

Storming the Stage in the Golden Age of the Russian Actress

LORI JOHNSTON
UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA, ANCHORAGE

In the 1890s, Izabella Grinevskaia (1864-1944) wrote about, and for, increasingly independent actress-directors. As a dramatic commentator, creator, and chronicler of drama, Grinevskaia observed, “Russian audiences . . . still [viewed] actresses solely as commodities” (Schuler 3). While superstar actresses promoted feminist themes and a radical examination of the body’s role in society, actresses still traded sex for money in order to subsidize their careers. Grinevskaia’s *Ogon’ki* [First Storm], a one-act performance of the body in century-old contexts both on and off stage, may be understood through contemporary feminist and performance art theory. Grinevskaia light-heartedly subverted the traditional constructs that constrained the female body in male stage design and costuming. Through her “everywoman” protagonist Grinevskaia reasserted the mythic female prerogative to create, confronting Russian theater audiences with a new, expressive female body.

Russian cultural historians traditionally consider the period 1898-1917 the Silver Age in theater, during which Western-trained playwrights and directors replaced the Slavic principle of “God-given talent” with Western methods and training of actors. Grinevskaia designates the years 1880-98 as the “Golden Age of the Russian Actress.” During these two decades a “personality cult” (Schuler) arose around several skilled women who ruled the stage, enabling a limited matriarchy to choose plays, direct rehearsals, or perform in improvisational situations that allowed female talent to control the stage. In some cases, these drama queens (*tsaritsy teatra*) owned their own companies or founded their own theater groups. Reflecting the feudal nature of Russian society, they were uniquely individual matriarchs of the stage, dictating a repertoire that expressed their opposition to or endorsement of the tsarist realm in which their audiences moved in everyday life (Schuler). Nevertheless, in retrospect (1909),

Grinevskaia suggested that actress-managers, many of whom saw their theaters as an escape route to freedom, were dangerously self-deluded. Although

several female entrepreneurs enjoyed a measure of economic, artistic, and personal autonomy, even the most ambitious and powerful among them were not free agents, forever liberated from the male hegemony in the theater. (Schuler 136)

On April 2, 1895, Grinevskaia's "First Storm" was first performed at the Aleksandrinskii Imperial Theater in St. Petersburg, during the reign of aging stage queen Mariia Gavrilovna Savina.¹ Although theater women remained fettered by masculine editorial powers, the brief ascendance of dramatic matriarchs such as Savina² introduced feminist themes to the theater-going public through many short-lived, brief pieces written by women of Grinevskaia's caliber.

The Golden Age of the Actress also led to the publication of a growing number of plays written by women. With the abolition of the Imperial Theater's monopoly in 1882, authors such as Grinevskaia not only influenced audiences through specific performances, but also left for posterity a dramatic commentary on the role of woman in society and in the theater. Grinevskaia's single-act "First Storm" relates a woman's (She's) use of her body to her perceived and actual value with the help of a supporting actor and foil, She's husband. Familiarity with the theater culture could have heightened Grinevskaia's awareness of the prostitute-like position of a wife/actress, which "First Storm" dramatizes. Grinevskaia's focus on the woman's (She's) body paralleled the manner in which audiences of the time concentrated on an actress's physical form rather than her dramatic skills.

According to Catherine Schuler, "Grinevskaia complained that the tendency . . . to pander to the low and often capricious taste of provincial spectators . . . was a principal cause of the costume crisis" (32). This "crisis" refers to the position in which actresses found themselves when they could not afford the wardrobe required of them. These wardrobes were costly, for performances necessitated several gratuitous costume changes.³ "And because entrepreneurs and directors demanded such wardrobes, actresses from all categories were compelled to engage on some level in commercial sex" (Schuler 33).

Actresses were pressured into prostitution because those financing the play would not cut into their profits to pay for glitzy sets and props. Instead, as one critic noted at the time, the capital-owners chose to "decorate their own often wretched productions at the expense of women's honor, soul, and body" (Schuler 32). The costume crisis of Russian actresses harnessed the female body to the plow of

sensationalism and male gratification. As Susan Bordo notes, “To feel autonomous and free while harnessing body and soul to an obsessive body-practice is to serve, not transform, a social order that limits female possibilities” (Bordo 179). The costume crisis illustrates patriarchal attempts to keep actresses in conservative social positions just when they were beginning to deviate from the route mapped out for them by male culture.

The Silver Age penchant to dissolve women’s essential self, “their honor, soul, and body,” is comparable to the Western phenomenon of establishing restrictive norms for the desirable ideal of femininity. The norms of both cultures require women to sacrifice sustenance in order to attract the male gaze. In both cases, a patriarchal society prescribes a physical image for women that results in a hollowed-out female body consumed by male constructs. While Russian actresses were called upon to forego essentials, including food, in order to purchase glamorous costumes for public consumption that compensated for a performance’s lack of literary substance, Freud was writing about the self-starvation of his anorexic star patient.⁴ In describing the withering disease of anorexia nervosa, which attacks feminine autonomy and calls on woman to suffer in order to attract and entertain male viewers, Bordo writes, “I take the psychopathologies that develop within a culture, far from being anomalies or aberrations, to be characteristic expressions of that culture; to be, indeed, the crystallization of much that is wrong with it” (141). The costume crisis, a norm in the minds of male patrons and managers, fed on women’s physical bodies in order to fill the void created by empty plays. This normalized amorality illustrated what was wrong with Russian theater. The psychopathology of the Russian theater’s Silver Age resembled anorexia nervosa in the West; both demanded the destruction or degradation of a (female) body for the gratification of the male viewer/consumer.

