

Olga Bertelsen, compiler, editor, and with an introduction and notes. *Les' Kurbas i teatr "Berezil'": Arkhivni dokumenty (1927-1988)* [*Les' Kurbas and the Berezil' Theatre: Archival Documents (1927-1988)*]. 2016. *Arkhiv Rozstrilianoho vidrodzhennia* [*Archive of the Executed Renaissance*], vol. 2, Vydavnytstvo "Smoloskyp," 2010-16. 2 vols. 504 pp. Illustrations. Appendices. Index of Names. UAH 130,00, cloth.

In 2010, Vydavnytstvo "Smoloskyp" published a volume of archival materials, compiled and edited by Oleksandr and Leonid Ushkalov, on several literary figures of the "Executed Renaissance." The book under review is the second volume in the set; here, compiler and editor Olga Bertelsen has assembled an extraordinary collection of materials on theatre innovator Les' Kurbas and his Berezil' theatre. The collection focuses on the theatre's Kharkiv period, from 1926 to 1933, but it also includes material on Kurbas's later rehabilitation. The materials aim to illuminate the relationship between the theatre and the state, and as such, they come largely from Kharkiv's regional archive, the central Party and state archives in Kyiv, and the archive of the former secret police. This set of documents will be invaluable for scholars of Kurbas and his milieu, and it should engender fruitful scholarship by historians and *teatroznavtsi* ("theatre scholars"). I look forward to seeing this collection used in future work, and I hope for a translated version someday. Most English-language documentary collections on Soviet culture focus exclusively on Russian-language theatre in Moscow and Leningrad, missing the important story of non-Russian-language theatre and theatre outside of the centre.

The materials from Kharkiv's regional archive are especially interesting. One finds a wall newspaper of the Berezil' that highlights the various power structures and vicissitudes inside the theatre (see 225-58). Volodymyr Novyts'kyi, the managing director of the theatre, appears as a major figure in this series of documents, as he agitates for financial help and approval for the completion of theatre renovation (see 221-23). The local documents highlight, as Bertelsen points out, the economic realities of everyday existence for a theatre in the early Soviet years of scarcity. Scholars will benefit greatly from reading the *kryminal'na sprava* ("criminal case") on Kurbas, which was copied from the archive of the Security Service of Ukraine (Sluzhba bezpeky Ukrainy). We know that Kurbas was arrested and interrogated, but the minutes (*protokoly*) and investigation reports and the many reports (*dopovidi*) of his friends and colleagues that were added later give depth and complexity to the picture. In short, this collection of documents is an extraordinary achievement.

The questions to consider, then, are the following: How does a compiler/editor assemble documents? And what does that person want their

compilation to suggest? All archives are constructed, and this one is no different. I will touch on three issues that for me stem from Bertelsen's commentary and selection.

First of all, one of the reasons that this collection is important is because theatre scholars in Ukraine tend to study aesthetics—the intricacies of the theatrical production—more often than they study the state. Thus, the focus here on documents that chronicle the theatre's relationship with the state is particularly welcome. But there are scholars, young and more seasoned, who are working on Kurbas and the Berezil', and they are not cited in the introduction. For a collection published in Ukraine for a Ukrainian audience, it would be appropriate to reference the current major compilation on Kurbas, Bohdan Kozak's 2012 publication *Zhyttia i tvorchist' Lesia Kurbasa: V retseptsii ukrains'koho teatroznavstva (The Life and Work of Les' Kurbas: Through the Eyes of Ukrainian Theatre Scholarship)*, and Natalia Iermakova's impressive 2012 work *Berezil's'ka kul'tura: Istorii, dosvid (The Berezil' Culture: History and Experience)*, which details every single production. Moreover, younger scholars have published and continue to publish on Kurbas, his productions, and the productions of the Berezil', and their work deserves recognition. Bertelsen notes an unpleasant experience, where she asked a group of Kyiv youth who were sitting near Kurbas's statue on Prorizna Street if they knew the artist; they did not (42). But neither might American youth know Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, or Eugene O'Neill. Many Ukrainians do, in fact, know of Kurbas and will welcome this set of documents that illuminate his life and work.

Personal experiences, of course, shape the collection of an archive. Bertelsen is transparent in her acknowledgments (5-8) and introduction (9-44) about her positionality: She grew up hearing about Kurbas because she lived in the (in)famous Budynok Slovo ("Word" Building) in Kharkiv. This is where the major literary and cultural figures, including Kurbas, lived—before many of them were arrested, sent to the Gulag, and executed. Bertelsen comes from an intelligentsia milieu directly connected with Kurbas; this background convinced her to take on this enormous scholarly task and, of course, shaped her interpretation of Kurbas himself. For Bertelsen, Kurbas is a representative of the world of high culture—the best of the best of the avant-garde. One of her goals, she writes, is to "remind [the reader] of the harm of mass culture, ersatz culture, or subculture, which the Party demanded from Kurbas" (my trans.; 13). I am not sure that this is quite fair to Kurbas, contemporary theatre in Ukraine, or "subculture," which is indeed a complicated term. Kurbas may have been frustrated with the tastes of audiences, but he worked with them more than Bertelsen may admit. In any case, cultural hierarchy was contested in the early Soviet years. Defining the terms *good culture*, *mass culture*, and *bad culture* was a project that

concerned Kurbas, and it concerns Ukraine (and not only) today. In fact, exactly how it happened that the Soviet intelligentsia came to feel such a remove from the state and from the masses (with their mass culture) is an important question to be examined, and it is one that might be answered by these documents.

Finally, a constant challenge with document collections is deciding what not to include. Bertelsen's focus was (rightly) unpublished documents. Yet, a recent exhibit entitled *Kurbas u Kyievi (Kurbas in Kyiv)*, curated by Tetiana Rudenko and Virlana Tkacz at the State Museum of Theatre, Music, and Cinema Art in Ukraine, showcased Kurbas's early experiments with film and acting technique and offered a take on his work equally as fresh as that which is offered by this volume. It is striking how missing Kurbas's early period (the Young Theatre and the Kyidramte) and focusing exclusively on the state (and not on the stage) obscures Kurbas's theatrical genius. Still, this collection will inspire and challenge scholars of theatre in Ukraine to re-investigate cultural hierarchy, the relationship between the state and the stage, and the Soviet past that inevitably still shapes Ukraine's present.

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