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# *The Decembrist* on the Stage of the Maly Theatre in 1918: The Soviet Premiere of the Imperial Theatre



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«Декабрист» на сцене Малого в 1918 году:  
советская премьера императорского театра

**Abstract.** The article is devoted to the production of Pyotr Gnedich's play *The Decembrist* at the Maly Theatre, which was first performed to the audience on April 2, 1918. The performance appeared to be a landmark: it was the first major premiere of the Maly Theatre after its destruction by the Red Guards in early November 1917, which was awaited by numerous admirers of the Shchepkin House. In addition, the play touched upon revolution events and had not previously been put on stage. However, despite the brilliant cast and significant public interest, not all the hopes of the directors were fulfilled.

Gnedich's play, despite being reworked by the author specifically for the play, was not appreciated by critics as a literary work: the author was reproached both for the length of the storyline over time (it covered the period of over forty years) and for commonplace characters. The very image of the Decembrists in the spring of 1917 (when the play was included in the repertoire) looked different than a year later, when the figures of the 'heroes of December 14' were viewed as their predecessors by both the Bolsheviks and their opponents. At the same time, the actors' performance received mostly positive reviews, and M.N. Yermolova's part of Princess Plavutina-Plavuntsova was noted in all reviews in the press as an outstanding achievement of the great actress.

The story of the 'semi-success' of *The Decembrist* based on archival sources (including the documents from the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, A.A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, and St. Petersburg State Theatre Library that are introduced into scientific circulation for the first time), as well as periodical materials.

**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена постановке пьесы Петра Гнедича «Декабрист» на сцене Малого театра, впервые показанной зрителям 2 апреля 1918 года. Спектакль оказался знаковым: это была первая крупная премьера Малого театра после его разгрома красногвардейцами в начале ноября 1917 года, которую ждали многочисленные поклонники «Дома Щепкина». Кроме того, пьеса затрагивала революционный сюжет и ранее не ставилась на сцене. Однако, несмотря на блестящий актерский состав и значительный интерес публики, далеко не все надежды постановщиков оправдались.

Пьеса Гнедича, хотя и переработанная автором специально для спектакля, как литературное произведение была оценена критикой невысоко: автора упрекали и за растянутость сюжета во времени (более чем на сорок лет), и за блеклость ролей. Сам образ декабристов весной 1917 года (когда пьесу включили в репертуар) выглядел иначе, чем год спустя, когда фигуры «героев 14 декабря» рассматривались в качестве своих предшественников и большевиками, и их противниками. При этом игра актеров удостоилась в основном положительных рецензий, а исполнение М.Н. Ермоловой роли княжны Плавутиной-Плавунцовой во всех печатных отзывах отмечалось как выдающееся достижение этой великой артистки.

История «полууспеха» «Декабриста» раскрывается на основе архивных источников (в том числе впервые вводимых в научный оборот документов из РГАЛИ, ГЦТМ имени А.А. Бахрушина и Санкт-Петербургской государственной театральной библиотеки), а также материалов периодической печати.

## Introduction

A daunting challenge the theatrical community was facing after the February Revolution was the so-called ‘revolutionary’ repertoire, its search and development. The former imperial theatres ended up in a particularly difficult situation: rightly considered ‘model’, they could not stage low-standard productions on the theme of ‘the Tsarina and Rasputin’ that took over farce theatres and, at the same time, they obviously needed new drama, appropriate to the times. The directors and actors began to look narrowly at works created before the fall of the monarchy that had never been put on stage for censorship reasons. One of the promising plays was *The Decembrist* (1909) by the famous playwright and theatre professional Pyotr P. Gnedich (1855–1925), whose literary work [Zhatkin, Serdechnaya, 2025, pp. 206–224] and stage practice [Mamchur, 2020, pp. 155–158] still remains in the focus of researchers. The literary work, which developed the plot of another play by Gnedich (*The Serfs*, 1907), had not been submitted to censorship before the revolution (despite being published) [Gordeev, 2020, pp. 684–685] and thus would be a novelty product on the theatre stage.