This psychopathology mandated that actresses’ talent and self-expression disappear, along with the body, under heaps of voluptuous velvet, fluffs of shimmering chiffon, and bright silk pulled over restrictive corsets. As men directed women across the stage according to a design that accentuated their airy step, bustle, and the always-popular bosom, the vocation of the professional actress atrophied, providing a male-authored script for the female audience member to reenact in her real life. The costume crisis distracted the audience’s focus from the dramatic *élan vital* of the actress’ creativity onto the

fantasy of physical passion within woman's breast. Grinevskaia's "First Storm" suggests that, in reality, what burned in the actress's breast was not the prurient lust imagined by men, but the desire for professional fulfillment. However, just as the actress sold her body in order to buy costumes, so too might the provincial girl of Grinevskaia's day have prostituted her body and dreams of a satisfying vocation for the uncommon opportunity to view the lavish costumes. Like Western anorexia, the Russian costume crisis devoured the physical and spiritual integrity of woman's body as women consumed the "feminine" images shaped by a patriarchal mold.

The performances that bid women to sacrifice dignity and perhaps food to buy costumes were largely written by metropolitan men for the provincial stage, probably with male audiences in mind. Such stagings offered male viewers the infrequent opportunity to openly ogle a live female body on stage while enjoying the darkness with a provincial girl who would be too distracted by the bright costumes changed with every scene to notice how her male companion might physically erode the autonomy of her own objectified body. The finely-feathered female on stage defamiliarized the everyday female body, transforming it into a spectacle for sale and potentially offering the male viewer a "life script." Having bought the right to consume the spectacle, he likewise had purchased the right to impose himself on the body of the dazzled damsel at his side, who, indebted to him for the price of the show, might imitate the actress' lead and sell herself according to the sexual/economic terms of the male-authored scenario. Thus, the on-stage drama spilled over into the actual life of the impressionable provincial audience.

Grinevskaia's "First Storm," however, deviates from the normal ending of a play during the costume crisis. Many male playwrights of the era presented actresses as self-destructive protagonists defined by patriarchal views of female sexuality. Chekhov, for instance, shrivels the budding young actress, Nina, into a provincial actress-turned-vagrant, circumscribed by male creators, cutting her from the climactic finale of *Chaika* [The Seagull, 1896]. In "First Storm" the audience sees a forward-thinking alternative to the Chekhovian version of reality.⁵ Grinevskaia does not write the talent and integrity of her heroine into anorexic oblivion. To the contrary, Grinevskaia's character, She, models a method for gaining political weight.

Through a quickly executed transfer of power from He to She, Grinevskaia's role reversal encapsulates a Shakespearean formula:

everyday characters, to whom the audience may relate, are chosen to turn the tables on authority and expose the traditionally unassailable myths of marriage. “First Storm” spotlights a couple that—the audience immediately learns—has been married a while. As the audience “overhears” a conversation casually performed between She and He on stage, it quickly associates the characters with people known from everyday life. The universalizing element of the play, signaled by the absence of names and the paradigmatic nature of the couple’s conversation, eliminates the Chekhovian need for an ante-scene that would have developed the characters. This technique frees Grinevskaiia to focus on the action, which consists of a transfer of power from the male body, He, to the female body of She, enacted during their lengthy tête-à-tête.

The list of dramatis personae labels the players as the young couple, Nina Pavlovna and the artist Vladimir, and the script implies that they typify a non-aristocratic but comparatively well-read and financially secure social class. Since Grinevskaiia throughout the play calls them “He” and “She,” the latter could be any woman⁶ who “lazily turns the pages of a journal”⁷ (Grinevskaiia 173)—which is, indeed, what She does at the beginning of the play. Although tentative and clinging at the outset, She scripts her own power play, finally eschewing the external affirmation of objectified value she initially seeks, and refusing to be coddled, costumed, arranged, directed, or produced by He.

She’s body enacts her dissatisfaction with her marriage and lack of vocation, while her speech enunciates her growing independence. She begins by complaining that He does not value her, and She sidles up to her life’s work, He, begging for affirmation of her self-esteem: “Tell me as before, just as before, that you love me. Tell me!

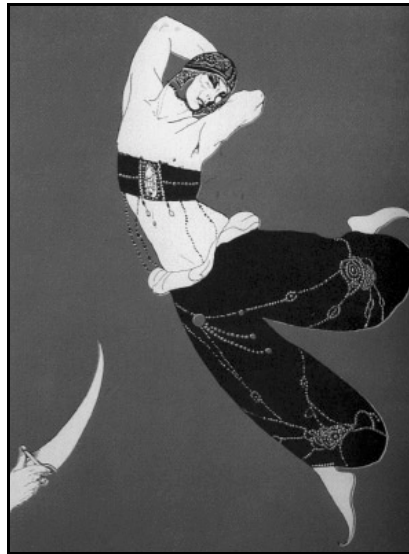


Figure 1. Leon Bakst. Drawing of Vatslav Nijinsky in *Scheherazade*. 1910s. *Bakst*. Slide 91.

