



Bertelsen, Olga, ed.

*Arkhiv Rozstrilianoho
Vidrodzhennia. Les Kurbas i teatr
Berezil: arkhivni dokumenty
(1927–1988)*

[The Archive of the Executed Renaissance. Les Kurbas and the Berezil Theatre: Archive Documents, 1927–1988].

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It took nearly 100 years to rediscover our cultural heritage of the beginning of the 20th century. We are now getting acquainted with our past and see it more clearly than in Soviet times. Formally, the phenomenon of cultural regeneration in the 1920s-1930s, ignited by repressions, was given its name by Yurii Lavrinenko, a Ukrainian émigré literary critic, in his anthology of the literature of the 1920s-1930s, entitled “The Executed Renaissance” (*Rozstriliane vidrodzhennia*).

In 2010, the Smoloskyp Kyiv Publishing House launched a research project entitled *Arkhiv Rozstrilianoho Vidrodzhennia* (Archive of the Executed Renaissance). It aimed to bring unknown aspects of our 1920s and the “dark” 1930s to the broad public, sharing previously unavailable or forbidden documents, letters, evidence, and reports. The first book in this series was dedicated to the criminal cases of Ukrainian writers of the 1920s-1930s, such as Mykhailo Yalovyi, Oleksa Slisarenko, Volodymyr Gzhytskyi, among others. The first book of *Arkhiv Rozstrilianoho Vidrodzhennia* (The Archive) was compiled by Oleksandr and Leonid Ushkalov, researchers and writers from Kharkiv.

The second book in this series introduces documents on theatre director Les Kurbas (1887–1937) and the Ukrainian Berezil theatre, prepared by Olga Bertelsen. Receiving her PhD at Nottingham University (UK), she researches Ukrainian history and culture of Soviet times, the intelligentsia and state violence, famines, national security, the Soviet secret police, political activism in Ukraine, and memory politics. Olga Bertelsen has conducted significant archival work, collecting an enormous number of documents connected to Les Kurbas and his theatre, piece by piece reconstructing their existence during the late 1920s and 1930s — the Kharkiv period of the Berezil’s activity. This book is a collection of documents: reports, letters, protocols, evidence, newspapers, oral testimony, all gathered in one book by Olga Bertelsen. In the book we can see the obsession of the bureaucratic USSR system to control everything. Paradoxically, this has proven to be a plus. Due to the system’s institutional perfectionism, subservience to the

state, and detailed reports on people's lives saved in archives, we now have the opportunity to reconstruct a reality previously hidden from us for ideological reasons.

What brings Professor Olga Bertelsen to the theme of theatre? In the preface to the book, she relates an autobiographical story — she was born in the legendary *Slovo* house in Kharkiv, the same building where key figures of the culture of the 1920s-1930s lived — writers, poets, painters, actors etc. And, unfortunately, for most of them it was their last place of residence, as they were arrested here and then interrogated, sentenced, and executed by the Soviet secret police. The path to death for Valerian Pidmohylnyi, Maik Yohansen, Les Kurbas and many others began in this building, fully controlled by the NKVD security police. It was called “the house of pre-trial detention.” Today this building has become an apt metaphor for the whole Soviet period — any person could be accused and arrested in his/her house anytime, no one was exempt. Even the most talented artists. And especially the most talented ones.

As her childhood Olga Bertelsen was surrounded by myths, separate phrases and whispers about Kurbas — each mention of the repressed intellectual was forbidden and dangerous. She sensed a strong feeling of the absence of the most important — the truth about him. One of the first intentions of *Les Kurbas and the Berezhil Theatre* was to invoke this voice of the past — make it loud and alive. But this is not Olga Bertelsen's only intent in the book. She also pays attention to historical ideological concerns, and aims to consider the existence of art under state pressure. In her preface, entitled “Kurbas Today,” Olga Bertelsen writes about those inhuman circumstances that Les Kurbas and many others were forced to live and work under — the absence of salaries and living costs, permanent renovations in the theatre, and stifling art commissions, which acted as censors. Included documents demonstrate another part of history, i.e. the detailed life of people, how they managed the theatre, how they worked under mental and psychological terror, which reminds us of a Chinese punishment consisting of water drops constantly dripping onto one's head.

Les Kurbas here is not portrayed as a heroic or super talented genius. This book is about destroying stereotypes and is filled with facts. Kurbas made mistakes every day, he wanted to survive as all beings have an instinct to do. Bertelsen uses the epithet of a “delicate (creature)” for Les Kurbas, not in the way of character softness, but in trying to explain how odd it was to live and work with fine thin matter surrounded by crude profane art.

I distinguish three themes of Les Kurbas and his theatre's life presented in the book: The Artist and the Authorities, The Artist and Managing Reality, and The Artist and the Audience.

The Artist and the Authorities

In the totalitarian Soviet state, art as the most freethinking activity was always under control, serving the Party and its global Aim, and of course it had to meet the requirements of the Party. Where was the place of artist here? Servants of the regime cannot make genuine art, and Kurbas, who had a Western European education, understood that clearly. The active phase of the conflict between the authorities and Kurbas began after the staging of *Narodnyi Malakhii* (1927), a play by Mykola Kulish. In *Les Kurbas and the Berezhil Theatre* there is an episode demonstrating conflicts from multiple perspectives. There was a dispute surrounding Kulish's play inspired by an art commission and party workers who saw the performance, directed by Kurbas. Tragicomedy was

perceived by the authorities in a very unpleasant way, and from this moment Kulish, Kurbas, and his theatre suffered from open criticism and accusations of “Ukrainian nationalism.” Kulish spoke first in this dispute and addressed the changes he made in the play under the pressure of party critics (p. 112). Kurbas next indicated that it was inappropriate for the artist to do something if he/she does not believe in it. Kurbas also said that revolutionary theater should not accuse an abstract enemy, but was to unmask it both for an audience and itself.