## The play becomes more revolutionary

The play presents five acts, which makes the plot rather convoluted. In the first act, the future Decembrists, young officers of the Russian army (including the protagonist, Prince Platon Plavutin-Plavuntsov) in 1814 in Paris discuss freedom, Russia, and Europe. The second one (set four years later), which is loosely connected to the others, primarily focuses on the protagonist’s dying aunt, the wealthy elderly Princess Ekaterina Plavutina-Plavuntsova. Before her death, she wishes to bid farewell to both her nephew and illegitimate daughter Glafira, who spent her youth unenviably as a servant girl and later became a marquise. The third act is set in the 1820s (more precisely, in November 1824, in the face of the infamous St. Petersburg flood). In this part the characters are already members of a secret society spied by the corrupt official Vetochnik, who, incidentally, has his own history with the protagonist — he once seduced and abandoned Vetochnik’s daughter. The fourth act unfolds thirty years later, in the 1850s in Siberia. Prince Plavutin-Plavuntsov, emotionally depressed, converses with his French wife, and then with a former convict,

the joyous and wise Silantiy. In the final act set in the early 1860s, the prince, his wife, and the elderly Decembrist Kotarbin meet the famous elder Fyodor Kuzmich (it is repeatedly hinted at, though never explicitly stated, that the elder is Alexander I). The Decembrists never recognize the old man who speaks enigmatically as the emperor. At the very end, when the Decembrists leave, the elder muses upon the sky and whispers, “Now you are letting your servant depart...” [Gnedich, 1909, p. 92].

Even though Gnedich’s Decembrists are not historical figures, they do have real inspiration. The love story of Ivan Annenkov and Pauline Gueble, which inspired Alexandre Dumas, is clearly traced in the couple of Prince Platon and his wife, the Frenchwoman Adele Baudry, who follows him to Siberia. The most radical of Gnedich’s characters, the Decembrist Melezinov, who reproaches his comrades for their half-heartedness and is later hanged, apparently embodies some of the traits of K.F. Ryleyev and P.G. Kakhovsky.

Gnedich himself wrote to the head of the Maly Theatre, the famous actor A.I. Sumbatov-Yuzhin (apparently, in response to his proposal to stage *The Decembrist* at the Shchepkin House) on Annunciation Day in 1917 (under the Julian calendar the holiday was celebrated on March 25), “I, dear Sasha, have reread my *The Decembrist* and completely reject the idea of putting it on stage. Now the end of the first act, the very end of the play, and the weak third act are impossible. In act four, Arakcheyev’s servant, Minkina’s murderer<sup>(1)</sup>, also needs to be reworked. In short, this will make a new play. I am writing to you so that you do not even think about it” [Letters of Gnedich, l. 32]. Nevertheless, Yuzhin managed to persuade Gnedich to quickly revise his work, and on April 20, 1917, the Repertoire and Artistic Committee of the Maly Theatre accepted *The Decembrist* for staging [Gordeev, 2020, p. 693].

It is not easy to identify which text Gnedich ultimately submitted to the Maly Theatre. A 1918 edition of the play could not be found in the major library collections. However, in the collection of the St. Petersburg State Theatre Library, there is an undated typewritten version of the play (bound) produced after the revolution under the new spelling (library code

(1) This refers to the character of convict Silantiy. It should be mentioned that in the play it is not said that he is A.A. Arakcheyev’s servant and his mistress’s murderer.

Manuscript / Shelf department / G 561 (A)) [Gnedich, no date]. Thus, it can be assumed that this version, or the one close to it, was sent to the Shchepkin House. Comparing the two texts, an expected conclusion can be made: the typewritten version that contains changes made after the revolution clearly intensifies the anti-monarchist themes, almost unnoticeable in the previous version.

For instance, in the pre-revolutionary edition, the first scene ended with the protagonist exclaiming (upon seeing Emperor Alexander I), “Look at him, look — are not we on the threshold of freedom?” [Gnedich, 1909, p. 26]. In the typewritten edition, these lines are followed by Melezinov’s sceptical remark, “Yes, maybe, in a hundred years from now!” [Gnedich, no date, p. 40]. Many of the lines by Melezinov, the most radical of all characters, were introduced by Gnedich in the third act. In the pre-revolutionary edition, in the scene of the Decembrist meeting, speeches against serfdom are given (mainly by the Marquise Glafira), and Melezinov speaks about freedom just in general terms and says that he is “fed up with quarter-measures. All or nothing” [Gnedich, 1909, p. 69]. In the revised text, he already attacks the emperor himself, “Alexander has deceived us. <...> And it is not Arakcheyev who is to blame for the nightmare, but Alexander. He surrounded himself with henchmen — Golitsyn, Fotiy, and Kridner, and with piety he sugarcoats the devil!” [Gnedich, no date, p. 116]. It is no coincidence that back in the autumn of 1917, in one of his letters to Yuzhin, Gnedich noted that the corrections in the third act would “require the one thing: ardour and enthusiasm from the actor playing the part of Melezinov” [Letters of Gnedich, l. 44].

