IN MAY 1933, Sophie Treadwell spoke to the company of the Moscow Kamerny Theatre about their production of her 1928 play Machinal, directed by Alexander Tairov with Alisa Koonen in the leading role. Having come to Moscow to attend the premiere, Treadwell lauded the production, saying:

When they staged Machinal in America, they reduced my play to a naturalistic presentation of the personal drama of one small American woman; here this play has been broadened to the limits of social tragedy. . . . I had to come to a country as distant as yours, to a people whose psychology, whose language is foreign to us, to see here for the first time my authorial concept not only realized, but also significantly deepened and broadened.1

The naturalistic production Treadwell had seen play on Broadway in 1928 was directed by Arthur Hopkins and designed by Robert Edmond Jones.2 The play had also travelled to London, where it was retitled The Life Machine. Yet she identified this Soviet production as having come closest to the spirit of her work.

Eugene O’Neill responded with similar enthusiasm to the Kamerny Theatre’s productions of his plays Desire under the Elms and All God’s Chillun Got Wings, which he saw in Paris on the Kamerny’s 1930 tour. O’Neill wrote to Tairov on 2 June 1930:

My feeling is one of amazement – and most profound gratitude! Let me humbly confess I came to the theatre with secret misgivings. . . . I [had] an author’s fear that in the difficult process of translation and transformation into another language and milieu the inner spirit . . . might be . . . distorted or lost.

Hence my amazement and gratitude when I saw your productions which in every way delighted me because they rang so true to the spirit of my work! . . . A theatre of creative imagination has always been my ideal! To see my plays given by such a theatre has always been my dream!3
Both Treadwell and O'Neill compliment the Kamerny’s artistry, then, but also reveal something deeper: that these Kamerny productions expanded beyond naturalistic specificity into formally innovative explorations of ideas with broader resonance.

In this essay I examine two of the six American productions the Kamerny staged between 1926 and 1934: *The Hairy Ape*, which premiered in 1926, the year the Soviet Union closed its borders to citizens who wished to travel abroad, and *Machinal*, staged in 1933, the year the US recognized the Soviet Union as a nation. Both productions used stylized design, movement, and rhythm to reflect on political and social themes: *The Hairy Ape* features a proletarian chorus that reveals its superiority to capitalism’s repressive upper classes through virtuosic movement, while *Machinal*’s central female character, played by Koonen, is rhythmically and visually misaligned with a dehumanizing, mechanistic society. In both cases, stylistic juxtaposition allowed the productions to be both specific and universal in relation to the complex status of the individual within larger societal structures.

The Moscow Kamerny (Chamber) Theatre and its two main artistic voices – director Alexander Tairov and leading actress Alisa Koonen – remain insufficiently understood outside Russia, largely due to historical erasures of the theatre’s significance under Stalin. Founded in 1914, the Kamerny was, from its inception, an actor-centred theatre based on the rhythmical principles of music. It became renowned in its day for its pioneering collaborations with cubist and constructivist artists. Yet leftist artists ranging from Meyerhold to the Eccentrics were also enamoured of Charlie Chaplin, detective novels, and the time–motion studies of Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford.

During the New Economic Policy (NEP), when Lenin promoted ‘Communist capitalism’ to boost the floundering Soviet economy, capitalism was viewed simultaneously as corrupting and as the economy’s salvation. Jazz and the foxtrot were both decadent and the rage. Throughout the 1920s, too, many Russians had a passion for American literature – the novels and tales of Jack London, O. Henry, and *Tarzan* author Edgar

American–Soviet relations in the 1920s were fascinatingly complex. The decade began on a tense note: the US supported the Whites in the Russian Civil War and not long after underwent a Red Scare that famously contributed to Isadora Duncan – who was then married to revolutionary poet Sergei Esenin – being ‘banned in Boston’. Yet Hoover’s American Relief Administration also fed millions of Russians per day during the lean years of 1921 to 1923. Throughout the 1920s, Americans were often stereotyped in Soviet films and mass spectacles as rotund, top-hat-wearing, moneybag-toting Westerners. Yet leftist artists ranging from Meyerhold to the Eccentrics were also enamoured of Charlie Chaplin, detective novels, and the time–motion studies of Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford.