I'm bored, I'm so bored, Voldemar!"⁸ (Grinevskaia 174). Through vivid images and pregnant ellipses, Grinevskaia has She imply that her husband fails to satisfy her need for affection and sexuality. In response to her pleas and challenges, He only showers She with words, devoid of the physical reinforcement She's body seems to demand.

She notes that He leaves her alone to go out into the world and implies that She would like to make her own mark on society. She initially mourns, "How sad that all has passed without a trace and nothing comes this way again" (174).⁹ As the audience enters the couple's world, it becomes clear that She will use her body to make her mark. That body lacks the traditional outlets of love and family, as her husband has not satisfied her enumerated expectations harbored as a "modestly naïve maiden" (179).¹⁰ Left with no means of sexual satisfaction or self-expression and with no vocational training, She makes full use of her body to communicate with the world outside her domestic sphere, thus negating her husband's claim to her as his private "treasure."

He explains the traditional relationship between a man and a woman in the following terms: a man's "feeling for her is comparable with that of a rich man to his treasures. While they are preserved under reliable locks, he goes about his business in peace, almost forgetting about them. But as soon as he questions the durability of the locks—he barely steps away from them and guards and dotes on the treasures" (185).¹¹ The conflict between He's desire to keep She safely under lock and key and She's desire to move about freely leads to the climax, when She's corporeal action declares that her body is not a treasure to be locked away, but is a living, breathing text that will engage the world in its own right, under female direction. Of course, this results in the transfer of power as the safely guarded "treasure" that clung to an inattentive husband disappears, and the clingy husband appears in the shadow of a woman with a vocation of her own. Although Grinevskaia perfunctorily examines the economic relationship between the woman and the man who keeps her, "like a treasure," hidden from others who might try to pick the woman's lock, she chooses to foreground the relationship between the woman's body and society's expectations in a manner comparable to that of the dramatist Antin,¹² a modern feminist who capitalizes on the body in performance art.

According to one viewer, during a performance Antin "showed herself making up with the camera as a mirror," thus

“changing her body to present a different ‘self’ to the world” (Carlson 152). In “First Storm,” after a speech delivered with “growing strength”¹³ about her lost faith in pastoral idylls and flowery words (179), She crosses over to her dressing table and looks into the mirror. Like Antin, Grinevskaia’s She prepares to present a different self to the world by creating a new body image. In the context of turn-of-the-century Russia, hers is a radical act of independence. Grinevskaia presents She’s body to her husband and the public, relying on her body movement through space to express her own inherent value to the world. She tells He, “I was content to fade into the background before you, to be hidden in your shadow”¹⁴ while “you thought that I was a colorless simple woman . . .” (179)¹⁵ and reminds He that She had devoted her life to “developing only [his] talents” (179),¹⁶ repressing her own creativity so that He might play the hero, though he did not value She’s sacrifices. She says, “While you were my hero, in your presence I was all that timidity which binds the tongue and movement” (179).¹⁷ The crisis of self-expression in “First Storm” recalls the costume crisis of the Silver Age and necessitates She’s emancipation through body movement that defies male construction of the female form.

When He finally hugs She, “She quietly but decisively frees herself from his embrace and walks to the dressing table, [and] sits in front of the mirror,” where She applies make-up and dons her costume, preparing herself for public view (180).¹⁸ Antin’s camera becomes Grinevskaia’s audience-mirror, which she invites to glimpse She’s inner self. If one’s eyes are the windows to the soul, then She’s reflection flickering in the audience’s eyes is the projection of the envisioned soul that She wishes to create for herself. At this juncture, She’s bedfellow, He, plays the role of public spectator dumbstruck by her talent.

Grinevskaia engages the public from the play’s very start, which consists of an everyday scene, no doubt played in drab everyday garb, centered on She’s complaints about He’s lack of tenderness, and his matter-of-fact responses. Their argument, so familiar among couples, instantly polarizes the audience along gender lines that urge sympathy or identification with one or the other. In gain-saying society’s power to limit She’s opportunities for affection and fulfillment because of her age, gender, or political situation, Grinevskaia invites analogous female spectators to throw the weight of their body around instead of passively playing the part scripted by

man, as She does at the play's beginning.

As Antin contends, "The usual aids to self-definition—sex, age, talent, time, and space—are merely tyrannical limitations upon my freedom of choice" (Carlson 153). Grinevskaia's She could have echoed these sentiments as, in preparation for her role in tableaux vivants, she defies her age, fading looks, the gender expectations of those in her social circles, her sparse feminine heritage, and her limited opportunities for growth. Grinevskaia's everywoman transforms social expectations, performing She as a self-emancipated woman through her body presentation. Through She's example Grinevskaia summons female audience members likewise to express themselves—via dress, speech, overall self-projection, and especially the traversal of their own public stage: the drawing room or garden party. Grinevskaia announces that a woman need not have an education, a well-connected husband or father, or Tolstoyan domestic bliss to attain self-assured, independent status. The forty-one-year-old "lowbrow" Savina would have played She with skill, for "she [Savina] was never effective or comfortable in romantic heroic roles; her heroines were for everyday use (*posvednevnost*)" (Schuler 42).