The destiny of the play can be traced in the correspondence between its author and the key figures of the Shchepkin House of that time — the authorized representative of the Maly Theatre A.I. Yuzhin and the theatre manager, actor O.A. Pravdin (in the hierarchy established in 1917, the post of a theatre manager was lower than that of an authorized representative).

### Long preparation in difficult times

In April 1917, when *The Decembrist* was officially included in the future repertoire, the theatre season was coming to its end and the actors were preparing for the summer break. However, even by the beginning of the next season, the premiere time was known just approximately. On August

24, 1917, Gnedich wrote to Yuzhin, “Dear Sasha, I have sent Pravdin the set for *The Decembrist*; as for costume and makeup, there is plenty of time, since, according to Pravdin, the production scheduled for December, as you told me in Petrograd, has been ultimately postponed until January” [Letters of Gnedich, l. 36]. On September 8, 1917, he informed Yuzhin of a letter from Pravdin, in which the latter asked him “to send the revised text of *The Decembrist* as soon as possible”. “Tell him that I depend on my fellow typesetters: if they want to, they type; if they do not, they shall seeds” [Letters of Gnedich, l. 42]. Gnedich promised to check with A.F. Marx publishing house and, “if it is not ready yet”, to send the handwritten text to Moscow [Letters of Gnedich, l. 42].

The delivery of the revised text was delayed. “It is mid-October already, but I still do not have the complete text of *The Decembrist*. I am waiting” [Pravdin, l. 8], Pravdin complained to Gnedich in a letter dated October 16. Two weeks later, the Shchepkin House appeared in the thick of the battle, between units of the Bolshevik Moscow Military Revolutionary Committee and the forces of the Public Safety Committee, loyal to the Provisional Government. During the events, in the first days of November, the theatre was destroyed by the Red Guards, after which it resumed work only on November 21 [Gordeev, 2022, pp. 53–72]. All the events, clearly, had their influence on performance preparation, having delayed it once again.

“Due to the suspension of performances for a whole month, the entire repertoire plan went down the drain. But I managed to retain *The Decembrist*” [Pravdin, l. 9], Pravdin reported to Gnedich in a letter on November 29. “We are currently rehearsing *Mad Money*, and as soon as it is all set, we will get down to *The Decembrist* — on December 12–15, I think, and will perform no later than January 20. We will not make it any earlier. Once we begin rehearsing, an advance will supposedly be paid, that is what Aleksandr Ivanovich told me. Do not worry about the play and the production — I will do everything in my power” [Pravdin, l. 9 back side].

The troupe started working on the play at the very end of 1917 (“Rehearsals of *The Decembrist* began on the 21<sup>st</sup>, and today I am sending a repeat submission for an advance payment” [Yuzhin — to Gnedich, December 22, 1917, l. 1]). At the close of winter, the upcoming premiere (often mistakenly called *The Decembrists*) was actively written about in the press — it was reported that the play was postponed for Lent [Chronicle, 1918, February 21–23, p. 4] or may even not take place at all, since

“due to the current circumstances it will not be possible <...> to rehearse” [Chronicle, 1918, February 26–27, p. 4].

Preparations for the premiere went slowly, every now and then interrupted by political events. “We have been rehearsing *The Decembrist* since December 21, but with long intervals (the holidays), and in a rather unbalanced mood, the reasons for which being January 5, 9, and 12. I think, that does not need to be explained” [Pravdin, l. 11], Pravdin wrote to Gnedich on January 14 (referring to the convocation and dispersal of the Constituent Assembly, the shooting in Moscow Theatre Square during the demonstration on January 9, and, possibly, the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of the Working and Exploited People on January 12, which became an important step toward the establishment of the Bolshevik dictatorship).

In the late winter and early spring of 1918, the Shchepkin House troupe, apparently, had other things but premieres to worry about: the theatre was intensely working on its constitution (Provisional Regulations), conducting difficult negotiations with the authorities to approve it, changing its management structure and re-electing its leadership. All this took place against painful staff reductions and mounting household problems [Gordeyev, 2024, pp. 51–79]. And yet, even under such circumstances, the creative process did not cease.

