completed in 1787, and, in the 1790s, Sheremetev created the slightly smaller but more technically complex Ostankino theater.¹²

Renowned architects were brought in to design these theatres; foreign masters were commissioned to create sets, and a host of special teachers employed to train the troupe. Sheremetev had a Parisian correspondent who sent him elaborate ideas, including the latest technology for the theater. From these suggestions Sheremetev, with the help of the eminent Russian architects I. E. Starov and E. S. Nazarov and the foreign architects Giacomo Quarenghi and Francesco Camporesi, worked out a "Project for a Palace of the Arts" in Moscow which was then sent (in January of 1792) to France, Italy, and Sweden for comments. Plans for the Ostankino theater-palace complex (a smaller version of the Moscow Project) were worked out simultaneously by a French architect with the assistance of the Russian serf architect A. F. Mironov. His Paris correspondent also sent Sheremetev detailed drawings for sets.¹³ The elaborate machinery of the Ostankino theatre facilitated a rapid, theatrical transformation of stage and parterre into banquet hall or ballroom adorned with "marble" columns which were actually papier-mâché.

At the turn of the century, a few years after the theater was completed, Prince Sheremetev wrote his son: "After beautifying my Ostankino and presenting it to spectators in an enchanting way, I thought to myself that, having achieved a great thing, in which my knowledge and taste is visible, which is worthy of amazement,

¹⁰ Cited in A. G. Cross, "British Sources for Catherine's Russia: (1) Lionel Colmore's Letters from St. Petersburg, 1790–91," *Newsletter of the Study Group on Eighteenth-century Russia*, no. 17 (July, 1989), pp. 24 and 29. Italics in the original.

¹¹ P. Bezsonov, *Praskov'ia Ivanovna Sheremeteva. Ee narodnaia pesnia i rodnoe ee Kuskovo. Biograficheskii ocherk s portretom* (Moscow, 1872), p. 15.

¹² See L. A. Lepskaiia, "Ostankinskii teatr: Predistoriia. Zamysel. Voploshchenie," *Novye materialy po istorii russkoi kul'tury: sbornik trudov* (Moscow, 1987), pp. 62–78.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 68–71.

and which the public has acclaimed, I will forever peacefully enjoy my productions."¹⁴ Clearly, Sheremetev enjoyed playing the prestigious role of public benefactor. The money spent on his achievement bankrupted the estate, however: inventories by the trustees in 1810–11 noted seventy trunks of costly costumes, seventy-six trunks, cartons, and boxes of props such as banners, weapons, animal skins and masks, and three trunks of sheet music.¹⁵

Many provincial estate theaters were hardly less lavish. Like Kuskovo, the estate of Marfino (which in the eighteenth century belonged to the Saltykovs, and in the nineteenth to the Orlovs and then the Panins) boasted two theaters: a wooden one in the formal garden, and an open-air theater two versts from the main house. The latter was the site for ballets, pastorales, and vaudeville, the former for more serious or complicated theater.¹⁶ I. D. Shepelev's theater in Vladimir Province, not far from Murom, described in detail by his choirmaster N. Ya. Afanas'ev, was only slightly smaller than the Mariinskii in St. Petersburg, and illuminated with gas rather than oil lamps—an unusual feature for the 1830s.¹⁷ The Povalo-Shvikovskii, Nakhimovs, and Brovtinskyis of Smolensk province, I. O. Khorvat of Kursk province, the Apraxins at Ol'govo and the Melgunovs at Sukhanovo in Moscow province, and the Kurakin brothers on their estates in Saratov and Orel provinces all supported renowned serf theaters, with sets, costumes, and performers of the highest quality. European and Russian plays, ballets, opera, and burlesque constituted their international repertoires. Through them some serf actors and actresses became well known, since serf troupes often were brought from estates to perform in provincial capitals or in house theaters in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

In supporting provincial theater the noble was both emulating the autocracy and discovering a means of asserting his own power. Peter the Great, Anna, and Elizabeth had all employed theater to educate their subjects and enforce their will. Peter's mock-emperors and patriarchs, Anna's ice-palace weddings, Elizabeth's court spectacles and male attire, and Catherine's Hermitage theater and simple Russian dress were all part of the same impulse. By the reign of Catherine this tutelary role of the crown had become more refined in means, but the goal remained the same. Catherine's desire to enlighten the Russian provinces hinged on her "children" the nobility, whose own cultural education she had overseen, acting as culture-bearers in the provinces. There, they were to take on the role of tutor, to bring new ideas and manners to the countryside, precisely through theater and spectacle. Such certainly was the tenor of the orders in 1776 to the new viceroy of Kaluga province, M. N. Krechetnikov. He was to build a theater which would "bring people together, for the spread of social life and politesse."¹⁸ Similar provincial theaters were created by imperial order in Tula, Kharkov, and Penza. In taking

¹⁴ TsGada, fond 1287, op. 1, d. 4824, p. 11. Cited by Lepskaiia, "Ostankinskii teatr."

¹⁵ V. G. Sakhnovskii, *Krepostnoi usadebnoi teatr* (Leningrad, 1924), pp. 48–49.

¹⁶ N. K. Kviatkovskaia, *Marfino* (Moscow, 1985), pp. 45–62.

¹⁷ N. Ya Afanas'ev, "Vospominaniia," *Istoricheskii vestnik*, 1899, vol. 41, no. 8, pp. 255–76.

¹⁸ D. I. Malinin, *Nachalo teatra v Kaluge* (Kaluga, 1913), p. 17.

part in theatrical productions, the local gentry, it was hoped, would pick up the more refined manners of the capital. Gavril Derzhavin, posted to Tambov as governor in 1786, found the local nobility “so crude and unsociable, so to speak, that they did not know how to dress, walk, or behave as a nobly-born person should.” In order to civilize them he organized “theatrical presentations by amateurs, young nobles of both sexes,” particularly on official holidays.¹⁹

By the turn of the century, while the lesser nobility was participating with great zest in these local productions, other wealthier nobles had become impresarios, creating troupes of serf actors and dancers for the countryside whose skills rivaled those of imperial artists. Count Kamenskii in Orel, Prince Shakhovskoi in Nizhnii Novgorod, and I. D. Shepelev in Vladimir province owned troupes which performed in well-appointed theaters complete with parterres, loges, bel-étages, and galleries. Kamenskii’s personal loge was equipped with a book in which he wrote down any errors on stage, and with whips he took onstage during rehearsals to reinforce his reprimands. In the course of 1817 this troupe presented eighty-two productions: eighteen operas, fifteen dramas, forty-one comedies, six ballets, and two tragedies.²⁰ Shakhovskoi’s troupe performed in Nizhnii Novgorod and went on the road: at the Makar’ev fair every year it presented operas and ballets nightly in a makeshift theater to a rapt audience of a thousand, at Moscow ticket prices. According to contemporaries, Shakhovskoi’s pride in his troupe was as immense as his profits.²¹ Shepelev’s serf opera was trained in a special school on his estate, and performed to the music of a fifty-man, salaried orchestra. Shepelev himself taught the female singers (selected not just for voice but for youth and beauty), beating them with a huge cane when he was displeased.²²

Aside from these serf troupes which performed in provincial centers, there were a host of private estate theaters. Serious private theater was reserved for the ultra-rich: the Sheremetevs, Iusupovs, Orlovs, and so forth. But in 1858, according to A. Troinitskii’s examination of the 10th Census, 1,396 pomeschchiki owned an average number of twenty-two hundred serfs per person, more than enough to support a staff of serf entertainers.²³ During the period under discussion there were many hundreds of estates on which serf theater was a normal occurrence. Troitskoe at the turn of the century, sixty miles from Moscow, which had about twenty-five hundred serfs and belonged to Princess Catherine Dashkova, Catherine II’s confidante and supporter, was probably typical in size for an estate that could support a theater housed in a separate building. The Troitskoe troupe was small and amateurish in comparison to the ones previously mentioned, its actors being drawn from the ranks of the house serfs. But first-hand accounts of the weekly performances were

¹⁹ G. R. Derzhavin, “Zapiski” in I. I. Podol’skaia, ed., *Russkie memuary: izbrannye stranitsy, XVIII vek* (Moscow, 1988), p. 157.