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Rice Burroughs. This American fascination was most intensely felt in film. In 1924 and 1925, there were 472 American to only 100 Soviet films shown in Soviet movie houses.5

Soviet theatre was also infused with ambivalent Americanism. In 1924, the year Anna Christie won the Pulitzer Prize, Soviet audiences were introduced to O’Neill via productions of this play at the former Korsh (Comedy) Theatre and at the Maly, which had also recently staged London’s The Call of the Wild and O. Henry’s The Gift of the Magi. In 1930, Nemirovich-Danchenko staged Reklama, an adaptation of Watkins’s play Chicago, at the Moscow Art Theatre, where a production of Dreiser’s An American Tragedy was also planned but never realized. In 1933, the R. N. Simonov Theatre-Studio staged a production of Machinal, retitled Ellen Jones, that competed with the Kamerny’s. Tairov, who was often accused in the Soviet press of choosing repertoire that was irrelevant to his times, was, then, responding directly to a foreign fascination in full swing. It was not until 1933, with Vishnevsky’s An Optimistic Tragedy, that Tairov staged a Soviet play that was praised above his American productions.

O’Neill and Treadwell, both of whose plays used expressionistic techniques to critique their societies, also provided Tairov with unique opportunities to combine artistic, political, and human relevance in a way he had never achieved before. Tairov prompted multiple simultaneous perspectives on these plays’ themes by using various forms of juxtaposition that prompted Kamerny audiences to consider both the specific and broader resonances of the works. Beginning with The Hairy Ape, Tairov lectured on and published articles about these American plays’ anti-capitalist themes, yet he also created theatrical images that invited the audience to develop open, connotative associations that expanded beyond a single geographical context and thus pondered oppression more broadly as it related to class, gender, artistic freedom, and individual thought.

The Kamerny began work on The Hairy Ape two full years before the production saw an audience.6 After multiple announcements that the premiere had been delayed,7 the show finally opened on 14 January 1926. There were several reasons for these delays: the Kamerny’s 1923 European tour was artistically but not financially successful,8 and the Kamerny turned significant energy to the celebrations of its tenth jubilee in 1924. Most importantly, however, the success of this production was critical to the theatre’s future. In the words of one reviewer after the general rehearsal (dress preview) of The Hairy Ape:

It wasn’t a general rehearsal for invited guests and the press, but a general battle for the fate of the Kamerny Theatre, and it was not without reason that A. Ia. Tairov postponed this production for so long, understanding very well its full significance for the troupe and for himself as a director. After the flop of Kurikol and the renunciation of former ways, circumstances were such that this production would decide the question: is the Kamerny Theatre to be or not to be.9

In the Kamerny’s first decade, Tairov had avoided staging plays that were vehicles for political messages. He found the immediate post-Revolutionary vogue for agitprop limiting. As he said in a polemic with Meyerhold over the latter’s 1920 production of The Dawns: ‘Agitational theatre after a Revolution is like mustard after a meal.’10

Tairov maintained that the aim of theatre was more far-reaching, that theatre should explore and elevate the human experience. By the mid-1920s, however, the Kamerny was under intense pressure to stage work that aligned with the new nation’s political goals. A significant portion of the Kamerny’s repertoire already consisted of foreign plays that celebrated the individual’s struggle against oppression. The Hairy Ape was Tairov’s first major success in connecting this struggle to topical concerns, using the artistic language of the theatre’s earlier stylistic and acting innovations.

In O’Neill’s play, Yank, a worker in the stokehole of an ocean liner, struggles to feel human after Mildred, a first-class passenger, treats him like a ‘hairy ape’ after visiting the ship’s bowels to view the stokehole workers at work. Yank’s defiant but solitary struggle against such dehumanization, played out in the streets and prisons of New York, is
ultimately unsuccessful: his final act is to die in the cage of an ape at the zoo. The play is an evocative fusion of human experience and expansive metaphor, making it ideal material for the expressiveness and formal innovation at which the Kamerny excelled.

*The Hairy Ape* was co-directed by Tairov and Leonid Lukianov, translated by Natalia Krymova and Pavel Zenkovich, and designed by Vladimir and Georgi Stenberg. The Stenberg brothers, who designed numerous Kamerny productions, beginning with *The Storm* by Ostrovsky (1924), crafted a streamlined, utilitarian constructivist set. A single multi-levelled structure represented three distinct places of action on the ship (Figure 1, opposite): the lowest level is the ship’s stokehole; the middle section the workers’ cabins; and the top level the first-class deck.