Grinevskaia suggests that everywoman may dictate her own scenario, one that does not allow sex, age, time, or space to limit her freedom, and that spatially signals her infinite potential.

HE: That's great. The husband's supposed to pay his wife compliments.

SHE: Why not? Is it better that she be told nice things by a stranger?

HE: What stranger? I won't allow anyone to say coarse things to you.

SHE: Why coarse? Really, are your compliments coarse? Anyone else can pay me the same ones.

HE: (settling down into the couch) But there's no one to pay them. We hardly go visiting. No one comes to visit us and we don't go anywhere. Together we're the image of the old pastoral idyll. It cannot happen that someone could begin to admire you. (Grinevskaia 178)¹⁹

The reference in this exchange to trite flirtations further helps the audience to appreciate She's provinciality and her lack of mobility under her husband's management. At this point she begins to resist both tradition and his control of her movements—a change that sets the stage

for She's rapid evolution into a self-possessed woman with agency in the final portion of the play.

She's first significant dissociation from her husband's will and desire occurs when she determines to present herself before the Princess and innumerable undetermined admiring strangers, and, moreover, in a manner that controls their gaze. Having prepared some poetic verses and an interpretive text depicting Antigone honoring a man's ashes, She devises the white "Greek" toga that constitutes her simple, inexpensive costume. Not just another pretty face in a skimpy costume designed to excite the male imagination, She will perform under female direction.

When She's husband expresses his shock that she "too" will burst onto the stage in the spectacle, the participation of which He had boasted, She asks, "Why are you so surprised? Am I some kind of freak?" (Grinevskaia 180),²⁰ indicating deviation from norms. Upon He's reply that she doesn't have what it takes to perform, She declares her independence, noting that She will compose her own text under the guise of a socially acceptable pursuit—the Princess' tableaux vivants.²¹ This assertion of autonomy finds artistic realization in She's skill in body movement and her creation of a companion text for her body's "picture."²²

Bordo maintains, "The body is not only a text of culture," but also "a direct locus of social control" (165). As She returns to her dressing table, she directs her husband, "Please stand still and don't look at me" (Grinevskaia 181).²³ Instead of having an affair and letting someone else "liberate" her from the male gaze, She achieves her own freedom from society's control of her body. By inviting strangers to admire her body art from a distance while denying her husband the right to a proprietary gaze, She exercises control over access to her body.

Although Grinevskaia did not direct actors to be nude, she certainly presented a woman stripped of traditional social control and inhibitions. Before She puts on the mask of costume and cosmetics that commonly protect women from society,²⁴ She is unmasked physically to some degree, but also emotionally. She reveals her intentions and desires to her husband, He, in a manner that "symbolically reclaims women[s] subjectivity through the body" (Dolan 62). As She creates her own "dramatis persona" or "acting face,"²⁵ she enters the public world, relegating He to the inert role of listening and watching the body She authors.

She's body art performance enables the viewer to see women as subjects. Through the offices of the Princess, the female member of the establishment who solicits She's active/acting participation in the show, She can elude patriarchal constraints. The course of events is navigated here by the two women, who, moreover, have advance knowledge of He's intended performance while keeping him in ignorance of She's plans. This fact makes it easy to imagine the Princess collaborating with She in a matriarchal bond comparable to that of actresses Fedotova and Ermolova, "one of shared power" (Schuler 65)²⁶ in deciding public presentations of the body.

This establishment of female subjectivity and authorial power allows Grinevskaia to show both marriage and theater from the viewpoint of a woman—specifically, a woman whose body is masked and costumed by She, then arranged in tableaux and consumed by the Princess and those dependent on the Princess' patronage. If one imagines the self-made woman Savina playing the part of She, the power of female creativity is magnified.

From the perspective of the female subject, the traditions surrounding marriage and theater are founded on a philosophy of falsehood. Purportedly arguing for the male establishment in general, He asserts that supporting his wife and children necessitates time spent away from home; that he is too tired to satisfy her needs because he is working and worrying about their "daily bread" (174).²⁷ She refutes these claims by reminding him that they *have* no children or pressing financial need. When She finally agrees with He's explanation that they "can't go [their] whole lives caressing and cooing" (186),²⁸ and declares her own independence, however, He mocks her reasoning. "You philosophize very well, but . . . like all women—and especially pretty ones—you lack logic . . . Now, Schopenhauer, you see . . ." (186-87).²⁹ However, She countermands his paternalistic attempt to educate her, retorting, "Wait a minute . . . allow me to finish" (187),³⁰ thus announcing that She is the author and philosopher who better understands women. At the culmination of a fast-paced transformation in "First Storm," She relocates the seat of domestic power within her body, which she begins to self-direct. The shift is



Figure 2. Savina.

emphasized through a straightforward reversal: whereas earlier He had admonished her not to interrupt (175)³¹ as she scurried around the stage, She now issues that order to him as He flits about desperately trying to attract She's attention.