²⁰ See M. D. Buturlin, “Teatr grafa Kamenskogo v Orle v 1827 i 1828 godakh,” *Russkii arkhiv*, 1869, no. 10.

²¹ I. M. Dolgorukii, “Slavnye bubny za gorami, ili puteshestvie moe koe-kuda 1810 goda,” *Chteniia v Obshchestve istorii i drevnostei rossiiskikh*, 1869, book 2, pp. 1-170; book 3, pp. 171-356.

²² N. Ya. Afanas’ev, “Vospominaniia,” *Istoricheskii Vestnik*, 1899, no. 8, pp. 255-76.

²³ M. I. Pylyayev, “Polubarskie zatei,” *Istoricheskii vestnik*, 1886, vol. 25, no. 9, p. 532.

fulsome in praise of the acting, sets, costumes, and special effects, all of which indicate a substantial investment in theater. When the Wilmot sisters visited Troitskoe in the early nineteenth century, Martha Wilmot wrote her mother delightfully, "We have a little theatre here, and our laborers, our cooks, our footmen and chambermaids turn into Princes, Princesses, Shepherds and Shepherdesses etc. etc. and perform with a degree of spirit that is quite astonishing."²⁴ The Irish maid who accompanied her was even more impressed by the spectacle to which she, along with all the other maids, was treated. Writing to her father raving about "the finest Play House the world had ever seen," she exclaimed:

. . . a Dragon! and Kings! and Birds! and a Witch! and loads of music! and Flames, and ladies and gentlemen in gold and diamonds dancing, not on the ground at all hardly, and the beautiful noise! and smoke! and plenty of pleasure of all kinds! "Ogh," says I, clapping my hands, "Mary Nugent and Kiff wou'dn't believe the sight I seen!"²⁵

Theatrical performances took place even on estates too modest to have a separate theater building. Some nobles periodically converted their riding-rings into stages. A. T. Bolotov, provincial agronomist, publicist, and overseer of a crown estate in Tula province in the reign of Catherine, trained a troupe of children to perform dramas such as Kheraskov's *Bezbozhnik* in his living-room, and had amateur musicales virtually every day.²⁶ As one memoirist recalled: "There was not a single wealthy landowner's house where an orchestra did not make a din, where a choir did not sing, and where a stage was not erected."²⁷

For foreigners the most remarkable type of serf orchestra (an expensive luxury) was the horn orchestra, forty men strong, which played in the fashion of bell-ringing, each man producing one note. The musicians in such orchestras were employed solely for that purpose; one observer noted that some players, when asked their names, responded with the note they played, and one must assume that they learned by rote. Martha Wilmot, while shocked at the "value placed on men in this country" if such was their sole occupation, could not help enjoying the concert she heard at Prince Alexei Orlov's.²⁸

As serf troupes and horn orchestras distinguished Russian estate theaters from anything in western Europe, so too did their role as a source of free entertainment for the entire community. A poster of May 11, 1828, invited one and all to the estate

²⁴ Martha Wilmot to her mother, October 19, 1803, in *The Russian Journals of Martha and Catherine Wilmot* (London, 1934), pp. 56–57.

²⁵ Eleanor Cavanaugh to her father, 1803, *Journals*, pp. 186–87.

²⁶ A. T. Bolotov, *Zhizn' i prikliucheniia Andreia Bolotova, opisannyi samim im dlia svoikh potomkov 1738–1795*, 4 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1871–73), vol. 3, pp. 867–77 and 902–15; vol. 4, pp. 114, 128–29, 329 and 498–99. The repertory of the theater included twenty-nine plays, some written by Bolotov himself.

²⁷ A. Troinitskii, *Krepostnoe naselenie v Rossii, po 10-i narodnoi perepisi* (St. Petersburg: Izd. statisticheskago otdela tsentral'nago statisticheskago komiteta, 1861), p. 45; see Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1987), p. 52, for a comparison with the 1795 census.

²⁸ Martha Wilmot to Mrs. Robert Wilmot, Jan. 24, 1804, *Journals*, p. 78.

theater of Sur'ianino in Orel province, to see a variegated performance by the serfs of Petr and Aleksei Iurasovskii and their sister Alexandra. Among the offerings were a three-act pantomime ballet "The Virtuous Algerian," featuring "battles, marches, and great spectacles" (which, the reader was assured, had delighted audiences in St. Petersburg and Moscow), a potpourri of dances, a conjuring act, and choral music. After the performance the guests were invited to supper in the garden of the estate.²⁹ The country estates of the aristocracy served, in effect, as regional amusement parks for the lesser nobility and for commoners as well. The garden of Kuskovo contained not only a temple of solitude, but a "fire-breathing" dragon, a labyrinth, and a casino.³⁰ At Kibentsy, owned by D. P. Troshchinskii, Marshall of the Nobility of Poltava Province, a favorite amusement was a barrel game, in which a huge vat was filled with water, into which the host would fling gold coins. Guests and clowns competed to see who could dive in and collect them all: if a diver missed some, he had to throw them all back in.³¹ Yankova, waxing nostalgic about the period when the Apraxins owned Ol'govo, with its theater, musicians, balls, and fireworks, said that "their whole life was one of constant gaiety and prolonged revelry."³²

Not surprisingly, some noble sponsors found themselves unable to keep up the pace. In the 1840s Baron von Haxthausen described the fate of a provincial patron in Nizhnii Novgorod as follows:

Many years ago . . . a wealthy bachelor landowner built a theater on his estate, trained a select group of his serfs to become musicians and actors, and had them perform plays and operas. Later he moved to Nizhni, built a theater there, and extended invitations to his friends and acquaintances. Extravagance gradually became his ruin; he began charging admission and ended as the concession director of his own company!³³

The nobility's passion for theater was closely related to a general inclination toward theatrical ritual and display which, like theater proper, was imitative of imperial practice. One historian has pointed out that Catherine the Great's penchant for "pageants, triumphal arches, processions, illuminations, fireworks, food, and above all, drink" was a "belated echo of the political use of court spectacle . . . in much the same way and with much the same objects as Louis XIV."³⁴ Catherine's visit to Moscow in June of 1787 commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of her

²⁹ A. L. Golitsyn, *Iz proshlogo, materialy dlia istorii krepostnykh pomeshchikh teatrov v Orlovskoi gubernii* (Orel, 1901). (Cited in Sakhnovskii, *Krepostnoi usadebnyi teatr* [Leningrad, 1924], pp. 23–26).

³⁰ Kurbatov, *Sady i parki*, p. 620.

³¹ Henri Toyat, *Gogol: The Biography of a Divided Soul* (London, 1974), pp. 11–12. Gogol's father, related by marriage to Dmitri Troshchinskii, played the role of major domo in this household, taking charge of theatricals and organizing "revels." Vsevolod Setchkarev, *Gogol: His Life and Works* (New York, 1965), pp. 6 and 9.

³² D. Blagovo, *Razskazy babushki: iz vospominanii piati pokolenii* (St. Petersburg, 1885), pp. 114–15.

³³ August von Haxthausen, *Studies on the Interior of Russia*, translated by Eleanor L. M. Schmidt (Chicago, 1972), p. 110.