This vertical staging was familiar to audiences from other early Soviet productions – Meyerhold’s 1921 production of Mayakovsky’s *Mystery-Bouffe* being a famous example. The structure evokes the simultaneous staging of medieval theatre, which represented heaven, earth, and hell in a single image, as well as of Ukrainian and Russian puppet nativity shows (*vertep*), in which an upper stage portrays the sacred (the birth of Jesus) and the lower level the profane (the Massacre of the Innocents). The set of *The Hairy Ape* was, then, a recognizable way to comment on class structure while also complicating audience expectations, as the workers in the ship’s hell were far more alive than the dead class inhabiting its luxurious heaven.

The stylistic contrast between these two classes was at the heart of the Kamerny production – so much so that there is comparatively little extant information on most of the production’s other scenes, aside from complaints in reviews concerning ‘Yank’s endless speeches’. This contrast was most brilliantly depicted in the movement and design of two main pantomime scenes: one in which the workers shovelled coal into the stokehole (Scene Three in O’Neill’s play), and a second in which millionaires prance down Fifth Avenue (Scene Five).

O’Neill’s stage directions in the first scene introduce two dominant metaphors: that of the stage itself as a cage trapping and weighing down on the workers, and the ways in which hard labour has distorted the men’s bodies and faces, making them ape-like. The make-up design in the Kamerny production hinted at this latter theme: shading below cheekbones, around eyes, and on foreheads recall fur patterns, while the stark, angular lines of the make-up drew on the Kamerny’s well-established tradition of bringing cubist and constructivist elements into the design environment.

The physical distortion to which O’Neill refers was captured in the Kamerny’s stokehole scenes primarily as physical punctuation that marked the climax of a speech or connected specific moments to larger metaphorical ideas. Much greater and more prolonged emphasis was placed on celebrating the physical prowess of the Kamerny actors and of the workers they embodied. From the Kamerny’s earliest days, Tairov had experimented with pantomime’s unique ability to physicalize emotions and metaphors. All Kamerny actors underwent rigorous movement training – acrobatics, dance, eurhythmics, commedia dell’arte – and much of the early repertoire was chosen to feature the actors’ physical virtuosity.

The stokehole scene in *The Hairy Ape* became one of the Kamerny Theatre’s most famous pantomimes. For seven minutes – ‘a very long time in the theatre’, as Koonen notes in her memoirs – the workers were chained to a huge fire-breathing furnace; with powerful strokes of their shovels they throw coal into its gaping mouth. As they shovelled, only the top halves of their bodies and their shovels were seen, working together in total unison. Koonen recalls: ‘The precise rhythm of the work, which responded to the music of the orchestra, was astonishing. The beauty of the half-naked, muscular bodies gave the impression of the all-powerful might of human labour.’

This scene was the most lauded in the production, both because it celebrated the proletarian and because it did so with great artistry. Even as the workers’ bodies were forced into a mechanized ballet of physical exhaustion, they brimmed over with irrepr-
responsible life (Figure 2, below). Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharskii praised the scene’s virtuosic celebration of the physical prowess of the working class:

No one . . . has succeeded in creating such a sculptural and metallic rhythm of movements and sounds as that shown by Tairov in the first, third, and fourth scenes. . . . They are the truest art, the truest aesthetics, but at the same time truly proletarian. They are proletarian because all the elements in them are proletarian – the powerful bodies, the tired bodies, and the magnificent measuredness of collective work, and the music of machines.17

Mikhail Zagorsky, who had frequently been critical of the Kamerny’s previous work, now credited the company with having created a new theatrical style: at last, in Zagorsky’s estimation, the Kamerny actors’ refined physicality served a social rather than a decorative purpose:

Figure 1. Set model for The Hairy Ape, Moscow Kamerny Theatre (1926). Reconstruction, 1927. TWS BM89. Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung, University of Cologne, Germany.

