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## Techniques of the Commedia Dell'arte in the Poetics of Plays of M.A. Kuzmin

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*The paper explores techniques of the commedia dell'arte, used in the dramatic works of M.A. Kuzmin. We give a particularly detailed study of two major pieces – “The Venetian Madcaps” and “Mary’s Tuesday” and the reason for the application of these techniques. Techniques of dell'arte allowed deliberate use of typification, suitable to depict common human situations.*

*Keywords: commedia dell'arte, pastiche, masks, play.*

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### 1. Introduction

Mikhail Alekseevich Kuzmin (1872-1936) looks odd in the literature of Russian “Silver Age”. In late 1900, he formally belonged to the symbolism, and in 1916, literary critic V. Zhirmunskii argued that Kuzmin “is linked to the symbolism by the mystical nature of his experiences, but he does not bring these experiences into his poetry” (Zhirmunskii V.M., p. 107). With this definition it is not clear why Kuzmin should be considered symbolist poet. And since he anticipated neoclassical findings of acmeism, then he is often seen as among acmeists, despite his statements that acmeism is “stupid and ridiculous...” (Kuzmin M.A. (1922), p. 100), that acmeism is “made-up and violent school...” (Kuzmin M.A. (1923), p. 116). In 1909, Kuzmin wrote: “... let the world discernment be mystical, realistic, skeptical or even idealistic <...> let creativity techniques be impressionistic, realistic, naturalistic; content – be lyrical or consistent

with the storyline <...> but, please, be logical, <...> in the plot, in the process of creation, in the syntax. <...> be <...> accurate and authentic – and you will find the secret of the marvelous thing – beautiful clarity – which I would call ‘clarism’ (Kuzmin M.A. (1910), p. 6).

Almost all researchers first of all note the pastiche skills of Kuzmin, his ability to feel the spirit and style of different cultures. However, pastiche was not an end in itself for Kuzmin. Having very personal attitude to tradition he claimed: “Pastiche is the transfer of the plot in a certain period and its realization in *the specific literary form of the exact time*” (Kuzmin M.A. (1910), p. 9).

### 2. Analysis

Kuzmin as a creator first came into contact with commedia dell'arte by writing at the request of V.E. Meierkhold music for the production of A.A. Block’s “Balaganchik”; in a letter dated

December 3, 1906 to the director Kuzmin wrote: "I love this thing of Alexander Alexandrovich ..." (Meierkhold V.E., p. 79).

In 1912 he wrote the play "The Venetian Madcaps", "a product, dubious and risky in terms of common morality" (Koiranskii A.A., p. 6). Poet and critic V.F. Khodasevich in a review of the play wrote as follows: "The content of it is simple, the characters are primitive" (Khodasevich V., p. 5). Meanwhile, the content is quite interesting, and the characters are ambiguous.

In the story an actress – Finett wants to seduce a count- Stello, but instead his friend-lover Narchizetto falls in love with her. Stello performs a pantomime by changing clothes to become a Columbine and putting on Finett's dress, and then dressed as a Harlequin Narchizetto kills the count. Only now Narchizetto understands that he liked the count only, and this cures his love for one whose dress the count put on. Then Finett and a real Harlequin leave the city.

Researcher An Chzien believes that "none of the characters can be identified with the eternal loser Pierrot" (An Chzien), but his alter ego is Narchizetto – the type of Pierrot, dressed in a suit of Harlequin and doing what could be done by real Harlequin. Everything is done by the plan of Kuzmin, in accordance with the dell'arte theater he introduces pantomime – a performance in the performance, but so that "no one will be able to discern where the real Harlequin and Columbine and where their counterparts are" (Kuzmin M. (1915), p. 66), because, as you can see, you can not live up fully to your role.

According to Finett,

We are all comedians.

<...>

We all play different roles,

But in a Change we are

Submissive to the will of someone else

Мы все комедианты.

<...>

Мы все различные играем роли,  
Но в пестрой и колеблющейся  
Смене  
Чужой покорны воле

(Kuzmin M. (1915), p. 76).

A quote from Shakespeare's "As You Like It" is obvious:

All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely  
players:

They have their exits and their entrances;

and one man in his time plays many parts,  
(Shakespeare W., p. 29–30), –

and Kuzmin's conclusion of this is in absolute agreement with Shakespeare, who wrote about how time becomes destiny.

The play ends with a direct appeal of actors to the audience, making it clear that it was just a play. But Kuzmin brings into a play a parallel story with Harlequin as the main character, making it clear that the planes of real life and theater performance can be combined: while Stello and Narchizetto are wearing dell'arte masks and leading this game seriously, Harlequin is jokingly playing with the Marquise, seducing her and bluffing.

In 1915, for the publication of the novel by J. Cazotte "The Devil in Love" Kuzmin translated poems from the novel, and in 1916 created his own of the same nature "pantomime in 5 scenes (on Cazotte)", which featured artist "with the crowd of Truffaldinos ..." (Kuzmin M. (1994-6), p. 263). J. Cazotte did not have any Truffaldinos in his play, but the use of a common name of a servant from commedia dell'arte is remarkable here.