³⁴ Isabel de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 534.

accession to the throne was the occasion for artillery salutes, the building of a triumphal arch, orchestra concerts, a masquerade ball and banquets. "In the course of all these days," said one writer, "Moscow rang with the triumphal peal of bells."³⁵ Ritualized public celebration of authority filtered downward: Catherine's viceroy Krechetnikov ordered all the church bells in Kaluga to be rung and cannons to be fired when he attended services in the cathedral. Moreover, in imitation of the holidays customary to mark imperial birthdays and anniversaries, Krechetnikov set aside certain days on which fireworks, balls, and masquerades would take place in his honor.³⁶

Imitating imperial festivals, owners of large estates in the environs of Moscow and St. Petersburg sponsored public days of festivity, causing traffic jams as a parade of brilliant and less brilliant carriages streamed out from the capitals.³⁷ Alexei Orlov-Chesmenskii (hero of the Battle of Chesmé), for instance, was famed not just for the race-track at his Gothic palace, Chesmé, outside St. Petersburg, but for summer garden parties to which anyone with "decent dress and a respectable appearance" (as one visitor put it) could come.³⁸ In the later eighteenth century Kuskovo summer festivals, similarly non-exclusive, featured open-air theater, outdoor games such as lawn bowling, boating in exotic gondolas on the great lake, and spectacular midnight fireworks before a throng which filled the walkways.³⁹ Well into the nineteenth century this tradition of noble largesse continued strong. Some three decades later the owners of Kuz'minki, an estate dating back to the reign of Peter the Great, celebrated its 158th birthday with a dinner for 136 guests, followed by public festivities for five thousand.⁴⁰

Large public festivals on private estates occurred in England as well, but their *raison d'être* was quite different. Some were charitable or educational. At Petworth, for instance, in May of 1834, Lord Egremont hosted a famous public dinner for six thousand of the poor, followed by fireworks for ten thousand. Coke's annual sheepshearings at Holkham, his model agricultural estate, attracted up to seven thousand attendees of all classes.⁴¹ Important family events, such as the birth or coming-of-age of an heir, or the death of an important family member, were occasions for festive or solemn public display.

In Russia, foreign observers were struck by the frequency of lavish entertaining, by theatrical details, and by the way in which Russian magnificence was tinged with vulgarity. The notoriously prodigal Nikolai Yusupov entertained visitors with excellent ballet in the theater of Arkhangel'skoe; at the wave of his cane, the

³⁵ "Gulian'e v Kuskove pri Imperatritse Ekaterine II, vo vremia prazdnovaniia dvadtsatipiatiletia eia tsarstvovaniia, s opisaniem Kuskova," pp. 128–29.

³⁶ Malinin, *Nachalo*, p. 13.

³⁷ See Kolbe, *Recollections*, p. 139. He describes a public celebration of the Empress's name day which cost Alexander I 300,000 rubles, to which even serfs could come.

³⁸ Robert Lyall, *Travels in Russia*, 2 vols. (London, 1825; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press, 1970), vol. 2, p. 505.

³⁹ *V Okrestnostiakh Moskvy*, p. 93.

⁴⁰ Vrangeli, *Venok*, p. 76.

⁴¹ See E. W. Bovill, *English Country Life 1780–1830* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 81–82, for a description of these and other annual events on English estates.

dancers would strip naked on stage.⁴² General Nashchokin had a serf sentinel permanently on watch to tell him if a visitor was approaching his estate of Rai-Semenovskoe; when a carriage was spotted in the distance his band of musicians would be ordered to climb up into a Chinese tower and surprise the guest with a sudden burst of music as he passed through the entrance gates.⁴³ Robert Lyall, who was the object of such a fanfare in 1825, noted that on one occasion Nashchokin severely punished a sentry who missed an arriving prince.

Banquets called forth extravagant display. At his suburban Moscow estate of Mikhalka, Orlov astounded William Coxe by producing a profusion of exotic fruits for dessert, including a small Astrakhan melon which had traveled, Coxe reckoned, one thousand miles by carriage.⁴⁴ The assembled guests actually picked fruit from cherry trees in full leaf which decorated the two ends of the table. Martha Wilmot called the typical banquet, with its procession of fifty or sixty dishes (a process which meant four hours at table) downright fatiguing; but she could not help being impressed by a dinner at Alexei Golitsyn's in the dead of winter which featured asparagus and all sorts of fruits, including "grapes as large as pigeons' eggs."⁴⁵ Alexander Kurakin's conservatory provided his guests with pears, apricots, cherries, and two sorts of melons.⁴⁶

Foreigners also noted that Russian largesse was more a way of life than a purposeful or occasional activity. Madame de Stael, in her memoirs of a trip to Russia, merely commented, Russians "are much more hospitable than the French."⁴⁷ But Lyall some decades later remarked: "So strong is the passion for entertaining company among the Russian nobles, that were it possible to find the means of supporting it, and to obtain a succession of guests, every day would be spent as they spend Sunday; and indeed some of the richer individuals keep open table throughout the year."⁴⁸ Nashchokin, says Lyall, customarily sent out pressing invitations for Sunday to all the nobility within twenty or thirty miles of his estate. They would begin arriving around 11 a.m. for the church service, held in the estate church only forty yards away, to which they would be ceremoniously driven in a

⁴² Felix Youssouppoff, *Lost Splendor* (New York, 1954), p. 14.

⁴³ Robert Lyall, p. 28.

⁴⁴ William Coxe, *Travels in Poland and Russia*, 5 vols. (London, 1802; reprint ed., 2 vols., New York: Arno Press, 1970), vol. 1, p. 313.

⁴⁵ Martha Wilmot to her mother, Dec. 22, 1803, *Journals*, p. 68.

⁴⁶ V. A. Bakarev, "Iz zapisok," *Krasnyi arkhiv*, 1936, no. 5, p. 255.

⁴⁷ From her *Ten Years' Exile* (London, 1821), cited in *Russia under Western Eyes*, edited by Anthony Cross (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971), p. 305.

⁴⁸ Lyall, *Travels*, p. 24. English and Russian estate hospitality patterns compared in terms of extravagant expenditure, but differed in terms of purpose, the frequency and duration of visits, and above all, in the character of entertaining. See Lawrence Stone's discussion of English country house hospitality in his *An Open Elite?* (Oxford, 1984) pp. 307–10, which ends with H. L. H. von Puckler Muskau's contrast (in 1826) of English spending to Junker thrift: "It requires a considerable fortune here to keep up a country house; for custom demands many luxuries! True hospitality this can hardly be called; it is rather the display of one's own possessions, for the purpose of dazzling as many as possible. After a family has thus kept open house for a month or two, they go for the remainder of the time they have to spend in the country to make visits at the houses of others; but the one hospitable month costs as much as a wealthy landed proprietor spends in a whole year with us."

lineika (a long, double-seated carriage holding about twelve people). At noon, a light lunch of *zakuski* and vodka was served, after which the group would disperse to play cards or take a walk. At three came a dinner of French and Russian dishes accompanied by fine wines, followed by more cards, walking, riding, or a nap until six, the hour for tea. Theater or dancing followed, with a good supper at midnight, after which the guests either went home or to their guest quarters on the estate. "Such," Lyall observes, "is a pretty general picture of the manner in which the hallowed day is spent by the nobles of the Russian empire. Those who are rich become hosts, and those who are poor form the guests."⁴⁹