Figure 2. ‘In the Stokehole’, The Hairy Ape, Moscow Kamerny Theatre (1926). THE B MS Thr 402, Box 38, Folder 13. Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
One is astounded by a technique that is new for the Kamerny Theatre – a turning away from petty, refined flourishes, replaced with one grand, rich, powerful, energetic stroke with the theatrical brush. . . . There are no individual workers, there is labour; there are no speeches and dialogue, only rhythmically resounding transitions from one movement to another. . . . This is not naturalism and not aimlessness; this is something new, an uber-realistic art.\(^1\)

The stovehole pantomime contrasted sharply with the scenes that focused on the wealthy class; initially represented by Mildred and her aunt, these characters were aggressively mechanized and devoid of individual life. When Yank (Sergei Tsenin) arrives in New York in the Kamerny production, he encounters a capitalistic chorus parading down Fifth Avenue. In Lunacharskii’s description, these promenading millionaires had ‘fixed masks, senselessly tiny for the women, and crooked, with marks of all sorts of vices, for the enfeebled men’.\(^1\) The women’s individual features were erased with dark make-up around the eyes and mouths that contrasted starkly with the unnatural white of faces framed in dark bobbed hair, coats, and furs that seemed to suffocate them. The men wore identical double-breasted coats, top hats, spectacles, and white half-masks on the bottoms of their faces that pulled down the corners of their mouths in grotesque, distorted lines.\(^2\)

One reviewer described the impression created by these mechanical men and women: ‘The scene on the city square conveys well the illusoriness of a big city, in which individuals are indistinguishable from one another in the violet light of electricity, and the movements are unforgettable monotonous.’ Their movement was especially striking: expressionless faces looked forward as bodies tilted mechanically from side to side, as Yank (third from the left in Figure 3, opposite) looked on in horror and fury. In the Kamerny production, Yank was unable to find his place within this world of stark contrasts.

Tairov published several ‘Conversations with Tairov’ in various theatre periodicals in the months leading up to the premiere of The Hairy Ape. In addition to announcing who would play the leading roles and hinting that Paul Robeson might come to Moscow to play Yank (he did not, in the end),\(^2\) Tairov articulated the Kamerny production’s intended social relevance. As he wrote shortly before the premiere:

Henceforth in our productions the Kamerny Theatre firmly intends to continue its work in the direction of the creation of current and socially significant repertoire.

The theatre’s next step in this direction will be a production of the best work of the American playwright O’Neill – The Hairy Ape – which the theatre treats as a tragedy that portrays the failure of individualism.\(^3\)

By individualism, Tairov meant that Yank chose individual action over class solidarity: ‘In attempting to gain a better place in life for himself, [Yank] acts anarchically, not building his connection with the collective, and perishes when he comes up against organized opposition.’\(^4\) The production’s tension between the individual and the collective resonates, interestingly, in multiple contexts: it aligns well with the content of O’Neill’s play, with the ways in which socialism was being promoted across multiple arts, and, significantly, with what the Kamerny itself was trying to do.

With The Hairy Ape, Tairov needed above all to assure his critics that he himself valued the Soviet collective, that his productions could align with the needs of a Soviet society, that the Kamerny itself was not pursuing artistic anarchism. In subsequent productions, Tairov was drawn again and again to plays that featured the (usually tragic) struggle of an individual set in relief against a collective. The stakes of this theme grew ever higher as Stalin rose to power; the nation rallied under the banner of ‘Socialism in one country’; the first Five-Year Plan imposed forced collectivization on the Russian countryside; and individual thought came increasingly under attack.

Six years after The Hairy Ape opened, the Kamerny premiered Sophie Treadwell’s Machinal. The production, which opened on 22 May 1933, was directed by Tairov and...
designed by Vadim Ryndin. Like *The Hairy Ape*, *Machinal* positioned the humanity of the individual against an inflexible, unfeeling society – but it did so in new ways. Here there is no proletariat class with which to unite – only a lone woman struggling to find her way in a society that has no place for her.

Treadwell’s play is loosely based on a true story: that of Ruth Snyder, the first American woman in the twentieth century to be executed by electric chair. *Machinal* makes a larger commentary on the ambiguous position of the individual, particularly of women, in a rigid society that values conformity and collectivism. The play’s main character, the Young Woman – Ellen in the Kamerny production, Helen in Treadwell’s source text – is forced into various mechanical roles (office worker, daughter, wife, mother) until she seeks freedom from such externally imposed expectations by taking a lover and, ultimately, killing her husband. At the play’s end, she herself is killed by another machine: the electric chair.