In a telling exchange, She notes that the clothes he pays for are unimportant to her, as are the standard trappings of patriarchal domestic respectability. She maintains, "I could calmly go about in tatters—it wouldn't be that remarkable... I'll burn all my dresses down to the very last one. I'll burn them, give them away, and throw them out, and I'll wear black dresses and linen aprons... There! (quickly moving about the stage)" (Grinevskaia 177).³² Grinevskaia has She declare her independence from the man who would provide her with costumes in exchange for sexual service and subordination. She's threat to burn the dresses may be understood in this context as an actress/wife/prostitute freeing her body to perform for "strangers" in whatever manner and costume She chooses. For her performance in the tableau, her choice is a symbolic free-flowing, simple white dress.

Once "in character," She mocks her husband, now clinging and dependent as she had been in the beginning of the play, "(Aside) 'My sweet thing' (distancing herself from him, loudly). Leave me alone! You will mess up my costume!" (181).³³ Indeed, the word for "costume" or "outfit," still used today and applicable to both sexes, is "kostium." Considering Grinevskaia's background in theater, it seems likely that the author is making a veiled reference to the tyranny of the "costume crisis" (Schuler) by using this word here instead of "dresses" or "clothes." She's "costume" is a simple white ream of pleated fabric "a little bit open" (181),³⁴ disingenuously revealing She's body, repossessed from He. Though "gracefully pleated," the costume lacks a restrictive corset, the Russian word for which was associated with grace.³⁵ The free-flowing costume signals She's freedom of body and spirit and allows freedom of movement across the stage instead of exacting the exorbitant price of access to She's body.

That freedom is emphasized by the simple gold hoop, resembling a wedding band, which She places on her head (181),³⁶ in a displacement that conveys her autonomy from traditional marriage patterns. She furnishes her own costume, authors her own script, and decides the terms of her relationship to the world she inhabits by symbolically marrying her own body. Instead of letting herself be 'produced' by male authority for public consumption—as did the

Golden Age Actress enduring the costume crisis—She produces herself under female authority.

The Russian connotations of She's Greek classical costume are complex. In addition to major Greek contributions to Russian religion and letters, the Greek description of the "Amazons" (thought to be a corruption of the older Slavic word *Omuzhony*—masculine women) has become legendary in Russian letters (Atkinson 3). References to the Amazons abound in Russian culture, for "ancient accounts link Amazons to the Scythians," whose descendants "were absorbed by the Slavs who came to be known as Russians" (Atkinson 3). Moreover, some scholars maintain that archaeological evidence and "various early accounts describe Slavic women as warriors and hunters" (Atkinson 4). Russian women, including decadent writer Mirra Likhvitskaia,³⁷ alluded to their Amazonian heritage, thus making it likely that Grinevskaia's audience had some familiarity with the notion of women's ancient matriarchal heritage.

Grinevskaia's She indulges in the "social fantasy" (Atkinson 4) of mythical man-killing Amazons who raze patriarchy when She rehearses "Antigone" in front of her husband. Clothed in her toga, holding a "Greek" vase that supposedly contains a man's ashes, She strikes a bold pose as she delivers her monologue: it describes the dawn when Antigone takes courageous steps to put her brother to rest with the appropriate ceremony. Grinevskaia's She pours her own words out of her mouth as she holds a vessel representing a dead man, and thus successfully redefines masculinist images through body art. Instead of acting as the vessel, She *holds* the vessel, which allegedly contains the carbonized residue of a man. Like a traditional patriarch, She holds the container in her hands, controlling its presentation and inventing a fictional account of what is inside the vessel, just as male-scripted dialogues create a fiction about what resides within actresses cast as vessels.

She's body text, contained in her half-naked form, may be better understood if read through the theory of modern dramatists such as Adolphe Appia, Jerzy Grotowski, and Jacques Copeau. All three propose that "the body must be divested of its social masks in order to access universal, archetypal, or subconscious images, which are seen as more authentic than the social" (Auslander 105). She's allusion to her matrilineal warrior-ancestors, who reside in her subconscious along with childhood fairy tales, in addition to She's overt invocation of the spirit of the non-Russian universal figure, Antigone, are

the sort of “universal, archetypal, or subconscious images” to which Auslander refers in describing performance art theory of the representational body. This universal image of the auto-authorial woman supersedes the socialization of Europeanized nineteenth-century Russia. Within the female community and backed by the Princess’s patronage, She draws on her native female heritage to author her own social face/identity.

In their bedroom after the performance her husband attempts to rewrite She’s lines. In response, she returns to the dressing room.

SHE: . . . The tableau does not require a commentary [he sees her in her gypsy outfit].

HE: (He looks at her for a while in amazement).

SHE: Well, what do you think?

HE: Why, you’re delightful, I never suspected that you could be that way.

SHE: What way?

HE: Well, how can I tell you, my little one, I never suspected you had so much . . .