In a letter dated February 14 (from this point onward, dates are given by the Gregorian calendar), Yuzhin informed “dear Petya” that *The Decembrist* was being rehearsed daily and was the only upcoming premiere of the theatre [Yuzhin — to Gnedich, February 14 (1), 1918, l. 1]. However, just two days later, on February 16, Pravdin wrote to Gnedich, “Something almost unexpected happened: *The Decembrist* had to be postponed. Here is how it happened: tasked by the Corporation, the Organizing Committee (made up of actors) was supposed to develop the statute of the future autonomous Maly Theatre. They (15 people) started, but due to political and other complications, they have not been able to do it; and by March there comes a time when every actor must know their place in the future, especially since they are all being confused by various Jewish lads” [Pravdin, l. 13] (probably, he was referring to private theatre entrepreneurs who lured artists from the state theatres to their places). Due to new urgent work, the production was postponed (“And the play was already so well-rehearsed that I scheduled three full-dress rehearsals for the 6<sup>th</sup>,

7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup>” [Pravdin, ll. 13 back side — 14]). Pravdin promised to resume rehearsals and set “the day for full-dress rehearsals and the performance” as soon as they finished the statute [Pravdin, l. 14 back side]. “After the final rehearsals, I will write to you about the play and the performance... honestly and openly...” [Pravdin, l. 14 back side], he promised Gnedich. “But I do believe that we will win... There is the only thing I am dissatisfied with: you were given so much freedom, but you made little use of it” [Pravdin, l. 14 back side].

“Pravdin writes to me that *The Decembrist* has been postponed. Will it suffer the same fate as *The Eternal Sleep* and suddenly perish in its mother’s womb just before its birth?” [Letters of Gnedich, l. 48], a worried Gnedich wrote to Yuzhin on February 26, 1918, mentioning another play of his. But his worries were unfounded — the theatre was no less interested in the premiere than the author himself.

### Before the premiere

The production took about a year (from acceptance by the Maly Theatre Repertoire and Artistic Committee to the premiere) and over the time its preparation had varying significance for the Shchepkin House. In the spring of 1917, it was an attempt to find some even remotely ‘revolutionary’ repertoire, the demand for which was often written about in the press at the time. By the autumn, the mood of both the troupe and the audience changed: the romanticism of the revolution gave way to irritation at the growing devastation, and the intelligentsia’s outrage at the actions of the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution.

Under such circumstances, not only did Gnedich’s play lose its rebellious image (initially, rather weak), but it also became a kind of escape into a rediscovered past, the poetic era of Alexander I. Beyond nostalgic charm, the reading audience already had an example not of continuity, but, on the contrary, of a radical opposition between the Decembrists and the Bolsheviks — in the poem *December 14, 1917* by Zinaida Gippius:

Will the noble heroes forgive us?  
Their covenant we’ve failed to keep.  
We’ve lost all that was sacred:  
The shame of soul and honour of land.

We were with them, we were together,  
 When the thunderstorm approached.  
 The Bride arrived... and soldier's bayonet  
 Stabbed the Bride in the eyes [Gippius, 1999, p. 222].

A few lines below, exclaiming “Oh, Nicholas’s noose is cleaner / Than the fingers of grey monkeys!” [Gippius, 1999, p. 222], Gippius suggested a new perspective not only on the Decembrists, but even on their historical persecutors: all of them and the entire Decembrist era (and its offspring, ‘the Bride’, that is, the freedom of the Provisional Government period, or ‘the beautiful lady of the marquises and Russian princes’ as in M.I. Tsve-taeva) appeared to be better, more principled than Soviet reality. However, it is unknown whether the poem published on December 14, 1917 in the Petrograd newspaper *The Evening Bell* [Gippius, 1999, p. 504] was read at the Shchepkin House or not, but the question of who the true successors to the Decembrists were — the Bolsheviks or their opponents — is supposed to have occupied numerous minds of the intelligentsia on the anniversary of the December events. Such a perspective on the play and the overall image of the ‘heroes of December 14’ at the time was relatable at least to some part of the Maly Theatre anti-Bolshevik actors, such as the longtime head of the Shchepkin House Alexander Yuzhin and Maria Yermolova, who were deeply affected by the revolution disorder.

