7. Cultural Shifts and Theatrical Innovation

THE EARLY 1990S

The first half of the 1990s was particularly marked by a series of collapses: the collapse of the Soviet Union, of coup attempts, of reforms, ideals, and economic programs. It was a time of war, corruption, and poverty. The political and ideological shifts had affected all areas of life. Ultimately, the events of the 1990s would lead to far-reaching cultural shifts and theatrical innovation that were unimaginable even a decade earlier, but by the mid-1990s the prospects looked grim.

The first half of the 1990s was perhaps the most unstable and depressing period since Gorbachev started his reforms. As noted before, by 1990 Gorbachev had entered his conservative period. He came to realize that the concept of a restructured, humane, democratic socialism, under the guiding role of the party may well have been a mere illusion (see also chapter 1). The 1991 coup, its contradictory explanations, and its ultimate failure was illustrative of the predicament of the Soviet Union, the party, and the ideology. As Yeltsin’s chief aide at the time, Gennadii Burbulis, said:

The putchists revealed the depths of the system’s deterioration and collapse. All the long-term decay of the military, the political system, the economy was all expressed by the August coup. After that our goal was simply to give some shape to the collapse. (Qtd. in Remnick, Resurrection 21)

The man who rose to the occasion and placed his stamp on the last decade of Russia’s political and cultural life in the twentieth century
was Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin’s rise to the top, as has been pointed out repeatedly (Aron, Yeltsin; Remnick, Resurrection), was a sign of changing times in and of itself. Yeltsin was not part of Gorbachev’s inner circles to begin with. He was a party secretary in the Urals, best known for agreeing to destroy in 1975 the house where the Romanovs were executed. He had the mixed reputation of being intelligent, erratic, energetic, and easily offended. Ironically, Gorbachev brought him to Moscow on the advice of Ligachev, the party traditionalist, who would become Yeltsin’s fiercest enemy (Aron 132, 200–201; Remnick, Resurrection 17–18).

In time, Yeltsin and Gorbachev grew to hate each other, which, according to one of the most prominent journalists in Moscow at the time, Sergei Parkhomenko, was the real engine for the collapse of the union (qtd. in Remnick, Resurrection 17; see also Aron, Yeltsin and Gorbachev, Memoirs). Yeltsin was dismissed in 1987 as first party secretary of the Moscow Party organization because he criticized the slow pace of reforms and challenged Ligachev and the “personality cult” of Gorbachev in a closed Central Committee session. But he did not leave politics (nor was he required to) and emerged as an elected deputy to the Soviet parliament in 1989; in 1991 he was elected president of the Russian Republic. It was Yeltsin who stood on the tank outside the White House to defend the White House against the 1991 putchists. A few months later he was instrumental in dismantling the Soviet Union in an agreement with the president of the Ukraine and the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus. And in 1993 he attacked the same White House against another group of Putschists, a strange group of communist apparatchiks, Russian nationalists, and Fascists who took an opportunity to revolt when Yeltsin called for parliamentary elections, following a referendum.

In the end Yeltsin won another victory, but it was bittersweet. Most people were disgusted with both sides, only expressing relief to the extent that a victory for the other side would have been infinitely worse. “The hangover in Moscow was deadening,” writes Remnick, “no more heroes, no great expectations” (Resurrection 80). The hero of the times became the nationalist leader Vladimir Zhirinovskii, who in 1991 came in third behind Yeltsin and former Soviet prime minister Nikolai Ryzhkov, and took twenty-three percent of the votes in the December