For Russian nobles on all levels, such entertaining was not merely a source of pride, it was a way of life and perceived as an obligation. Contrasting Russian to English habits in the 1790s Karamzin noted, "With us the rule is: 'Always be a guest or receive guests.' An Englishman says, 'I want to be happy at home, and only now and then have witnesses to my happiness.'"⁵⁰ Not all nobles could entertain on the grand scale; but all of them felt obliged to feed and entertain swarms of visitors, whose very presence was considered a compliment. A nineteenth-century Russian declared hospitality "the general character of the whole nation."⁵¹ E. P. Yankova, whose family belonged to the well-to-do gentry, says that in the 1780s it was customary on her family estate of Bobrovo to have a constant stream of visitors, so that there were continually thirty people or more for meals.⁵² Now, all of these visitors came not only with their own servants but with their own bedding (as Wilmot observed with amazement).⁵³ And they sometimes stayed not just several days, but for weeks, months, or permanently.⁵⁴ Yankova quotes her father: "He is my neighbor and a noble like myself; my obligation is to receive him joyfully. A guest who laughs at his host while at table is a swine, but a host is a beast if he does not respect and entertain his guest."⁵⁵

The frequency and duration of theatrical festivities and entertaining in the provinces support Lotman's view that a general impulse to theatricalize life pervades this period. Prince A. B. Kurakin's regulation of life on his estate Nadezhdino is a notable example. Banished from Catherine's court to Saratov because of his close friendship with Paul, Kurakin created around himself a complete parody of a court composed of his serfs, including a serf police chief and other

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ N. M. Karamzin, *Letters of a Russian Traveller 1789–1790* (New York, 1957), p. 310.

⁵¹ Count A. Gurowski, *Russia As It Is* (New York and London, 1854), p. 186.

⁵² D. Blagovo, *Razskazy babushki: iz vospominaniiu piati pokolenii* (St. Petersburg, 1885), pp. 25–26.

⁵³ M. Wilmot to her mother, Nov. 11, 1803, *Journals*, p. 61. Haxthausen attributed the Russian habit of taking everything needed along on a trip, down to servants and a cook, to the non-Western tradition of the Asian caravansarai. See his *Studies*, pp. 60–61. A decade earlier the Marquis de Custine had likewise compared inns in St. Petersburg to caravansarais. See his *La Russie en 1839* (4 vols., Brussels, 1843), vol. 1, p. 143.

⁵⁴ T. Tolychova, in her *Semeinyia zapiski* (Moscow, 1865), pp. 95–98, said that she had no idea how one poor noble who had lived as a guest in her grandfather's house for the last twenty years came to be there.

⁵⁵ Blagovo, *Razskazy*, p. 26.

officials. Life at Nadezhdino was governed according to strict rules of etiquette inscribed in a printed sheet delivered to all guests entitled, "The order and regulations for the manner of life here in the village of Nadezhdino." Kurakin, resplendent in a silk camisole and brocade or velvet caftan (both with bejeweled fastenings), dazzling crosses hanging from his neck, reigned over a host of circling servants and a crowd of nobles, the poorer of whom often stayed for months at Nadezhdino without ever seeing their host. He had a special staff of servants whose only task was to oversee the transformation of ordinary life into "weeks, months of gigantic celebrations."⁵⁶ Similarly, guests stayed at I. O. Khorvat's pleasure estate of Golovchino weeks on end. "Stuffed and drunk," according to one visitor, they marveled at his romantic fantasy "Keingrust" in the forest, a tall mound with a spiral stairway and numerous gazebos, crowned with a large summer house in which they were served fresh fish and crayfish.⁵⁷

Often (as in the case of Kurakin) noble fantasy celebrated or drew on imperial ritual. The building of triumphal arches or the erecting of monuments to mark an imperial visit to an estate was common. But Sofia Mengden's memoirs describe a country neighbor who, without the stimulus of such a visit, decorated the entrance to his estate with a triumphal arch. He then ordered his serfs to create gilded carriages, dressed a young male serf in uniform, a young female in a fancy dress, sat them in one of the carriages, and recreated a festive entry into Moscow of Emperor Alexander I and his wife, complete with their suite (composed of his house serfs). The landowner led the procession and rang the bells.⁵⁸ Prince D. V. Golitsyn, governor-general of Moscow in the 1820s, preferred a European royal model (one much favored by the Empress Maria Fedorovna) for the refashioning of his estate Rozhdestvino as a playhouse. Its service buildings were turned into a *ferme ornée* and it was stocked with foreign breeds of decorative cattle. Princess Natalia Petrovna took her guests to a special room in the cowshed, where they would drink milk and eat jam, served by the head milkmaid garbed in a foreign costume.⁵⁹

Theatricalization based on royal theater or church ceremony (as Kurakin's crosses and the processional bell-ringing suggest) did not exhaust the models upon which the Russian noble could draw. Lotman cites the example of the eighteenth-century nobleman V. V. Golovin's ritualization of daily life on his estate along the lines of folk theater. The master and his servants staged daily performances for the beginning and end of the day on the estate, repeating a set script and using the same gestures. Golovin himself was actor, playwright, and spectator.⁶⁰ Drawing on pagan peasant traditions similar to those which inspired Golovin's ritualistic incantations, another eighteenth-century noble exorcised evil spirits nightly by assigning a peasant woman to walk around his house shaking a rattle.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Sakhnovskii, *Krepostnoi teatr*, p. 45.

⁵⁷ V. Borisovich as recorded in the diary of Dmitrenko-But; cited by Sakhnovskii, *ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵⁸ S. V. Mengden, "Otryvki semeinoi khroniki (iz vospominanii baronessy Sofii Mengden)," *Russkaia starina*, vol. 134 (1908, no. 5), p. 326.

⁵⁹ Blagovo, *Razskazy*, p. 249.

⁶⁰ Lotman, "Poetics," pp. 77–80.

⁶¹ Blagovo, *Razskazy*, p. 73.

The noble's costume on the estate frequently symbolized the "otherness" of this milieu. The "at home" dressing gown appears often in memoirs. Kurakin's caftan was an elaborate version of a pre-Petrine costume. On their estates some nobles preferred even more exotic alternatives to the uniforms or Western dress customary in the city. Shepelev, the Vladimir impresario, modeled not only his dress but his personal environment after that of a Turkish pasha. He strode about in a Turkish robe, pantaloons made of forty arshins of silk, and gold-embroidered skullcap and slippers, through his private apartments decorated exclusively with Turkish carpets, furniture, and huge, fragrant tropical plants.⁶² More nativist but equally theatrical in terms of its deviation from "normal" noble dress was the peasant costume affected by the occasional provincial eccentric.⁶³

Nobles theatricalized their estates by peopling them with exotic household members in the fashion of the imperial court. Among them were blackamoors (*arapy*), popular since Petrine times and very much in vogue in contemporaneous England.⁶⁴ But many households maintained a hunchback, dwarf, fool, or clown, archaic by Western standards. Troshchinskii had two clowns, one of whom was a filthy, defrocked priest.⁶⁵ Exotic house-serfs intrigued visitors. Miss Wilmot notes an evening's entertainment that consisted of three children aged five, eight, and nine: a Kalmyk, a Circassian, and an Indian, who danced charmingly for the company.⁶⁶ Nobles also took in odd peasant types who made life more interesting: "holy fools," fortune-tellers, and singers of ballads and epics.⁶⁷

Easily accessible elements of court ritual such as celebratory fanfares, processions, and parades served to theatricalize ordinary events such as trips to and from country estates. Witness the opening scenes of Turgenev's "A Poor Gentleman," in which an estate steward bustles around, freshening up the servants' livery and summoning the estate musicians to welcome an absentee owner. An elaborate display of theatrical rituals of arrival and departure is recounted in the memoirs of Gerakov, who set off from St. Petersburg bound for Tbilisi with a young friend intent on inspecting his many holdings. Not far from Rostov they came to his sizeable estate of Bogoroditsk, where they spent the night. This is what he writes: "No words can describe the joy of the peasants, seeing their *barin* for the first time."⁶⁸ They laughed and cried with delight as they presented the bread and salt. The manor house, in which no one had slept for thirty years, was in perfect condition, as were the park and the church. When the travelers left after two days, the

⁶² Afanasiev, "Vospominaniia," p. 40.