But the lucky feature of the theme of Gnedich’s play was that the entire meaning layer, though quite visible to the intelligentsia, was, as it were, unofficial. To the demanding authorities, the theatre could present the production as work on cultivating the image of ‘freedom fighters’ in line with the ideological principles of the People’s Commissariat of Education. Finally, a vibrant costumed premiere featuring theatre pillars would prove to the city and the world that the Maly Theatre had recovered from the chaos of the revolutionary days and successfully continued its creative work.

A few days before the premiere, Yuzhin was in good spirits. “I am writing to you at the full-dress rehearsal of *The Decembrist*, my dear Petya” [Yuzhin — to Gnedich, March 29, 1918, l. 1], he wrote to Gnedich on March 29. “I am truly satisfied with both the production and the performance. Yermolova, Leshkovskaya, Lenin, Sadovsky, Pravdin, Aidarov, all of them are magnificent. The first act is lively and picturesque, and, in connection with the tundra of the last two acts, produces a strong impression. Aidarov

(Kuzmich) is noble, simple, and majestic at the same time. The sets are great — all new. The minor parts are also performed superbly by Lepkovsky and Scriabin, especially the latter, substituting the sick Maximov, who will be performing at the premiere” [Yuzhin — to Gnedich, March 29, 1918, l. 1]. Yuzhin congratulated Gnedich in advance, “I believe, the success of the play is guaranteed. It is noble, touching, and truthful” [Yuzhin — to Gnedich, March 29, 1918, ll. 1, 1 back side]. The coming success was also confirmed by the audience’s interest in the premiere scheduled for April 2, (“The house is sold out” [Yuzhin — to Gnedich, March 29, 1918, l. 1 back side], Yuzhin noted in the same letter).

### The premiere

The premiere, much anticipated for nearly a year, excited considerable interest not only among the audience, but also other Moscow theatres representatives. Speculators, ignoring decrees, sold tickets to the stalls at a price of 60 roubles [My [Kugulsky S.L.], 1918, April 4–6, p. 7]. Finally, on the evening of April 2, Tuesday, the audience attended the performance, which was a benefit for the assistant directors and prompters of the Shchepkin House [Programs, 1918, p. 8]. Then it was time for theatrical reviews in the press.

*News of the Season* published a lengthy review of the performance by V.K. Ermans. He highlighted the drawbacks of the play which also reflected in the stage production. “The chronicle is written in an interesting and intelligent way, but unevenly, and at times too schematically. <...> There is no climax in the scene of the meeting of the conspirators, the powerful ‘people of December 14’, the meeting of Prince Plavutin and the elder Fyodor Kuzmich, the well-known legend about whom P.P. Gnedich apparently considers plausible, lacks significance” [Ermans, 1918, p. 3]. The critic’s point of view was generally shared by Yu.V. Sobolev in *Footlight and Life*, “*The Decembrist* does not show what, as one would think, should be the core of the drama — December 14, the terrible and bloody conclusion of the December tragedy. Having a fresh and promising start, after the second act, Gnedich’s becomes less interesting, seems verbose and even unnecessarily sentimental in the end, and, moreover, is spoiled by an attempt to present almost the apotheosis of the ‘elder’ Fyodor Kuzmich” [Sobolev, 1918, p. 6].

One of the most hostile reviews of the play (but not of the actors and stage production) was published in the Petrograd newspaper *Nash Vek* (Our Century), whose Moscow correspondent attended the premiere. “P.P. Gnedich as a risky, ‘suppressed’ writer is rather unusual. Ridiculous absurdity of past, old-regime years. So benevolent and decent he is, the very picture of moderation and precision, as one would think <...> Far from red, not even salmon-coloured” [Chuzhoy, 1918, p. 2], remarked sarcastically the critic under the pseudonym Chuzhoy. “But P.P. Gnedich came up with an idea — to bring the Decembrists on stage. He carried out the impudent idea with steadiness and composed nature characteristic of him. There is not a single grain of revolution. The martial pathos is replaced by quiet idealism and sweet sentimentality. <...> In fact, there are no real Decembrists either. In Gnedich’s play, they remind the Octobrists — not the current Leninist ones, of course, but the old Guchkov’s” [Chuzhoy, 1918, p. 2]. Despite the Decembrists being portrayed as “well-behaved” in the play, the censors “barred their way onto the stage”, and “P.P. Gnedich became the forbidden fruit”. However, the critic continued to ironize, “this time the forbidden fruit is not very sweet. Firstly, there are few Decembrists, and secondly, little play” [Chuzhoy, 1918, p. 2]. Having reproached the author for the drawn-out action (“With such a scattered action, drama cohesion is impossible; the impacting force is wasted in the disunity of the episodes”), the journalist concluded, “There is no inner strength, and therefore no artistic synthesis” [Chuzhoy, 1918, p. 2].