In 1917, Kuzmin again turned to the methods of the Italian commedia dell'arte. As indicated in the subtitle, "Performance in three parts for live or wooden dolls", the play "Mary's Tuesday" (1917) was intended for the theater, where people can act as puppets, and it is no difference whether they are live or wooden dolls.

The play can be classified as Harlequin style play; its beginning is the best proof of that. In the first part of the play Newspaper seller as a barker from fairground street theater (Harlequinade) is selling newspapers, full of colourful, important and trifling information:

Министерство пало!  
Во время придворного бала  
Фрейлина упала!  
Арестовали известного нахала!

<...>

Балет,  
Кабинет,  
Туалет.

<...>

Социалистов съезд,  
Угольный трест!

Литературный манифест!

Молодой человек, готовый на всё, ищет места в отъезд! (Kuzmin M. (1921), p. 9–10).

The play is based on the characteristic of the commedia dell'arte love interest. The main characters make a triangle out of an unfortunate admirer, frivolous beauty and her beloved.

A young man (“ready for anything”), dissatisfied with his own social position as an official at stock exchange and therefore not sure about the future of his love, expresses his feelings in mannered, and somewhat formulaic and messy way:

Но любишь ли, но любишь ли, не знаю я,  
И в этом вся трагедия, поверь, моя.

Зачем не при посольстве я атташэ?

Тогда бы был уверенней в твоей душе.

Ах, сердце так колотится, так ноет  
грудь.

Меня ты поцелуешь ли когда-нибудь?

(Kuzmin M. (1921), p. 14).

In Part 2 Mary, she is Lady (meaning beloved), vows to love the pilot, who has taken her to the heavens. In the third part the performance is transferred from the street to

the theater: “The auditorium is noisy; phrases like headless birds fly without any beginning, middle and end. <...>

...Она ответила?.. ха-ха!

...Послушайте, слова так грубы...

...Ну, кто, мой милый, без греха?

...Мне надоели эти клубы!..» (Kuzmin M. (1921), p. 30), –

and the fundamental difference between street noise and hum of the theater is not felt. Everyone throws their words, and no one hears anyone.

Interestingly enough, apparently independently of each other, two reviewers pointed to “the use of cinematic methods” in Kuzmin’s play (Vinokur G.O., p. 4), and E.F. Gollerbakh wrote as such: “Cinematic Movie <...> is the content of Mary’s Tuesday” . “<...> Even more interesting is the unexpected slant to ‘mayakovschina’ ...” (Gollerbakh E.F., p. 42). Arrangement of scenes really lets talk about cinematographics of the play, and some remarks without appealing to the cinema sphere can not be played on the stage – for example, “Meadows and pastures. Everything is minor. <...> Finally, everything – like colored geographical map” (Kuzmin M. (1921), p. 24–25). By “mayakovschina” it is obviously meant the rhythmic structure of monologues, which in the same 1917 Kuzmin appreciated in Mayakovsky’s verses (Kuzmin M.A. (1923), p. 117).

Let’s turn to the scene depicted in the play where there is a trio: Pierrot, Columbine and harlequin (note that the name of the last character starts with a lowercase letter): “... Pierrot sighs in the doll garden with a small moon on the background. Columbine leans towards him and stops corny, until harlequin touches the strings of his guitar. Pierrot is now forgotten and given to the old moon. Harlequin performs his serenade confidently and vulgarly” (Kuzmin M. (1921), p. 31). Comedic provision, as old as the world is, is characterized by the words of Lady:

It is an old tradition  
When we look out from the dark box  
On the eternally sad Pierrot

(Kuzmin M. (1921), p. 33).

“On the stage now there is the buff mess with sticks. Someone is killed ...” (Kuzmin M. (1921), p. 33), – and it is well known that it should be Pierrot, whom Harlequin is traditionally pounding with a stick. Meanwhile, the other, parallel to the doll show, trio is in the hall: they are the very Lady, Pilot and Young man who appears in the form of a sepulchral letter imitating Pierrot’s manner of speech:

But I love you indescribably  
And I can not, I can not, I can not!..  
I wanted to die even last winter,  
But it is better to lie down on the autumn  
meadow  
Но я люблю вас невыразимо  
И не могу, не могу, не могу!..  
Я хотел умереть еще прошлую зиму,  
Но лучше лечь на осеннем лугу

(Kuzmin M. (1921), p. 34).

If A.A. Block created though cardboard, but live heroes in “Balaganchik”, who symbolize the eternal tragedy of a love triangle, Kuzmin uses the principle of the footlight as a mirror and leaves basically unclear, who parodies who: whether the life is given as a theatrical performance or the theater replicates the real life. By remark of researcher E. Krichevskaja, Kuzmin wrote “an harlequinade, in which an element of comedy is always closely intertwined with an element of tragedy” (Krichevskaja E., p. 7).