⁶³ Yankova describes an eccentric neighbor whose dress was like a peasant's although a knout hung from his waist sash. (Blagovo, *Razskazy*, p. 26.)

⁶⁴ See Allison Blakely, *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1986), pp. 13–25 for a discussion of Negro servants in imperial Russia.

⁶⁵ Henri Troyat, *Gogol*, p. 13.

⁶⁶ Martha Wilmot to her mother, Dec. 18, 1804, *Journals*, p. 82. "Mauvais honte is absolutely unknown, or if felt, 'tis banished as fast as possible as useless lumber," was Miss Wilmot's comment upon the Russian custom of bringing into the drawing-room "anything that can amuse."

⁶⁷ D. K. Moroz recalls some of these figures on his family estate in his memoirs, "Iz moego davnoproshedshego," *Kievskaiia starina*, 1895, no. 6, pp. 319–21.

⁶⁸ G. V. Gerakov, *Putevye zapiski po mnogim rossiiskim guberniam 1820* (St. Petersburg, 1830), p. 8.

peasants ran alongside their carriage for twelve versts, singing and dancing “as if it were a festival.”⁶⁹ Twentieth-century cynicism prompts the suspicion that the young master’s departure, possibly for another thirty years, might well have been cause for festival and celebration among peasants. But the incident highlights the fact that in such rituals the serf and the master were playing expected parts.

Lastly, some nobles structured estate life accordingly to reflect the passion for military ritual that characterized the outlook of Russian autocrats from Peter the Great to Nicholas I.⁷⁰ As Marc Raeff has noted, the young noble’s experience of a regimented, regulated life in military service often gave rise later to an attempt to recreate on his estate a similarly ordered and planned universe.⁷¹ Numerous memoirs testify to this impulse. Petr Kropotkin’s father, for instance, issued two sets of military “marching orders,” to his wife and his major domo, for the annual *déménagement* of servants and family from town to country. “To the Princess Kropotkin, wife of Prince Alexei Petrovich Kropotkin, Colonel and Commander,” read the commands enumerating all the halts on the five-day journey.⁷² The function of these orders was clearly ritualistic: Prince Kropotkin read them aloud to the family some days after May 30, the date specified as the day of departure. The family left Moscow in the afternoon, not at 9 a.m. as specified, throwing off the whole schedule. But, says the son, “as is usual in military marching orders, this circumstance had been foreseen”; one paragraph commanded the princess to deal as best she could with unexpected changes “in order to bring the said journey to its best issue.” Some landowners, not content with regimenting the daily routine, went so far as to create drill units of serfs on their estates.

For Lotman, the anecdote in Baron Wrangel’s memoirs concerning a landowner of the 1850s would constitute an extreme case of theatricalization of estate life. Instead of a single manor house, this landowner built six or seven smaller but spacious houses on his estate, each decorated in a different style: French, Spanish, Chinese, and so forth. In the garden were pedestals, but no statues. The houses, Wrangel learned, had been staffed with harems of serf-girls dressed in styles appropriate to each house; the owner (a bachelor) lived now in one, now in another, presumably changing his own cultural persona with each move. In his garden the landowner undoubtedly fancied himself in ancient Rome, for the pedestals had supported “statues” which were naked serfs, male and female, who were painted white and forced to adopt classical postures, remaining motionless when the owner was present. Eventually “Venus” and “Hercules” conspired: Venus threw sand in the owner’s face and Hercules leapt off his pedestal and clubbed the tyrant to death.⁷³

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

⁷⁰ For a brief but illuminating discussion of this phenomenon see Richard Stites’ chapter, “Administrative Utopia: Parade, Facade, Colony,” in his *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 19–24.

⁷¹ Marc Raeff, “Home, School, and Service in the Life of the Russian Nobleman” in *The Structure of Russian History*, ed. by Michael Cherniavsky (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 219–21.

⁷² Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York, 1971), pp. 39–42.

⁷³ N. N. Wrangel, *From Serfdom to Bolshevism*, trans. by Brian and Beatrix Lann (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1927), pp. 42–43.

The cultural and social impulses behind the theatrical continuum on the Russian estate were complex, and its psychological dimensions are difficult to assess, despite the abundance of memoirs concerning estate life. The historical significance of estate stages and the estate-as-stage is far more apparent. To start with the most obvious, the importance of estate theater in Russian cultural history is considerable: without it the great dramatic tradition developed in Russia would have been delayed, if not diminished. Private theaters both developed thespian talent and encouraged play-writing. Serf artists such as those carefully educated and trained from the age of ten for the stage of Ostankino became Russia's first professional actors, dancers, and singers, despite their legal status. Literary visitors would often be importuned to produce something for the theater, as Karamzin did for Marfino in 1803.⁷⁴ His contribution was a rustic comedy, "Exclusively for Marfino," in which he played the role of the owner Count P. S. Saltykov, V. L. Pushkin the role of watchman, and F. F. Vigel the role of *burmeister*.

Also obvious is the considerable expense of estate theater and theatricality. Much of it appeared "free": that is, it was made possible by the vast quantity of cheap or free labor that serfdom afforded. In fact, for many a family it was ruinous: in *War and Peace* Tolstoi echoes memoir literature when he attributes the decline in the Rostov family fortunes in large part to Count Rostov's inability to curtail lavish spending on hospitality, and his unwillingness to heed the warnings of his steward.⁷⁵

The theatrical continuum both validates and raises questions about Lotman's thesis that distinctly different semiotized behaviors were appropriate for town and country. On the one hand, there is no question that those aristocrats who treated their estates as "pleasure grounds" were trying, in their celebratory style of life, to get away from routinized, town hierarchy and rituals into some sort of carnival, fantasy world. Lesser nobles also deliberately created a "different" routine or atmosphere on their estates. But festive behavior on the estate often took its cues from imperial revels, and some nobles introduced into this private sphere the type of hierarchical, militaristic order which permeated Russian life elsewhere.

The observation that the Russian nobility stretched "from the foot of the throne into the peasant's hut" has often been used to refer to obvious disparities of wealth in this class. It acquires cultural significance in the light of estate theater and theatricality, which based itself mainly upon court practice but also had elements drawn from popular culture and peasant tradition. In some ways theater drew lord and serf closer: the cultural gap between them lessened because of the education and training necessary for theater proper, and they sometimes performed together. But the theatrical continuum also highlights anomalies of the lord-serf relationship. In the last analysis serf actors were trained slaves: Sheremetev freed and married one of Ostankino's operatic stars, but this, as much as Kamenskii's whips and Yusupov's cane, indicates the absolute power of lord over artistic serf.

⁷⁴ Kviatkovskaia, *Marfino*, p. 50.

⁷⁵ L. N. Tolstoi, *Voyna i mir*, 4 vols. in 2 (Minsk, 1976), pp. 47 and 58. See Lyall, *Travels*, vol. 2, pp. 363–64, and Kolbe, *Recollections*, p. 120, for disapproving comments on Russian extravagance.