As in many American expressionist plays, Treadwell emphasizes the erasure of individualism by listing the *dramatis personae* by their social function – Young Woman, Mother, Telephone Girl – rather than by their names, which, in the few instances they exist at all, are revealed during the course of the play. Treadwell also brilliantly emphasizes repetitive, mechanical dialogue rather than pursuing the irregular rhythms and quotidian details of everyday life.

Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko was initially interested in Treadwell’s play for the Moscow Art Theatre. He realized, though, that the Young Woman would be an ideal role for Koonen, and gave Tairov a copy of Sergei Bertenson’s Russian translation of the play shortly before the Kamerny’s 1930 tour to South America. Bertenson’s version gives the main characters proper names – Ellen (Helen) Jones, Gary (Harry) Roe, etc. – and cuts the play’s references to homosexuality: in Treadwell’s original ‘prohibited’ scene, the Young Woman meets her lover for the first time in a Prohibition-era bar in which two male lovers also have a rendezvous. Despite these and several less substantive rewrites, Bertenson retained a keen sense of the precise, rhythmical language with which Treadwell constructed her mechanized world.

Tairov viewed the world of *Machinal* as a capitalistic urban machine placed in rhythmical, visual, and social opposition to an out-of-sync individual. While in Buenos Aires, Tairov had an experience that inspired the production’s central organizing principle. He visited a quarter of town that was, as if by clockwork, suddenly abuzz with activity during the early evening hours on a daily basis. For Tairov, the daily routine of these people was somehow mechanical:

I stopped, saw the endless quantity of advertisements, lamp posts, people: hubbub, shouts, noise, discarded wares, the aimless bustling, a kind of strange machine-quality to all the motion. As if someone intentionally turned a key – and the
street began to whirl round; people walked, walked ceaselessly in some kind of cliché, repetition. And suddenly I remembered this play. . . . It seemed to me that in this play it would be possible to convey the essence of a modern capitalist city. 26

Tairov was not interested in having the production tell ‘The Story of an American Woman Who Killed Her Husband’, the subtitle of Treadwell’s play.27 Rather, he said, ‘I want our production to be (and hope it will be) not about a woman who killed her husband, but about an American or generalized capitalist city that killed a woman, and, moreover, killed one of many as it decisively kills each person . . . [who] deviates from the norm.’28

Tairov organized the production around the sharp contrast between what he called the play’s ‘two dramatis personae: Ellen and the city’. He added:

This city is personified in an entire gallery of characters . . . [of] different sexes, different heights, different girths, different hair colours, different personalities; in essence, they are not people, but marionettes that eat, drink, sleep, give birth to others like themselves, dress, undress . . . go to court, grow rich, and destroy themselves only within the limits of the prescribed standard. This standard has so entered into their flesh and blood that they themselves do not notice . . . it, thinking naïvely that they live ‘freely’ and according to their own will.29

Ryndin captured this varied uniformity in his costume designs; the three newspaper reporters at the trial at which Ellen is sentenced to death seem even to share a single body. Characters who have proper names, such as the husband George Jones and the lover Gary Roe, evoke universal types: Mr Jones is a lecherous plaid Pantalone (in contrast to the Vakhtangov Theatre’s production of the play, retitled Ellen Jones, in which Jones resembled Hollywood’s Douglas Fairbanks),30 while Roe evoked one of any number of generic American movie stars, and his apartment room any of a thousand like it.

In the 1928 Broadway production, Arthur Hopkins had made everyone in the Young Woman’s world normal. Ellen was the only one who did not fit in.31 Tairov did the opposite: Ellen Jones was the only human character, just as Yank, even while shovelling coal, was more human than the upper-deck passengers in The Hairy Ape. She did not look significantly different from the others, though, as evidenced by her costume, a plaid office dress. Rather, she tried to fit in, to be mechanical like the rest, but was always a little bit off-beat. Tairov describes this as the ‘syncopation’ of Ellen:

Ellen is not a heroine, she is an ordinary woman, not a rebel, not a revolutionary . . . not even a serious protester; she is just out of step, she hasn’t had time to become standardized, she hasn’t been able to become mechanized – and this is enough, this is already a crime, this the city-giant will not tolerate with his mechanized life and machine psyche – and Ellen dies.32

This use of musical contrast between the rhythmically coherent world and Ellen’s off-beat interjections into it was echoed in the projections, and in Ryndin’s scenic design in alternating long shots and close-ups. Between scenes, the curtain remained open, allowing for projected visual transitions that established general themes before scenes themselves were performed. The result was a constantly shifting perspective between the machine as a whole and its individual components, from vast urban vistas to tiny cramped rooms (Figure 4, opposite). The scenic design mirrored this alternation.