SHE: So much what?

HE: I can’t explain it, no, but you’re so wonderful that I definitely won’t allow you to . . .

SHE: You won’t allow? But I won’t be asking for your permission. No, enough. I’m bored! I don’t want us to gaze into each other’s eyes anymore! I’m sick of old pastoral idylls! (Grinevskaia 182-83)³⁸

Though She seems to have impressed He with her “Antigone” performance, her husband does not like her gypsy costume and does not want his “treasure” unlocked and displayed in front of their social circle. She derives power, not from the words of male philosophers but from her own feminine heritage as she tells her husband, “And I will not be asking for your permission.” Decorated with a coin headdress and holding a tambourine high when she strikes a “folkdance” pose, She overtly accentuates her primordial sexual power and financial independence, building on the spiritual potential of her body art from the preceding Antigone tableau.

She’s repetition of the words “I’m bored” (173, 183, 185)³⁹ indicates that she wants more than what traditional Russian patriarchy can give her. And She dramatizes her needs through her body. She’s body art performance of unfulfilled dreams is a “site of resistance”



Figure 3. Unknown artist.
No date. Poster. *Russian
Graphic Design*. Slide15.

because it “recognize[s] that the body is a battleground whose self-determination has to be fought for” (Bordo 263). Dressing, posing, and making herself up, She authors her own personal presentation, locating the battle on the body and giving to the Russian Amazon in everywoman the weapons of war: cosmetics and costume.

He’s query, “You are going to recite? You can recite?” (183),⁴⁰ indicates that he is intimidated by what He calls the empowered She’s sphinx-like genius (182). She becomes director, playwright, producer and *tsaritsa teatra*, ordering He to play the seated spectator as she stands before him presenting her textual body. As a site of resistance to the patriarchal constructs materialized in the costume crisis,

Grinevskaia’s She offers the female viewer hope for the future, as, most likely, did Savina, “who brought the Russian ‘new woman’ with her ‘new content’ and ‘assertive will’ to the stage” (Schuler 44-45).

Grinevskaia overlays the completed feminine coup with comedy in the final exchange between husband and wife. He offers to kill himself to convince She that He deserves her love and will give his life for her, thereby reversing She’s earlier reference to her life-sacrificing dedication to He.

HE: Do you want me to jump out the window?

SHE: (laughing) What? From the second floor? And aren’t you afraid that you’ll spoil your outfit/costume?⁴¹

HE: You want me to?

SHE: Throw yourself out . . . it’ll be interesting to see. . .

HE: And you laugh! You don’t believe I’ll do it! (he impetuously throws himself at the window and tries to open it)

SHE: (hurries after him) Oh, my God! Don’t open it . . . you’ll catch cold!

HE: (lifting her in his arms and seating her on the couch). You see how silly you are? You say . . . “Do it” and at the same time worry that I’ll catch cold . . .

SHE: (hanging her head) Well, yes, because you were cough-

ing just yesterday.

HE: And what if I'd jumped out the window and broken my bones, what then?

SHE:(covering his mouth with her hand) Oh, don't say it! . . . I would just die.

HE: That means you still love me, my little one, dear? . . .

SHE: Yes . . .and you?

HE: I love you, I love you . . . (he kisses her hands and embraces her). (Grinevskaia 189-90)⁴²

Here, Grinevskaia reasserts patriarchal order tongue-in-cheek. With a bit of defensive comedy and ambiguity,⁴³ Grinevskaia leaves the viewer to decide who finally is in control. In the closing reversal, it is the male who experiences a costume crisis and must limit his movements, giving up his autonomy and dignity so as to keep his costume pretty. Through her gaze and words, She directs the manner in which He presents himself (in this case, in a clean costume). Like the provincial actress, He has a life worth less than his stage outfit. This chaotic scene defuses the drama of the larger situation, and She's sudden reprisal of the stereotypical female role of nurturer elicits incredulity and, possibly, laughter on the viewer's part as "all's well that ends well."

In the nineteenth century, Russian society attributed to women "the traits of sensitivity, love, and modesty" (Atkinson 34). The body of Grinevskaia's generic "She" does not conform to society's expectation of modesty, as shown by She's intent to participate in the tableaux without He's knowledge or consent; neither will She force herself to live an unsatisfying life with only love (and, in this case, unrequited love) as an occupation. When She becomes an actress prepared to incinerate her costumes to develop body art that fulfills her own needs, her body defies expectations of feminine timidity, sensitivity to her husband, and romantic preoccupation. She's enactment of female autonomy offers a model for both women in the audience and actresses on the stage. The actress who likely portrayed She's part, Savina, likewise encouraged women to script their own lives through her "proud history of resisting attempts by directors to mold her performances" (Schuler 62).

Although tableaux vivants were popular in Grinevskaia's time, "First Storm" was unique in that the body was prepared and the dress rehearsal was performed in the bedroom for the educational benefit of an everyman, He, and perhaps for the audience that might



Figure 4. Aleksandra Ekster. *Tret'ia zhenskaiia maska*. 1921. *Aleksandra Ekster* 108.

recognize She's unhappiness and the public value of her body art. This fast-moving one-act play belongs to the theatrical category of body art because of its brevity and its use of the body in communicating feminist themes and political argument—precisely what today's viewer expects from contemporary performance art.