Young man like Pierrot is disappointed and condemned to death. Unlike Pierrot, Kuzmin always writes the name harlequin with a lowercase letter: so sadness (Pierrot) is characterized by individual traits, fun (harlequin) acts as a type that exists everywhere and always (unfortunately, in the authoritative edition of Kuzmin’s plays of the University of Berkeley the exact fixation

of lowercase and capital letters is not always correspond to the original, neither in “The Venetian Madcaps”, nor in “Mary’s Tuesday”).

Lady, like Columbine, lives one day, here and now. Perhaps here lies the mystery of the title “Mary’s Tuesday”, which is attributable to the second day, when God created the water and the sky, where Lady was flying for love, which when repeated weekly (as flights do) threatens to turn into routine.

Both triangles develop and complete as in the commedia dell'arte with a victory of carelessness over seriousness, of play over reality, of this fun-filled present over the sad past and uncertain future. In the “Declaration of Emotionalism” (1923) Kuzmin said: “There is no past, no future, regardless of our own, sacred present perceived emotionally with all the forces of the spirit, and art refers to this present” (Kuzmin M. Radlova Anna, Radlov Sergei, Iurkun Iur (2005), p. 270).

A.G. Timofeev, comparing “Mary’s Tuesday” with “a certain confusion of tragedy and farce”, said: “The banality and vulgarity of what is happening is like something overlooked through the chimney hole by the only real, not a “doll” actor – a chimney sweeper ...” (Kuzmin M. (1994-6), p. 407).

Чай горячий, свежий бублик  
Мне дороже всех республик.  
Всё ведь вылетит в трубу,  
От всего золу сгребу.  
На ухо скажу вороне:  
«Что бывало при Нероне,  
Будет через сотню лет, –  
Чёрной сажки липкий след!»

(Kuzmin M. (1921), p. 18).

But the play boasts another impartial person whose sentiments are extremely important for understanding it, because they play ends with the words of this character: Chauffeur. Objective remarks of Chimney sweeper and Chauffeur set the necessary grid of coordinates and define

vertical and horizontal sections of the world depicted. Chimney sweeper says:

Dirt under me and death,

Over me there is grey firmament -

and there is no hope, which Lady has for that “the cut ether will sparkle <...> blue ...” (Kuzmin M. (1921), p. 18, 23–24). And the other petty, but also necessary character – Chauffeur says:

Ах, луна ли, фонари ли!

Всё один и тот же путь! –

and sums it all up – the smoke and caricature, and they are not ours, but we should pay for everything:

В окне карикатуры пар

<...>

Ах, всё равно, летим, летим,

Куда хотим, –

Ведь цель поставлена не нами!

<...>

Вор, кот, иль кукольный кумир,

Скрипач, банкир? –

Самоубийца ль – та же плата!

(Kuzmin M. (1921), p. 29, 35–37).)

### 3. Results

Kuzmin used a schematic plot involving masks of commedia dell'arte, which, in fact, allowed expressing his attitude to the world. Moreover, the characters, who are not participating in the development of the action, are figures that are in the meaningful roll call with theatrical masks and the main characters: thus, pessimistic Chimney sweeper shades cynically Young man and Pierrot, indifferent to the lives of others Chauffeur cynically proclaims his credo, similar to the role of harlequin and the character

of Pilot, – both observers understand life much deeper than their potential counterparts. Even Manicurist in her daily routine suddenly becomes a prophetess and predicts Harry's death (Harry is Young man) “on the verge of mistress Mary”, where the “shoulders shine in a number of boxes ...” (Kuzmin M. (1921), p. 12–13).

Techniques of dell'arte allowed Kuzmin to use elaborate typification, suitable for a sketch of the timeless human situations. Types of commedia dell'arte probably seemed to him as a kind of standards, similar to the types of folk theater, but commedia dell'arte attracted him more due to its comprehensive literary pretreatment. This can be proved by the review of Kuzmin on the staging of “The Tragedy of Judas, Iscariot Prince” (1919) after A.M. Remizov. In his review Kuzmin praised the story, which is “artfully decorated with masks, reminiscent of Italian comedy masks (Monkey King, Pilate and the two elders)”, and mentioned “folksy dialects of masks and Gozzi's fairy tales, in which the main characters remain the standard language, which is literary and even elevated by generosity of lyrical pathos” (Kuzmin M. (1923), p. 111).

Writers of the pre-revolutionary years referred to techniques of the commedia dell'arte, its themes, the essential methods and characters, this reference can be explained by Russian life at that time, emotional turmoil and senses of frustration and hopelessness embodied by numerous Pierrots. Kuzmin's theater was trying to heal using the present time, pushing as an example reckless Harlequin in a duel with grim Pierrot; Kuzmin portrayed joy of present as opposite to the sad past and dangerous future.

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## **Приемы комедии дель арте в поэтике пьес М.А. Кузмина**

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*В статье исследуются приемы комедии дель арте в драматическом творчестве М.А. Кузмина, особенно подробно изучаются две его главные пьесы “Венецианские безумцы” и “Вторник Мэри” и выясняются причины обращения к приемам дель арте, позволяющим пользоваться высоким уровнем типизации, пригодной для обрисовки общечеловеческих ситуаций.*

*Ключевые слова: комедия дель арте, стилизация, маски, игра.*

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