Norris Houghton, who attended rehearsals, described it thus:

Against a background of projected skyscrapers, which mount in rigid corrugations of light into the sky, are set small scenes without ceilings or side maskings, realistic rooms with beds and lamps, desks and typewriters, sinks and dirty dishes, rooms which huddle symbolically beneath the towering monuments of capitalistic construction.33

This diminishing of the human is especially apparent in the second scene (‘At Home’), in which Ellen’s neighbours occupy claustrophobic spaces set into an urban void. Design elements of each scene are also rigidly grid-like. In the seventh scene (‘Domestic’), looming buildings seem to crush the space beneath them (Figure 5, on page 12). In the fourth scene (‘Maternal’) and in the last (‘A
Machine’), metal bars and grids visually link the maternity ward with the prison. The production’s shifts of perspective reinforced the view that the urban capitalist machine holds no place for Ellen, no matter from which perspective she is viewed.

One of the production’s most striking aspects was its heightened performance of the rhythms of everyday life. Tairov was drawn to Treadwell’s use of language, which, in Bertenson’s Russian translation, retained its forceful repetition and rhythm. The Kamerny ensemble’s musical virtuosity was especially effective in the opening scene, in which office workers work in precise mechanical rhythm. Tairov noted:

In the first picture . . . I want to present a theatrical quartet, and then quintet . . . The telephone girl, stenographer, filing clerk, and adding clerk each play in turn. Everything is constructed on the interaction between them; as a result, this connection rhythmically and musically takes the form of a quartet, where we take into account each part, each 32nd note, each fraction of a rest, each downbeat.34

We get a sense of the degree to which this was implemented from the director’s prompt book,35 which features numerous handwrit-
ten rhythmical indicators, accents over certain syllables, and divisions between words that show precisely how the rhythm and tempo of each line were to be spoken (Figure 6, opposite). Indeed, the office workers are an orchestrated quartet of four voices, accompanied by their machines.

When the tardy Ellen finally arrives, the Russian translation emphasizes that she is at odds with this rhythm by giving her awkward phrases that interrupt the others. As Tairov explained: ‘Taking these people, taking this rhythmical foundation with all its variations, I build a contrapuntal [stage] picture; the rhythm of Ellen, who . . . is always off-beat, constantly disrupts the main rhythm.’ He emphasized this in multiple ways: for example, an empty coat-hanger hinted at her conspicuous lateness.

One of the most remarkable records of this is a series of detailed mise-en-scène drawings that storyboard the action for each scene in the production. The blocking in this first scene (‘To Business’) was as deliberately
monotonous as the workers who inhabited it. Characters are evenly spaced, positioned behind their machines. The only breaks in this regular pattern are a small space between tables for entrances and exits and the conspicuously empty seat of the absent Ellen (Figure 7). As seen from the mise-en-scène sketch, at Ellen’s first entrance she had to walk past four work stations before getting to her chair, a further mark of her slowness and inefficiency in this mechanical world.

Alisa Koonen’s portrayal of Ellen Jones supported and heightened Tairov’s musical interpretation of the play. Koonen was famous for monumental, emotionally heightened performances, which perhaps explains why she recalls the production in her memoirs in terms of emotional peaks and major turning points. A small, seemingly insignificant change to one of her lines near the end of the Kamerny production became the hinge on which the rest of character of Ellen Jones turned. In Koonen’s interpretation, she makes one tiny attempt— not present in Treadwell’s original—to protest against the mechanical world that is crushing her. For Koonen’s Ellen, this was not the taking of a lover or the murder of a husband— it was simply saying no. In the final scene of Treadwell’s play, when Ellen is taken away to the electric chair, her final cry of despair (‘Somebody, some—’) is cut in the Kamerny script, and the words ‘I don’t want this! I don’t want this! I don’t want this!’ written in by hand.39

While Ellen’s ‘syncopation’ in each of the preceding scenes is a result of her inability to keep up, to conform to her mechanized society, in this moment she defies the rhythm around her with a new one of her own. This defiance is unsuccessful— her voice is silenced by the electricity that courses through her body— but there is strength and dignity in the attempt.