The NKVD soon took control over this case. Actually, a theatre of the absurd took place during subsequent interrogations: this artistic method would be borrowed from the stage by the secret police to create an unbelievably absurdist accusation of an innocent artist, such as terrorism or attempted murder (as was the case with Kurbas — he was accused of terrorism and counterrevolution) (p. 325). The artist actively participated in this “interrogation-play,” and the price for his participation was life itself.

Bertelsen’s book includes material from Kurbas’s criminal case — reports, the testimony of Berezil actors, and of course, Valentyna Chystiakova’s (his wife’s) evidence. Included is Kurbas’s own “confession” as well. In comparing how confidently his testimony had sounded previously (p. 17–120) and then reading his words of confession, written by a man in a dead end, it may seem as a mistake or even “fake confession” (p. 325). But this discrepancy — of who Kurbas was and who he became — for me was one of the strongest points in the book, and provided clear evidence of human metamorphosis in totalitarian times.

The Artist and Managing Reality

Kurbas can be compared to a father for his actors in the Berezil theatre. But he was also a good manager, keeping the theater in conditions which allowed comfortably work during that difficult period. How is it possible to maintain a theatre in the absence of state financial aid? This book includes the theatre newspaper (*stinhazeta*), in which many essays about their dissatisfaction and regarding the process of work are presented in a sarcastic style by the theatre’s actors. Dozens of documents about delayed renovations and money matters are included. These complicated circumstances caused permanent conflicts and even physical illnesses among the actors. Artists were forced to survive and work in difficult conditions, thinking, first of all, about basic needs, not about art and performance.

On the one hand, the flighty nature of the people of art easily prompted them to buy chic clothes and perfumes, allowing them to forget about routine needs. For example, Kurbas, who always wore English tailored suits, was often an object of discussion among his actors. This becomes a tragic insight when we discover that he took his suit and hat to prison. I cannot stop thinking of what was inside his mind when he was in that gorgeous suit arriving in Sandarmokh.

The Artist and the Audience

A portrait of an actor can be easily reconstructed from the presented evidence and archival documents. What about the audience? Who comprised the audience of the Kurbas theatre? During the interwar period, Kharkiv was mainly a proletarian city. People from rural areas were

moving to the city, working at factories and attending universities. The level of education had fallen catastrophically, and was aimed at affording the badly educated masses an opportunity to study. This led to the idea that art had to meet the demands of the majority. In the book there is much evidence on how Les Kurbas's views on how art should develop conflicted with the thoughts of the proletarians. One of the most representative documents is a transcript of the dispute following the staging of *Narodnyi Malakhii* at the Berezil, Kulish and Kurbas and the proletarians found themselves on opposite sides. The artists defended art in its pure form, the complexity of the art piece, while the audience demanded the play to be a clear and simple comment on the Revolution of 1917.

In Kurbas's comments in the dispute there is an emotional and exciting concentration of his philosophy of art in general. And he wasn't afraid of taking responsibility for his views. He maintained the position that art should evoke the intellectual and esthetic feeling of the audience, but not vice versa, that is, making art easier to understand and perceive.

Interestingly, each statement of the proletarians began with a confusing phrase: "I work at the factory and make rasps. I'm not a theatre critic and I don't actually know much about art, but I would say that..." And then he/she criticized the play, pretending to be a qualified person to do so. I imagine how Kurbas and Kulish stood in front of someone with the surname Baran (meaning "sheep" in Ukrainian!), listening to the nonsense of the newborn critics giving advice as to how to create art. Kurbas was thus forced to work in an intellectual vacuum, few people perceived this kind of modern art — complex, expressionistic, and abstract. Kurbas always maintained: "You should bring your mind with you every time you come to the theatre. Otherwise, do not come at all." Only intellectual efforts can give rise to a conscious mind. Kurbas did not meet with the appreciation he deserved during life. Has the perception of the Kurbas phenomenon changed today?

In 2017, we are celebrating Les Kurbas's 130th year anniversary. His life continues to inspire artists and researchers to make art and conduct research. For me his life is a document of that epoch. And simultaneously it is a part of a broken mirror. Why? The hypnotizing power of something we have lost brings us to this period and it reminds us of a broken mirror with many fragments that we can observe separately. Awareness of the necessity to reconstruct our history moves us forward, and the reflection is only whole in the mirror when all its parts are gathered.

The book is intended for historians, literary scholars, culture scholars, art critics, and those interested in Ukrainian history and culture who wants to know more about the theatre and culture of the 1920s-1930s, and of course everyone who wants to reconstruct Les Kurbas's complex image. This book presents the detailed life of the Berezil theater and its founder, Les Kurbas, without prejudice, myths, and legends. It contains no fiction, yet at the same time it is very expressive — after reading the book a feeling of a full presence of the 1920s–1930s is guaranteed.