While the play itself was criticized in the press, the reception of the actors’ work was different.

Critics paid tribute to M.N. Yermolova who played the part of Princess Plavutina-Plavuntsova. “All the shortcomings of the production can be compensated for just by M.N. Yermolova as Princess Ekaterina. This is truly a celebration of art, a celebration of talent” [Ermans, 1918, p. 3], V.K. Ermans was lavish of praise. “Frankly, the character is not bright. You be the judge: the old princess in a wheelchair, about to die, invites her relatives to beg forgiveness and repent of her sins. Just one scene in one act. And on this canvas, she embroiders patterns of rare beauty. Individual intonations and phrases impress with their unexpectedness, brightness and vital truth. The actress does not sink into melodrama or crying spells, as a commonplace actress would do. Yermolova, on the contrary, adds comedy to the character. Princess Ekaterina is so old, so indifferent to life,

that she even speaks of her past with a touch of irony — it all happened so long ago, you see...” [Ermans, 1918, pp. 3–4].

“However, the main charm of the performance (it did have a charm, perhaps even without the author’s participation!) is not in the part where the Decembrists dominate the action, but in the second act where Princess Plavutina-Plavuntsova appears. And this, of course, is because the part is played by Maria Nikolaevna Yermolova. <...> And one must be Yermolova to create such a figure based on just a few phrases and poor details. Yermolova does it with such perfection that the entire past of the dying old lady seems to rise to the audience’s view. <...> Learn from her, Russian actors!” [Sobolev, 1918, p. 6], exclaimed Yu.V. Sobolev in *Footlights and Life*. “It was a celebration of art” [Chuzhoy, 1918, p. 2], wrote the Moscow correspondent of the Petrograd newspaper *Nash Vek* about Yermolova’s performance. “It was truly enchanting in its subtlety, nobility, simplicity, and sincerity of performance. The sun of this enormous talent is almost setting. After all, soon we will celebrate Yermolova’s fiftieth anniversary on stage. But the sun still shines brightly, ardently, and gloriously beautifully. The magic of theatre is still in her power. And once again, we sat in the auditorium, enchanted, captivated, and filled with great tenderness and affection” [Chuzhoy, 1918, p. 2].

Reviewers praised other actors as well, in particular E.K. Leshkovskaya who played the part of Glafira (“E.K. Leshkovskaya, who played the illegitimate daughter of Princess Plavutina, was a well-matched partner for Yermolova... E.K. Leshkovskaya portrayed a character of great brilliance” [Sobolev, 1918, p. 6]; “The author did not give a detailed picture of the character; nevertheless, the actress created an interesting image of a marquise from the courtyard girls” [Ermans, 1918, p. 4]). Only the correspondent of *Nash Vek* allowed himself a little criticism, writing, “That marquise from the former courtyard girls played by E.K. Leshkovskaya, who has accumulated hatred for the oppressors and love for the oppressed, should have been more exuberant, outraged, and unbroken, as it seems to me” [Chuzhoy, 1918, p. 2]. However, the journalist also noted, “E.K. Leshkovskaya played her marquise, conceived as a sufferer, with her usual skill and expressive convincingness” [Chuzhoy, 1918, p. 2].

Reviewers’ acclaim was also addressed to Pravdin (Marquis Pacioli), who “sparkled with all the facets of his talent”, though “he failed to do the Italian accent and sounded somewhat Greek” [Ermans, 1918, p. 4].

V.K. Ermans emphasised that N.K. Yakovlev “played Silantius superbly”, but did not remain silent about the failures, for instance, A.A. Levshina as the Frenchwoman Adele Baudry, in love with the main character, “The actress trivializes the charming image of a kind-hearted woman, capable of self-sacrifice. <...> This bottomless love could not be felt properly in the actress’s portrayal of the character. Accentuation was not good either – it does not come easily to Levshina” [Ermans, 1918, p. 4]. Somewhat sarcastically, Ermans commented on the performance of M.F. Lenin as Prince Platon, “The part is difficult and not a winning one. In general, in *The Decembrist* there are many difficult parts and few good ones... Lenin handsomely wore his costume in the first scenes and handsomely (not too dryly?) suffered in the last ones” [Ermans, 1918, p. 4]. Sobolev also gave an ambivalent assessment of Lenin’s acting, “He was very natural in the last scenes where scepticism and spiritual exhaustion of the prince are pronounced, but lacked romantic sentiment and ardour for the young Platon, a sacred and convinced believer in the triumph of the Union of Welfare” [Sobolev, 1918, p. 6].