The Kamerny production also concluded differently from Treadwell’s play, which ends (as does Bertenson’s translation) with the death of the Young Woman. Tairov’s version clearly posits that individuals like Ellen will continue to be crushed until the machine itself is destroyed. At the end of the Kamerny production, after Ellen’s final cry, the lights
come up again on the office, and the workers resume the rhythm with which the play began:

Again the office moves on; again the stenographer types; in Ellen’s place there sits a different young woman. George Jones was killed, but the company still exists. It ends where it began. It is a carousel; one victim was removed, but the carousel keeps moving, it will remove another, a hundred, a million. 40

This final return to the beginning takes the emphasis off one small woman in one small machine, the electric chair, and broadens it to the scope of any world capable of creating such a chair: a capitalistic America, yes, but also any society that crushes individuals who are out of sync with it.

Tairov was, of course, creating a production about multiple machines. One was far-away capitalistic America, where many women like Treadwell had grown disillusioned by the continued lack of gender equality despite the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, which had granted women the right to vote, in a country where so many individuals were suffering extreme poverty as a result of the Great Depression. Another, though, was his own society, which had just undergone the forced collectivization of Stalin’s first Five-Year Plan, which was to mandate Socialist Realism the following year, in which arrests, repressions, and erasures were becoming increasingly common, and in which Tairov himself was experiencing a rapid loss of artistic and individual autonomy in and outside his theatre.

After 1934, the Kamerny did not premiere any more American plays. Tairov’s archive contains two letters, though: one to O’Neill, the other to Treadwell, both dated 1944, in which he attempts to rekindle their collaboration. He wrote to O’Neill, for instance:

December 25th will mark thirty years since the founding of the Kamerny Theatre. Thirty years! . . . And now, looking back at the tempestuous thirty-year path of our theatre, we once again tenderly remember . . . [our] work on your plays and the creative joy that we received every time from this work . . .

Send us your new plays; we would very much like to work on [them] again.

We firmly believe that we will meet you again, as doubtlessly the friendship that has been established between our peoples will, after the victory [in the Second World War] allow for great closeness between the art and artists of our countries. 41

These proposed collaborations never took place. Not long after the Second World War, Soviet authorities accused Tairov of ‘cosmopolitanism’ and published his Jewish surname (Tairov was a pseudonym) in newspapers. Five years after Tairov wrote the letter to O’Neill, he and Koonen were fired from the Kamerny and forced into retirement. The Kamerny was liquidated in 1950 and replaced with the Pushkin Theatre, which remains today in the Kamerny premises at 23 Tverskoi Boulevard in Moscow.

What, then, is the Kamerny’s legacy from these American productions? In The Hairy Ape and Machinal, simultaneous staging, pantomime, and rhythmic movement expressed the individual’s struggle against the machine of capitalism. Through the productions’ juxtapositions of multiple perspectives, Yank and Ellen Jones, as they confronted these dissonances, became something much more than simply caricatured Westerners: they were transformed into real people undergoing little tragedies of insignificance and voicelessness and unhappiness.

While Tairov’s significance as a director and Koonen’s as an actress lie in the theatrical economy, beauty, and precision with which they were able to represent any theme, their legacy finds particular resonance in these eloquent theatrical explorations of the universal need for individual expression both within and despite the collective.

Notes and References

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1. Article by Sophie Treadwell (author of Machinal)
about the production of her play at the Kamerny Theatre
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2. See Jennifer Parent, ‘Arthur Hopkins’ Production
of Sophie Treadwell’s Machinal’, TDR, XXVI, No. 1
(Spring 1982), p. 87–100.

3. See Frenz Horst, ‘Eugene O’Neill in Russia’, Poet
Lore, XLIX (Fall 1943), p. 3.

and ed., The Soviet Theater: a Documentary History

5. Vance Kepley, Jr, and Betty Kepley, Foreign Films
on Soviet Screens, Studies in the History of Film
Quarterly Review of Film Studies, IV, No. 4 (1979), p. 431.

6. This analysis of the Kamerny’s production of
The Hairy Ape is based on the theatre’s hand-annotated
translation of the play, reviews, production photographs,
scene and costume designs, a set model, Tairov’s
published remarks, and a short archival film of
production moments.