We know virtually nothing of the serf's attitude towards the theatrical continuum. We do know, because guests comment on it, that sometimes the peasants hastily transformed into liveried footmen behind every chair for a showy banquet did not know how to serve properly. But since serfs did not write memoirs, we have little idea of the extent to which they enjoyed or resented being pressed into entertainment duties, or considered their owners' dramatic behavior unusual. One group of peasants belonging to Princess Dashkova seemed delighted when she appeared with a dear English friend and suggested that they rename their new village after the visitor.⁷⁶ By and large, serfs seem to have acquiesced in their role in estate entertainment, and even collaborated in the staged aspects of estate life, perhaps because of their own attitude toward hospitality, a tradition which, like Orthodox ritual, informed both gentry and peasant culture. Serfs turned up at the manor house on request to entertain guests with folk songs and dancing.⁷⁷ Religious holidays and ceremonies brought lord and peasant together in familiar roles, as did the celebration of the master-serf relationship through prescribed rituals such as the bread-and-salt offering to an owner returning to the country estate after an absence.⁷⁸

While a passion for and pride in estate theater is writ large in memoir literature, we know little more of the landowner's attitude toward his theatrical life than we do of the serf's. This is primarily because, as Lotman points out, behavior which seemed to cultural outsiders "theatrical" did not seem so to those who had been brought up in the fashion of the Russian noble, rehearsing the cultural and social roles which would fit him for later life.⁷⁹ To him these roles became a part of "normal," unremarkable behavior. But we can assume that to some extent the theatrical continuum described above must have been compensatory. Theatrical activities modeled on court practice psychologically reinforced the noble's identity with the autocracy; the role-playing gave him a sense of power and an enhanced image possible only in the arena he entirely controlled: his estate.

A serious scholarly interest in the Russian estate first arose in the early twentieth century. (Coincidentally, this was a second period, according to Lotman, when art "invaded" life.) Men like the gentleman scholar G. Lukomskii, the painter V. A. Vereshchagin, the art historian I. Grabar, and the author and memoirist Baron N. N. Vrangél combed the Russian countryside, photographing estates (many in an alarming state of disrepair) and researching their histories.

Their work probed the many theatrical aspects of that distinctly Russian estate culture they now proclaimed to be unique. In one article Baron Vrangél offered a hypothesis about the psychological impulse behind estate theatricality: until the 1820s, Russian nobles, he said, had been "playing grownups" on their

⁷⁶ Dashkova, *Memoirs*, p. 223. The friend was Mrs. Hamilton; the village was three versts from Troitskoe.

⁷⁷ See Wilmot, letter to Harriet Aug. 19, 1803, *Journals*, p. 44.

⁷⁸ See Wilmot, *Journals*, pp. 73–74, 95, and 188.

⁷⁹ Lotman points, for example, to the *dvorianka's* theatrical rehearsing of worldly manners in boarding school as preparation for her social role before marriage. See his *Roman A. S. Pushkin "Evgenii Onegin."* *Kommentarii* (Leningrad, 1983), p. 53.

estates.⁸⁰ From the context of the article it is clear that Vrangél was pointing to Russia's cultural childhood compared to an "adult" Western Europe, an immaturity reflected in the noble's exuberant imitation of Western culture on his estate. But the evidence presented earlier points to a more organic and deeply rooted parent-child relationship, one of dependency and imitation, which affected estate culture: that of autocrat and noble. This relationship was reflected, first of all, in the Russian estate's social and political function. In Russia, estates were not organic outgrowths of local landownership and power in a particular region, as was true in England, across the continent, and in the southern United States. Russian nobles acquired estates through gifts from the crown, service, or purchase, with many of the largest land holdings coming in the eighteenth century as grants to favorites. The location of these estates had little if anything to do with local roots or authority. From the 1760s a parade of traveling Russians found models for their estates in magnificent houses such as Blenheim, Twickenham, Stowe, and Chatsworth,⁸¹ the showplaces of eighteenth-century England. But the grandeur of these establishments was very much connected with the local roots and political role of the British peerage. In fact, as Mark Girouard and others have pointed out, landownership and political power in England were inextricably entwined: the English country estate was a "power house," emblematic of its owner's social and political standing.⁸² In Russia it was not. Though an estate might be used for prestige-enhancing display, the noble's real chances for wealth and position remained tied to a presence at court.⁸³

For this reason, the English attitude toward the estate was markedly different from the Russian. While traveling through England in the 1790s, Karamzin noted: "Here they live in the country as if in the city, and in the city as if in the country."⁸⁴ By this he meant that the Russian aristocrat typically spent more time living grandly in the city, his power base, source of rank and imperial favors. The Englishman, by contrast, only frequented London for the short winter season; and during it, Karamzin observed with surprise, he thought nothing of using rented carriages or walking around in shabby dress.⁸⁵ The English country seat took precedence over the capital because it symbolized a lengthy family association with a particular area and local responsibilities which English lords took seriously. All this was absent from the Russian scene, where local power resided in the hands of appointed bureaucrats and estates changed hands frequently.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Baron N. Vrangél, "Razval," *Starye gody*, July-September, 1910, p. 52.

⁸¹ See Anthony Cross, "By the Banks of the Thames:" *Russians in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Newtonville: Oriental Research Partners, Inc., 1980), especially chap. 9, "Russians on the Grand Tour."

⁸² Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 2.

⁸³ Marc Raeff, "The Russian Nobility in the 18th and 19th Centuries: Trends and Comparisons" in Ivo Banac and Paul Bushkovich, eds. *The Russian and East European Nobility* (New Haven, 1984).

⁸⁴ N. M. Karamzin, London, August, 1790, in *Letters of a Russian Traveler 1789-90*, trans. by Florence Jonas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 325.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ H. Habakkuk, in his essay "England" in *The European Nobility in the 18th Century*, edited by Albert Goodwin (London: A. and C. Black, 1953), p. 3, notes that "there was no market in second-hand

The dependency of the nobility was also a product of the ill-defined, even tenuous nature of noble status in Russia. This certainly contributed to the noble's eagerness to use his estate for theatrical, prestige-enhancing display of a type that was only a minor part of the noble ethos elsewhere in Europe. Though Russia had an ancient nobility of birth, since Muscovite times hereditary noble status and estate ownership had been closely linked to state service. Peter the Great's Table of Ranks did not fundamentally alter this relationship by opening the ranks of the nobility to talent. Status, measured in rank and wealth, continued to be linked to service to the state, compulsory or not.⁸⁷ And the question of who belonged to the *dvorianstvo* continued to be unclear. No genealogical register of the *dvoriane* existed; in 1767 the Master of Heraldry confessed, in a report to the Catherine's Legislative Commission, that he was not certain exactly what the qualifications were.⁸⁸ In 1785 Catherine's Charter to the Nobility gave it corporate rights, including the rights of freedom from corporal punishment and arbitrary confiscation of estates, and of keeping its own books of heraldry. Yet the charter "also included broad grounds for loss of noble status, which in turn meant the loss of noble privileges such as freedom from corporal punishment or confiscation of property."⁸⁹

Since one could lose noble status through unbecoming behavior, proving nobility by "acting" noble assumed a particular importance in the Russian context. To be sure, just as the French grandee at Versailles used role-playing and conspicuous consumption to maintain his status in the eyes of his peers at court, and as the English landed gentry used hospitality to maintain local prestige, some Russian theatricality was directed toward a pragmatic concern for status.⁹⁰ But for Russians, "acting" noble had a particular cultural connotation: the autocracy demanded that they behave as Europeans did. As Lotman has pointed out, the ideal was not to

mansions in 18th century England." Cf. August von Haxthausen's observation of 1843: "Nowhere does (real) property change hands as frequently as in Russia," and his assertion that "the nobleman does not regard his estate as his homestead . . . he will dispose of his inheritance immediately if he sees an advantage in doing so." (*Studies on the Interior of Russia*, translated by Eleanore L. M. Schmidt [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972], pp. 23 and 250.)