The work of director I.S. Platon who staged the play was positively met by critics, although without much enthusiasm (“The play was not staged brilliantly, but modestly and with attention to detail” [Sobolev, 1918, p. 6]; “The production <...> is meticulous and pleasant” [Ermans, 1918, p. 4]). However, the Maly Theatre, as is known, was not a ‘director’s’ theatre at all [Shalimova, 2024, p. 121]. As for the set design, on November 29, 1917, Pravdin promised Gnedich, “The set design will be created by Petrov, a talented artist” [Pravdin, l. 10]. As a result, the sets created by S.I. Petrov (made to sketches by Gnedich himself, sent by the author to Moscow [Pravdin, l. 14]) were well-received in the press: “The sets are well-executed... the cafe in sweet, happy Paris and Princess Ekaterina’s living room with a view of the Neva” [Ermans, 1918, p. 4].

And yet, contrary to Yuzhin’s prediction, the production did not become a significant, undeniable success for the theatre. Noting that a telegram from Yuzhin to Gnedich about the ‘outstanding success’ of his play at the Maly Theatre had appeared in Petrograd newspapers, *News of the Season* wrote, “If the telegram was sent indeed, Prince Sumbatov came across as a tactful friend and comrade, because the play, as such, did not enjoy success... The marvellous performance was truly a success, but the play itself was not positively received by either the audience or

critics. <...> The success of actors and the success of a play are two very different things, as they say, presumably, in Odessa” [My [Kugulsky S.L.], 1918, April 18–20, p. 5].

“My dear Sasha, I am deeply touched by the attitude of the theatre administration and the troupe towards *The Decembrist*” [Letters of Gnedich, l. 49], Gnedich wrote to Yuzhin on April 5. “I did not expect Yermolova and Leshkovskaya would take part in it. Judging by the publications in *Rech*, M.N. made miracles out of the hints that were rather scantily given in the character’s image. I knew nothing about Elena Konstantinovna’s participation until the last minute: neither you nor Pravdin said a word about her! All the more pleasant is their participation. But was not it of a comradely nature, merely for the benefit performance?” [Letters of Gnedich, l. 49]. Gnedich asked Yuzhin to “complete the good deed” and send him a playbill (“It is important for me to know who participated”) and photographs, if possible, and also to return the sketches of the set design (“I need them in St. Petersburg”) [Letters of Gnedich, l. 49].

Like any author, Gnedich was offended by criticism of his work. One of the most hostile reviews of him as a playwright, published in the central organ of the Cadet Party, stated that instead of reflecting the psychology and ideology of the Decembrists, the characters in Gnedich’s play utter only “a few very general lines about liberties in a café on a Parisian boulevard, interspersed with longing for kvass and vodka” and “a few equally general lines about bribery in a conversation with a greedy St. Petersburg official” [Chuzhoy, 1918, p. 2]. “*Rech* accuses me of romanticism and sentimentalism in my portrayal of the Decembrists” [Letters of Gnedich, l. 49], Gnedich wrote to Yuzhin on April 5, 1918. “But was not the whole movement dreamy inactivity (which for some ended on the gallows)? And was not Alexander himself romantic? After all, Pavel was a romantic of sorts – a Knight of Malta!” [Letters of Gnedich, l. 49].

### The destiny of the play

The era of the great revolution gave the play about the figures of the early revolutionary movement in Russia tragicomic scenes not intended by its author.

A remarkable incident took place at one of the first performances of *The Decembrist* (shortly after the premiere, no later than mid-April 1918).

