

*Theatre and Identity in Imperial Russia.* By Catherine A. Schuler. Studies in Theatre History and Culture. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009; pp. x + 326. \$49.95 cloth.

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In this study of “theatre from a signifying prop in the eighteenth century into a signifying practice in the nineteenth” (8), Catherine Schuler uses the imperial stage to illustrate the development of a national identity in Russia, 1800–81. During these years Russians fought Europeans on the battlefield twice, enjoying success against Napoleon in 1812 only to suffer bitter defeat in the Crimea in 1856. Schuler grounds her work in the efforts of Peter the Great a century earlier to join Russia to modern Europe, and draws the distinction that other historians have between cultural and economic modernization, which can help to explain the Russian hybridity of the traditional and the modern. The first generations that developed from Peter’s westernization performed the identities that he was forcing upon them more than they truly inhabited their new roles. Schuler has set her story up as the Russian struggle against the European “other” in an effort to find an authentic sense of national self. The theatre makes a very appropriate site for the exploration of this internal contestation, because of the emergence of the *teatraly*, a new social type who understood public performance as an ideal space for the mediation of nationalism.

In Chapter 1, “The Culture Wars,” Schuler contrasts the last quarter of the eighteenth century, dominated by French drama, with the first quarter of the nineteenth, as Russians moved to realize their own national stage, aided by a French foil against which to develop their own unique “soul” (*dusha*), a term Schuler uses often to epitomize the essence of nationalism. Aleksandr Sumarokov’s translations and adaptations of neoclassical works gave way to Vasilii Federov’s and Nikolai Il’in’s rescriptings of Russian sentimental favorite “Poor Liza”; the peasant girl who kills herself in Nikolai Karamzin’s original survives onstage to personify the decency of her social estate. The “culture wars” of the chapter’s title are many-faceted: not only Russia vs. France, but also Russians vs. themselves in their appreciations of social estate. As Schuler points out, the emotional licenses granted to serfs could not be carried over into political ones, even as much about the institution of the imperial theatre patterned its origins in the serf theatres organized by wealthy landowners. Russia’s first genuinely popular actress, Ekaterina Semenova, was the illegitimate daughter of a nobleman and his serf, and the first actor to acquire fans; Aleksei Iakovlev was a merchant’s son, whose offstage personal profligacies made him less than a model character type. The lowly social status of actors was hardly unique to Russia, but the question of serfdom was.

Triumph over Napoleon changed all possibilities with its ushering in of patriotic fervor, but the Russian theatre was not yet sufficiently sophisticated to explore these possibilities fully. Chapter 2, “Uncertain Boundaries,” focuses on

the career of the first influential *teatral*, A. A. Shakhovskoi, who more than any other individual professionalized the Russian stage. The first to emphasize the importance of production quality, Shakhovskoi wrote plays, served as director to the imperial theatre, and worked hard to develop schools for training in the changing art of acting. Moreover, as the publisher of the first Russian journal devoted entirely to the theatre, he established criticism in such a way that theatre became interpolated into broader social and political issues. Shakhovskoi is already a familiar character in Russian history, but Schuler fleshes him out, especially in his political relationship to Karamzin. Given the list of his accomplishments (which she details on page 114), however, it strikes me that she exaggerates his browbeating. The actors who later chided his abusive behavior owed their careers in no small part to his demands that they adapt to changing styles and excel.

Chapter 3, “Friction in the Fatherland,” explores the “Decembrist aesthetic” that grew in the interwar years, when patriotic enthusiasm for the victory over the French became tempered by the realization among many young intellectuals that French republicanism was more attractive than Russian autocracy. Moreover, as the *teatral* who dominates this chapter, Pavel Katenin, recognized, the quality of the French theatre superseded that of the Russian at all levels. Katenin would spend three years in provincial exile, a victim of the tension that led to the abortive Decembrist revolution in 1825. A new sort of hero emerged onstage, embodied by actor Vasilii Karatygin, who performed as the nascent intelligentsia imagined themselves: reflective, moral, and brave in the face of danger. But in time this personification appeared to lack the *dusha* necessary to portray the uniqueness of the Russian national identity. Intellectuals began to part ways, the Westernizers separating from the Slavophiles, who looked to a romanticized pre-Petrine past. This precipitated the entrance of another actor, Pavel Mochalov, to counteract Karatygin’s rationale. Vissarion Belinskii, the most influential writer among the intelligentsia, critiqued these actors’ conflicting styles and entered the Russian theatre more fully into national political discourse.

In her last chapter, “A Suffering Nation,” and the epilogue, Schuler argues that the dichotomy of “us against them” that had begun with Russia vs. France grew into competing visions of Russia itself following the Crimean War, when Tsar Alexander II began another Peter-like effort at reforms based on Western models. Ending appropriately with the critics’ interpretations of playwright Aleksandr Ostrovskii, who wrote in the idiom of the empire’s various social groups, Schuler has succeeded in explaining more cogently than others who have also written on the history of the Russian theatre how the stage mediated the creation of a national identity from the claims that competed to control it. More careful editing would have removed some of the repetitious use of various forms of “signify” and forced a more careful analysis of how this term was deployed, but the lovely illustrations compensate for oversights elsewhere.