⁸⁷ The mid-century palace coups which followed the death of Peter showed how precarious were even the mightiest noble's status, wealth, and very life: former favorites were summarily exiled and sometimes put to death, their estates confiscated and awarded to new favorites. For a dramatic personal account of the devastating effect of a fall from power, see *The Memoirs of Princess Natal'ja Borisovna Dolgorukaja*, annotated and translated by Charles Townsend (Columbus: Slavica Press, 1977). Even in the reign of Nicholas I, the Tsar's favor was critical. The Marquis de Custine, observing Russian courtiers in 1839, declared: "(La Russie) manque de hierarchie sociale . . . le dernier des hommes, s'il sait plaire au maître, peut devenir demain le premier après l'empereur." (*La Russie en 1839*, 4 vols. [Brussels, 1843], vol. 2, p. 20.)

⁸⁸ Paul Dukes, *Catherine the Great and the Russian Nobility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 145.

⁸⁹ Brenda Meehan-Waters, *Autocracy and Aristocracy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1982), p. 166. For the historical roots of this insecurity, see Meehan-Waters, "The Development and the Limits of Security of Noble Status, Person, and Property in Eighteenth-Century Russia" in Anthony Cross, ed. *Russia and the West in the 18th Century* (Newtonville: Oriental Research Partners, Inc., 1983), pp. 294-305.

⁹⁰ As Raëff notes, "vivant noblement" was a legal concept in ancien-régime France. See his "The Russian Nobility in the 18th and 19th Centuries," p. 119, fn. 1.

become a foreigner, but to *act* like one.⁹¹ The Westernization of the Russian elite, though initiated by fiat in the reign of Peter, within a few generations had produced a Russian nobility which willingly incorporated the externals of Western European culture—language, dress, manners, architecture, interior decor, and the fine and decorative arts—into its daily life. In matters of taste the nobility followed the lead of the crown. The result was a *mélange* of European styles: the French language and Parisian fashion reigned, but Catherine’s Anglomania in architecture and landscaping, and her importation of Wedgwood china as well as Sèvres porcelain, influenced the building and buying patterns of the aristocracy.

By the late eighteenth century these externals had become an important part of the nobility’s self-definition, and it had become adept at European manners. But throughout the period in question literary satire of foppish Russian Francophiles and eccentric Russian Anglomaniacs also warned Russians of the dangers of over-playing their European roles. On the self-contained world of his estate the noble could, if he wished, ignore these cultural pressures, and fashion a role suited to his own psychic needs. Ironically, while lacking real political power in the world beyond his estate, on it the Russian noble had more absolute power than his peers elsewhere. A theatrical reshaping of this private world offered the possibility of a personal response to the official restrictions and controls of the world of official Russia. As we have seen, estate theatricality went both ways: it could reinforce the noble’s “normal” image of himself in his roles of cultured European and Russian office-holder, or it could engender a fantasy that implicitly or explicitly rejected this imposed image through inventive festival and ritual or costume of a different rank or nationality.

In trying out various identities, the Russian noble can be said to have been “playing grownups.” But his desire to play in such a fashion still does not fully explain the enormous investment in theater and theatricality on the estate in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Elsewhere in his essays on Russian culture in the Pushkin period Lotman posits a general blurring of the lines between theater and everyday life in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Russia which seems to me significant. By the late eighteenth century, life itself was a form of theater, in which *chin* (rank) determined one’s role, costume, and lines. A Russian critic pointed to the ridiculousness of the Table of Ranks whose categories embraced not only the military and bureaucratic hierarchy but teachers, doctors, and actors as well. “Why not forty-one classes instead of fourteen? Fourteen, when in reality there are but twelve . . . The relation between the rank and the functions is quite arbitrary,” he wrote in the 1840s.⁹² So schooled were people in these *chin* roles that Gogol’s imposter Khlestakov, finding himself mistaken for one of another rank but unsure what it was, could pick up his new part from the verbal cues of those addressing him, and knew how to change his own lines to fit the new role. Though this aspect of life-as-theater appeared routinized and predictable, it could

⁹¹ Lotman, “Poetics,” p. 70.

⁹² Ivan Golovine, *Russia under the Autocrat Nicholas the First*, 2 vols. (London, n.d., reprinted by Praeger, New York, 1970), vol. 2, p. 77.

at times become a theater of the fantastical and the improbable, in which the quality of one's role-playing could effect radical transformation, as Khlestakov's temporary success or the instant estates of imperial favorites, raised from obscurity to enormous wealth, illustrate.

Beyond outright theatricality, many ritualized aspects of estate life such as the carefully ordered household hierarchy, the assignment of living spaces, dining procedures, and forms of address substantiate Lotman's life-as-theater model: such cultural markers defined the roles of everyone on the estate stage. But estate theater could blur real-life distinctions. Serf cooks became princesses, and footmen princes. Early nineteenth-century gentry theater productions often sported a mixed set of actors—talented serfs and their owners—and played to a mixed audience. Gerakov, a sophisticated theatergoer who during his journey of 1820 saw performances in the provincial capitals of Orel (where he visited Kamenskii's theater), Tula, Nizhnii Novgorod, and Saratov, criticized both nobles and serfs for poor acting.⁹³ As for private theaters, he heaped scorn on nobles who, as he put it, “spend all their money on the passion to have a theater on their estate in which they themselves play, and for the most part serfs applaud whether or not the master plays well,” terming such squandering of money both “comical and sinful.”⁹⁴ But Gerakov's critical stance was unusual in a society driven by the theatrical impulse. (A thoughtful commentary on the social ironies of theater comes from the cultural outsider Baron August von Haxthausen in the 1840s. “Fascinated” to discover that the actors in the Nizhnii Novgorod provincial theater were all serfs, he ruminated, “What a vast conflict in feeling this must evoke. From their earnings in this, the freest of all arts, as in the lowliest trade, they have to pay *obrok* to their masters.”)⁹⁵

Some of the repertory of provincial theater bolsters Lotman's assertion that the distinction between reality and what was happening on stage virtually disappeared in this period. Shakhovskoi's comedy of 1808, *Polubarskie zatei* (Semi-noble Enterprises), for example, is a play about play-acting. It takes us seemingly into his own real world, behind the scenes of an estate theater (but one considerably inferior to his own, as the mocking title indicates). The main characters, a resident poet and acting instructor, are preparing a play to celebrate the betrothal of the landowner's daughter which will feature a ballet with dialogue, with roles for Minerva, Juno, the Muses, Graces, naiads, and driads. By the fourth act of the play, despite feverish preparations, the whole production has turned into a fantastical shambles. Some actors are drunk, a groom who was to dance in the ballet has been bitten by a dog, and the female dancers have been overcome by heat cooking blinis. In a final farcical twist, the theater itself collapses.⁹⁶

While farce was plentiful, the mainstay of provincial theater was elaborate,

⁹³ Gerakov, *Putevye zapiski*, pp. 21, 35–36, 122–23, and 162. Gerakov's reservations indicate a change in sensibilities among the educated elite around the 1820s, chiefly the increase of sentiment favoring a privatization of life, for he feels mothers should be at home, giving their children moral guidance.

⁹⁴ Gerakov, *Putevye zapiski*, pp. 143–44.

⁹⁵ Haxthausen, *Studies*, p. 110.