“During the third act, the echoes of gunfire were heard in the auditorium – muffled and distant at first, then the sound was approaching...” [My [Kugulsky S.L.], 1918, April 18–20, p. 5], the journalist was setting the scene of starting agitation. “A burnt child dreads the fire, so the audience, impressed by recent events, took the sounds for gunfire outside. Box doors opened and the audience was leaving, obviously rushing to get home in time. A movement started in the stalls as well: people began to leave, too” [My [Kugulsky S.L.], 1918, April 18–20, p. 5]. And only when one of the actors “gave the line that the cannon shots were warning of a coming flood on the Neva, the audience realized that the cannon fire was staged behind the scenes” [My [Kugulsky S.L.], 1918, April 18–20, p. 5]. Then, the escapees returned to the auditorium.

In any case, the theatre season was coming to its end, and *The Decembrist* ceased to be performed. However, with the start of the following season, it did not return on stage of the Maly Theatre, which could not but worry its author. “In spring, O.A. Pravdin wrote to me that after 11 sold-out performances *The Decembrist* was temporarily removed from the repertoire just to reappear on the stage in autumn as a fresh production”, Gnedich informed Yuzhin on November 30, 1918. “Now three months have passed since the start of the season, and *The Decembrist* has not been back on stage yet. I would like to know when we can expect its revival” [Letters of Gnedich, l. 56].

Yuzhin replied to “dear Petya” (Yuzhin’s letter is dated November 27, probably erroneously or under the Julian calendar), “I have not written to you for over two months, hoping to inform you of the revival of *The Decembrist*. Not a week has passed without me speaking to Sadovsky about this matter. But it was either the withdrawal of three actors from the troupe (Lepkovsky, Maksimov, and Zhelyabuzhsky), or the hasty production of *Posadnik* for the anniversary, or all sorts of other challenges set to me by Sadovsky as insurmountable that postponed the revival. Finally, today, having received your letter, I spoke to him officially (as I did before multiple times), referring to the Council resolution on including the play in the repertoire” [Yuzhin – to Gnedich, November 27, 1918, ll. 1, 1 back side]. However, Sadovsky “repeated the same explanations to me and pointed out that, for similar reasons, a whole series of plays, beginning with *The Government Inspector*, could not be included in the repertoire for the time being, although they had been approved by the Council” [Yuzhin – to

Gnedich, November 27, 1918, l. 1 back side]. Assuring Gnedich that he was doing “everything in his power” and advising him to send an official letter to him (Yuzhin) as Chairman of the Maly Theatre Council (“I will report the letter at the meeting”), Yuzhin, emotionally depressed by the political events of the past year, finished his letter on a sad note, “I embrace you tightly. Forgive me, on my soul ... No light can be seen” [Yuzhin – to Gnedich, November 27, 1918, l. 1 back side].

Yuzhin, who at the time was no longer the sole head of the Maly Theatre, might have been unaware of the motives of actor P.M. Sadovsky, member of the theatre’s board, or unwilling to fully disclose them to Gnedich in order not to upset his old theatrical and literary comrade. As for Sadovsky, in a letter to the playwright, he expressed himself more frankly: the play was no longer suitable for ideological reasons. On December 16, 1918, Gnedich wrote to Yuzhin, “My dear Sasha, I received P.M. Sadovsky’s letter today. From it I see that *The Decembrist* is not performed because it is a ‘bourgeois’ play. Sadovsky hopes it will be staged again in the current season. ‘Hope is a gentle messenger from heaven’. But in our case, it seems, hope is giving us a finger, and although it still keeps it up its sleeve, it will show it someday” [Letters of Gnedich, l. 58].

Thus, history came full circle: *The Decembrist* that in the spring of 1917 seemed fresh and revolutionary, a year and a half later appeared too old-fashioned for the Soviet Maly Theatre.

## Conclusion

Gnedich’s play *The Decembrist* put on stage on April 2, 1918, was the first full-scale premiere of the Maly Theatre after the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks and destruction of the Shchepkin House in revolutionary struggles (not to mention one-act play *The Comforts of Life* by N.N. Vilde performed in late-January 1918 [Theatre Day, 1918, p. 4], which failed to produce any significant impression in theatre circles).

In the public consciousness of that time, the Decembrist theme in general and Gnedich’s play in particular changed their political overtone, gradually losing revolutionary spirit and acquiring an ambiguous meaning that allowed both the Bolsheviks and their opponents to pantheonise the Decembrists. The artistic merits of the play were not highly acclaimed by reviewers, unlike the performance. The acting of the Maly Theatre

performers in *The Decembrist* was praised in the press, and the part of the old princess Plavutina-Plavuntsova played by the outstanding actress M.N. Yermolova was generally recognized as one of her greatest creative achievements.

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