Grinevskaia may have approached feminism as she posited a new free “She,” but history reminds us that every woman's commitment to autonomy does not necessarily end in fulfillment. With every step forward

taken by Russian women onto the proscenium of the modern era, the patriarchal pendulum knocked them two steps back. As urgent political questions eclipsed women's issues, male directors dressed and draped women across the furniture in the backdrop of dramatic action. Russian political leaders linked liberal artistic trends and specifically feminism with foreignness and urged women to dissolve their individual autonomy in the waves of intense patriotism associated with WWI and, finally, with the ideology of a patriarchal revolution. Instead of vouchsafing personal fulfillment through free artistic expression, Russian women's bodies became co-opted by male priorities touting the “common good.” Thus, Grinevskaia's vision of female creativity dispersed, like the morning mist as the sun rose on the Soviet era.

Notes

1. Maria Gavrilovna Savina was founder of the Russian Theater Society and the first woman named “Actor Emeritus.” St. Petersburg-based Savina

- “successfully exploited both Western trends and Slavophile traditions.” (Schuler 41). Lowborn, ambitious, and pragmatic, she prompted one admirer to speculate that if “Savina had been born male, she would probably have reached the pinnacle of authority and power, and who knows, she might have secured a place in the pages of world history” (Shuler 41).
2. M.G. Svetaeva called Savina “the first authentic actress-social activist (*aktrisa-obshchestvennitsa*) in Russia” (Shuler 54).
 3. “By Silver Age standards [Savina] spent enormous sums on elegant, contemporary fashions suited to the genres in which she specialized. Her purchases were apparently motivated less by personal vanity than by an almost perfect understanding of her audience” (Shuler 52).
 4. Though Freud never met his star patient, he projected his views onto Bertha Pappenheim, later a noted social worker in Germany, using her as a vehicle for his own thoughts on women. This mirrors the manner in which the male perspective is projected onto Russian actresses, whose portrayals of women were presented to audiences as representative of real women.
 5. Savina refused to play Nina in Chekhov’s *The Seagull*.
 6. Again, this argues that She is a character to whom Savina would have been drawn. “Savina can be seen as a prototype for the realistic actress that followed; the barriers between Mariia Gavrilovna and her audience broke down precisely because women in the audience began to see characters and situations with which they could identify” (Schuler 52).
 7. “Лениво перебирает страницы журнала.»
 8. “(подходит к нему и садится возле) Скажи мне попрежнему, совсем попрежнему, что ты меня любишь. Скажи! Мне скучно. Мне так скучно, Вольдемар!”
 9. “Как грустно, что всё проходит так бесследно и ничто не повторяется.”
 10. “. . . робкая, наивная девочка . . .”
 11. “. . . его чувство к ней можно сравнить с отношением богача к своим сокровищам. Пока они хранятся под надежными запорами, он спокойно уходит, занимается своими делами, почти забывает о них . . . Но чуть он усомнился в прочности замков—он уже не отходит от них, сторожит, не надыхнется ими.”
 12. A contemporary American artist and filmmaker, Eleanor Antin is a professor of visual arts at the University of California, San Diego and the author of *Antinova* and *Eleanora Antinova Plays*.
 13. “(с возрастающей силой)”
 14. “Мне приятно было ступшевываться перед тобою, скрываться в твоей тени.”
 15. “Ты думал, я безцветная, простенькая женщина.”
 16. “Я хотела создать для тебя тихую, мрнрую жизнь, при которой

- могли бы развиваться только твои таланты. Но ты этого не оценил . . .”
17. “Пока ты казался мне героем, у меня была перед тобой та робость, которая связывает язык и движения.”
18. “Она тихо, но решительно освобождается из его объятий и подходит к зеркальному столику, садится перед зеркалом . . .”
19. “ОН: Очень это хорошо: муж говорит жене комплименты!
ОНА: А что? Разве лучше, чтоб ей говорил любезности посторонний?
ОН: Как посторонний? Я никому не позволю говорить тебе пошлости.
ОНА: Почему пошлости? Разве твои комплименты были пошлости?
Вот такне то может мне говорить всякий другой.
ОН: (успокоившись, садится на кушетке) Да некому и говорить. Мы никого почти не видим. У нас никто не бывает, и мы нигде не бываем. Мы с тобою изображаем идиллию из старых пасторалей. Такого случая не может быть, чтоб кто-нибудь начал за тобой ухаживать.”
20. “Почему ты так удивляешься? Разве, я урод?”
21. Society tableaux often raised funds for a soldier’s hospital or some equally traditional charity.
22. Живая картина is tableau vivant; She’s body will be a living picture.
23. “. . . извольте оставаться на месте и не смотреть.”
24. A modern-day Grinevskaia might have enacted this today with She creating and dismantling her presentational image in front of the mirror (which is the audience) instead of providing the discreet direction to dress and undress offstage.
25. “действующее лицо”
26. Fedotova is the older actress, who to some degree facilitated Ermolova’s rise. Fedotova was passed over for parts given to the younger Ermolova, but there were no open hostilities and they got along uncommonly well at the Mali Theater in Moscow from about 1880-1905 (Schuler).
27. “заботы о насущном хлебе”
28. “Нельзя же всю жизнь ворковать.”
29. “Ты философствуешь очень хорошо, но . . . у тебя, как у женщины . . . и ещё хорошенькой женщины . . . нет настоящей логики . . . и я мог бы тебе ответить [. . .] Вот видишь . . . Шопенгауер . . .”
30. “Подожди . . . Дай мне кончить.”
31. “Не перебивай меня . . .”
32. “[. . .] я могла бы преспокойно надеть рубище—это не будет замечено . . . Я сожгу все мои платья, все до одного; сожгу, раздарю, брошу и буду носить черные платья и холостинковые передники . . . Вот . . . (быстро ходит по сцене).”