⁹⁶ Sakhnovskii, *Krepostnoi teatr*, pp. 52–60.

allegorical celebration and reenactment of real life events in the way that Shakhovskoi's play-within-the play depicts. Such productions called for spectacular effects, and cast important personages in multiple roles as characters, spectators, and sometimes actors. Before their very eyes, their existence or exploits in real life were transformed through allegory and allusion into those of classical or mythical heroes. The great spectacle Potemkin produced on his estate for the celebration of the birth of Grand Duke Constantine in 1779, or the even grander fête celebrating the capture of Ismail in 1791 which Derzhavin describes at length in his memoirs were models for lesser productions. For these famous occasions, carefully staged by Potemkin, his palace and garden became a theater, and the costumed guests were drawn into the action. Battles were reenacted on the estate lakes, a grotto modeled on the mountains of the Caucasus served as the site for supper, and choruses of maidens in Greek tunics entertained. Guests became denizens of other countries and times as they wandered through different parts of the house decorated in Turkish, Italian, and Indian style, or out into the park, transformed into arcadian groves and elysian fields complete with young wrestlers.⁹⁷

As Potemkin was both producer, spectator, and costumed participant, so too Catherine II was both present at and represented in these spectacles. Her subordinates in the provinces found themselves in similar positions. For the occasion of the arrival of E. P. Koshkin, Krechetnikov's successor as provincial viceroy, Vasilii Levshin and Ivan Kartseli composed "Rejoicing Kaluga and Tula: A Prologue." The play cast a nymph, the local river, Vulcan, Mercury, and the people of Kaluga and Tula along with the viceroy in leading roles. In the opening scene, against a backdrop representing a gloomy wasteland with an amphora containing the springs of the river, the nymph sings a lament about Krechetnikov's death. Vulcan tries to comfort her, predicting that "a hero will come." Soon enough, after an elaborate ceremony, Mercury flies onstage heralding the arrival of the new viceroy.⁹⁸ One wonders how Koshkin felt when confronted with his theatrical alter ego, appearing in the company of mythical gods to transform life in Kaluga. As in Potemkin's fêtes, here art was invading life, providing refashioned roles for real people drawn from classical models, and blurring the distinctions between life and art in such a way as to suggest that life itself was a masquerade.

A poem by I. M. Dolgorukii entitled "My Theater" speaks of the delights of such conscious remodeling of life. In his theater, he says, "I revel in deception, evoking a golden century; In verse and in prose I am distinguished, I a young Tsar of dreams."⁹⁹ One of Dolgorukii's plays, "The Magic of Love," staged in 1799, was an extraordinarily complex production designed to amaze viewers by a series of "miraculous events."

Gods constantly fly down from above and up from below, earth and sky are in movement, forests spring up, buildings move, and imps issue from the ground like sprouts from seed. Everything . . . is evoked magically.

⁹⁷ G. R. Derzhavin, *Sochineniia*, 9 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1871), vol. 1, pp. 383 and 390–91.

⁹⁸ D. I. Malinin, *Nachalo teatra v Kaluge* (Kaluga, 1913), p. 21.

⁹⁹ I. M. Dolgorukii, *Pushkinskaia biblioteka* (Moscow, 1919), p. 184.

The final enchantment consisted of the fact that suddenly the palace of Venus is presented, and Cupid appears seated on an emerald throne.¹⁰⁰

This was representative of the “heroic” period of provincial theater and theatricality, which came to a close with the death of the “angel” Alexander I and the collapse of the Decembrists’ dreams. Romantic literature and the nobility’s sense of limitless means, the wellsprings of this period’s theater of splendor and fantasy, succumbed to a merciless realism. Lotman feels that the literary realism of the 1840s reversed the direction of modeling: art began to draw on life, and life to reject literary models.¹⁰¹ By mid-century, in any case, few nobles could still afford the streams of cupids, nymphs, satyrs, Turks, Persians, Greek gods, and *bogatyri* who had flooded the prosceniums of provincial stages at the turn of the century.¹⁰²

The estate culture of Nicholas I’s reign appears to validate Vrangeli’s assertion that the nobility’s “playing grownups” ended in the twenties. Midway through Nicholas’s reign signs of a more economical “privatization” of estate life were evident; the search for a national Russian architectural style was beginning to transform estate architecture;¹⁰³ and—to judge from Baron Vrangeli’s anecdote about his eccentric neighbor—extremes of estate theatricality took place in private, ceding to a more refined sense of taste and manners.

At court and among the intelligentsia, however, theatrical display and a theatrical consciousness remained strong. In the 1840s the court staged elaborate masquerades, and Nicholas I “acted” his role of emperor as felicitously as had his brother.¹⁰⁴ Small wonder, then, that the elite still viewed its life and behavior through the prism of theater. Like Krylov, who earlier had commented that “this world is nothing other than a capacious building into which a great multitude of masked people have been gathered,” the Decembrist poet V. F. Raevsky, in his last poem (written around 1846), warned his daughter about the deceptive brilliance of high

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ “A little time would pass, and the literariness and theatricality of the real life imitators of Marlinskij’s or Schiller’s heroes would itself become a group norm that hindered the individual expression of the personality. The man of the 1840s to 1860s would be seeking to find himself by rejecting literariness.” (“Theater,” p. 160)

¹⁰² In the 1820s the nobility was already courting financial ruin. Lyall notes that Alexei Razumovskii, with an income of 600,000 rubles, was always short of money (*Travels*, vol. 2, p. 363). But the spectre of the bankruptcy of a class was less apparent than it would be a few decades later.

¹⁰³ Marquis de Custine in 1839 commented favorably on a wooden villa near Moscow which he visited: “On m’a reçu dans une maison de bois . . . l’intérieur de ces grandes cabanes rappelle le luxe des plus beaux palais de l’Europe . . . C’est la seule habitation qui soit d’un style national” (*La Russie*, vol. 3, p. 150).

¹⁰⁴ See *The Diary of George Mifflin Dallas, United States Minister to Russia 1837-1839* (New York: Arno Press, 1970) for a personal account of court festivities. In 1842 the Tsar held a masquerade which was a medieval tournament. On imperial role-playing, see Lotman’s description of Alexander I’s adeptness at theatrical posturing (“Theater and Theatricality,” pp. 156–59). The Marquis de Custine similarly characterizes Nicholas I as an actor in his memoirs: “Il pose incessamment; d’où il résulte qu’il n’est jamais naturel, même lorsqu’il est sincère . . . En grec, *hypocrite* voulait dire acteur; l’hypocrite était un homme qui se masquait pour jouer la comédie. Je veux donc dire que l’empereur est toujours dans son rôle, et qu’il le remplit en grand acteur.” *La Russie*, vol. 1, pp. 192–93. Italics in original.

society. It is all a masquerade, he told her, in which men wear “masks and theatrical costumes, and are not what they seem.”¹⁰⁵

Though estate theater and theatricality may have subsided under Nicholas and all but vanished with the emancipation, they left a rich legacy. Estate theater had educated as well as entertained several generations of provincials, and it laid the groundwork for the rich nineteenth-century Russian theatrical tradition. Estate theatricality, played out on two alternative stages, also had a lasting impact on Russian culture. One stage had pandered to official Russia through imitative and sometimes spectacular pantomime. The other stage had been, in effect, an embryonic theater of alienation that employed transforming costume, speech, and behavior to express disaffection from reality. This type of theatricality became a characteristic response of the Russian who felt psychologically oppressed, alienated from, or enraged by his surroundings and circumstances. We can, in fact, view well-known later types—the bearded Slavophile in Persian dress, the iconoclastic youth of the 1860s whose costume, language, and manners owed much to Bazarov and Chernyshevsky’s “new men,” or a Nechaev, Khlestakov-style imposter and pseudo-*bogatyr*—as heirs to the theatrical model of life the impresarios and amateurs of this earlier epoch had established.

¹⁰⁵ Cited by W. E. Brown in his *A History of Russian Literature of the Romantic Period*, 4 vols., (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1986), vol. 2, p. 109.