7. Vecherniaia Moskva, 19 March 1924. RGALI f. 2030,
op. 1, ed. khr. 218: 127–28; ‘“Kosmataia obez’iana”–
O’neilia. (Beseda s A. Ia. Tairovym).’ Vecherniaia Moskva
6 February 1925. RGALI f. 2030, op. 1, ed. khr. 218:
118–19; Novyi zritel’, 1 Dec. 1925. RGALI f. 2030, op. 1,


No. 5/1084 (2 February 1926), 6. Central Research Library
of the Union of Theatre Workers (STD): 05/Ж–71.

10. D. I. Zolotnitsky, Zori teatral’nogo oktiaubria

11. Leonid Lvyovich Lukianov co-directed or assistant
-directed several Kamerny productions with Tairov.
He was also the director of the Kamerny’s last American
play, Dos Passos’s Fortune Heights.

12. Simultaneous staging on two levels became even
more central to the Kamerny’s Love [Desire] under the
Elms later that same year. In one scene in this
production, Abbie (played by Alisa Koonen) stands on
the upper stage level near the cradle of her illegitimate child
while her husband’s guests at the celebration for the
baby’s birth mechanically dance below like wooden
automata. See Ada Shmerling, ‘Neizvestnyi Tairov: Piat’
спектаклей Kamernogo teatra na kinoplene’, Colta.ru, 30
April 2013 <http://archives.colta.ru/docs/21353>,
accessed 15 September 2015.

13. Programnyy gos. akademicheskikh teatrav, No 19 (26
January–1 February 1926), p. 7. STD 05/Ж–78

14. For a short archival video of moments from the
production, see: ‘Filmed Scenes from The Hairy Ape, by
Eugene O’Neill, directed by Alexander Tairov and L. L.
Lukianov, Moscow Kamerny Theatre (premiere 24 Janu-
ary 1926), HB 3826/2. Copyright © A. A. Bakhru
ish State Central Theatre Museum, Moscow <http://hdl.
handle.net/20/7fullru.28sort26b>.

15. Alisa G. Koonen, Stranitsy zhizni (Moscow:

16. Ibid.

17. Anatolii Lunacharskii, review of Kosmataia obez’-
iana. Iskusstvo trudiaishestvia, No. 4 (1926), p. 6; reprinted
in Sobranie sochinii, III, p. 288; quoted in Thomas
Joseph Torda, ‘Alexander Tairov and the Scenic
Artists of the Moscow Kamerny Theater, 1914–1945’, PhD


20. According to Zagorsky, these designs were inspired
by an ‘admixture of the techniques of [George]
Grosz and [Otto] Dix – artists of post-war Germany’.


22. ‘Negr Robertson in Kamernom teatre: Blizaishie
postanovki teatra (Beseda s A. Ia. Tairovym), Vecherniaia
Moskva, 18 December 1925. RGALI f. 2030, op. 1, ed. khr.
218: 97–8.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. This analysis of the Kamerny’s production of
Machinal is based on two hand-annotated director’s
prompt books, reviews, production photographs, scene
and costume designs, Tairov’s published remarks, and
mise-en-scène drawings of all the scenes in the pro-
duction.

26. Aleksandr Tairov, ‘Doklad dla assotsiatsii
teatral’nykh kritikov, 16 Maia 1933’, O teatre: Zapiski
rezhisera. Statti. Besedy. Rechi. Pis’ma (Moscow: VTO,

27. Ibid., p. 324.

28. Ibid., p. 325.

29. Ibid., p. 320–1.

December 1933, p. 4.


33. Norris Houghton, Moscow Rehearsals: the Golden
Age of the Soviet Theatre (New York: Grove Press,


35. Machinal, by Sophie Treadwell. Director’s


37. Koonen, Stranitsy zhizni, p. 351.

38. Mise-en-scène drawings for Machinal, Moscow
Kamerny Theatre, 1933.

39. Machinal, by Sophie Treadwell. Director’s prompt
2832: p. 74.


41. Letter from A. Ia. Tairov to Eugene O’Neill,
typescript with handwritten notes by R. M. Bramson,
dated by A. Ia. Tairov, 1944. RGALI f. 2328, op. 1, ed.
khr. 721, 7 verso–8.