33. «(в сторону). «Моя крошечка» (отсрания его, громко). Оставь! Ты сомнешь мой костюм!»
34. «Некоторое открытие»
35. «Грация»
36. «На голову надывает золотой обруч.»
37. Mirra Aleksandrovna Lokhvitskaia (1869-1905) was a poet and dramatist who wrote of female sensuality.
38. «ОНА: Картина не требующая комментариев.
ОН: (смотрит некоторое время в изумлении).
ОНА: Что же вы скажете?
ОН: Но ты восхитительна! Я не подозревал, что ты можешь быть такую!
ОНА: Какою?
ОН: Да как тебе сказать, моя крошечка, я не подозревал что у тебя столько . . .
ОНА: Столько чего?
ОН: Не могу тебе объяснить, нет, но ты такая прелесть, что я решительно тебя не пущу . . .
ОНА: Не пущу! А я и спрашивать не стану. Нет, довольно! Мне скучно! Я больше не желаю, чтобы мы смотрели друг другу в глаза! Мне надоела эта идиллия из старых пасторалей!»
39. «Мне скучно.»
40. «Ты будешь читать? Ты можешь читать?»
41. «костюм»
42. «ОН: Хочешь я выпрыгну из окна?
ОНА: (смеясь) Как? Из второго этажа? И ты не боишься испортить твой костюм?
ОН: Хочешь?
ОНА: Бросайся . . . Интересно будет посмотреть как . . .
ОН: А, ты смеешься! Не веришь! (стремительно бросается к окну и старается его открыть)
ОНА: (бросается за ним). Ах, Боже мой! Не открывай . . . ты простудишься! . . .
ОН: (поднимает её на руки и усаживает на диван). Видишь, какая ты глупенькая! Говоришь . . . «бросайся», а сама боишься, чтобы я не простудился . . .
ОНА: (опустив голову). Ну да, потому что ведь ты вчера кашлял . . .
ОН: А что, еслиб я выпрыгнул из окна . . . и разбился, а?
ОНА: (закрывает ему рукою рот). О, не говори! . . . Я бы умерла . . .
ОН: Так, значит, ты меня ещё любишь, моя крошечка, дорогая? . . .
ОНА: Да . . . а ты?
ОН: Люблю, люблю . . . (целует её руки и обнимает).»
43. Many women, Savina among them, addressed women's issues with humor in order to get past the censors. "Savina's 'new woman' had a quick wit

and a sharp tongue, but she rarely transgressed the bounds of bourgeois propriety, preserved many conventional, non-threatening qualities of traditional 'zhenstvennost,' and was, therefore, acceptable to conservative spectators and critics" (Schuler 53).

Works Cited

- Aleksandra Ekster: Put' khudozhnika.* Comp. G.F. Kovalenko. Moscow: Galart, 1993.
- Atkinson, Dorothy. "Society and the Sexes in the Russian Past." *Women in Russia.* Ed. Dorothy Atkinson, Alexander Dallin, and Gail Warshofsky Lapidus. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1977. 3-37.
- Auslander, Phillip. *From Acting to Performance.* New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Bakst.* Text by Elisabeth Ingles. London: Parkstone, 2000.
- Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body.* Los Angeles: U of California P, 1993.
- Breuer, J., and S. Freud. *Studies on Hysteria.* Volume 2 (1883-1895). Trans. James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1955.
- Carlson, Marvin. *Performance: A Critical Introduction.* New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Dolan, Jill. *The Feminist Spectator as Critic.* Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998.
- Grinevskaia, Izabella. "Pervaia groza." *Ogon'ki.* St. Petersburg: Tvorchestvo khudozhestvennoi pechati, 1900. 173-92.
- Litvinova, I.W., and R.C. Daglish. *Russian-English Dictionary.* Moscow: Wiley, 1966.
- Ozhegov, S.I. *Slovar' russkogo iazyka.* Moscow: Russkii iazyk, 1983.
- Russian Graphic Design 1880-1917.* Text by Elena Chernevich. Comp. Mikhail Anikst and Nina Baburina. New York: Abbeville, 1990.
- Schuler, Catherine A. *Women in Russian Theatre: The Actress in the Silver Age.* New York: Routledge, 1996.