

## Impact case study (REF3b)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Oxford
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 28 Modern Languages and Linguistics
<b>Title of case study:</b> Enabling the staging of Russian Drama in British Theatres
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Staging Russian plays in British theatres presents specific difficulties, ranging from the remoteness of cultural and historical points of reference down to the complexity of Russian names. Dr Curtis's interpretative, biographical and editorial studies of Russian drama have assisted companies such as the RSC, the National Theatre, the Belgrade Theatre (Coventry) and Complicité to overcome these barriers to staging Russian plays. She has achieved this through running educational workshops for the companies, talks, translations, event planning, help to props and other departments, and the writing of theatre programmes, bringing cultural and educational enrichment to professionals and public.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Dr Curtis has been a University Lecturer in Russian at the University of Oxford since 1991. Her long-standing commitment to the analysis of Russian drama dates back to the publication of two previous books about the leading 20th-century playwright and novelist Mikhail Bulgakov. Over the last decade this ongoing research has been underpinned by the constantly updated scholarly investigations she undertakes for the specialist undergraduate and postgraduate options she offers. These include a course entitled 'Russian Drama of the 19th and 20th centuries', which encompasses the rich tradition of Russian drama inaugurated by Pushkin in the 1820s, via Gogol' and Chekhov, and right up to contemporary dramatists such as Ivan Vyrypaev.</p> <p>Since 1993 she has published a scholarly edition of Bulgakov's play <i>Beg (Flight)</i> (Bristol Classical Press, 1997). In her introduction to this, his most cherished work for the stage, she shows how he continues his account of the Civil War period in Soviet Russia, as already portrayed in his <i>Days of the Turbins</i>, but refashions it in a modernist theatrical mode which represents a startling break with the realist vision of the previous play. This paradox is further explored in her new article for <i>Modern Language Review</i>, which considers the explicit dialogue between Bulgakov's drama and the Futurist/Constructivist theatrical vision of Maiakovskii and Meierkhol'd. These projects have allowed her to investigate the contrasts between the two major trends of 20th-century Russian theatre, encapsulated in the Chekhovian realism of Stanislavskii and the experimental work of Meierkhol'd. She has also explored the ways that these evolved in the relatively liberal cultural and political atmosphere of the 1920s, followed by the years of Stalin's Terror. This theatrical and historical background is what theatre directors have asked her to elucidate for them, when working both with their casts of actors, and with their technical and literary staff.</p> <p>The primary research project she has been engaged in since 2008 is the completion of the first major biography of the writer Evgeny Zamiatin (1884-1937). Though best known for his novel <i>We</i>, along with his stories and essays, Zamiatin was also very ambitious to achieve success in the theatre, like his great friend Bulgakov. Appointed to a state committee to promote historical drama in 1919, Zamiatin's first contribution to the new theatre of the Soviet era was his controversial play about the Inquisition, soon banned, <i>The Fires of Santo Domingo</i>. His most successful plays were his adaptation for Stanislavskii's Moscow Arts Theatre of Leskov's story <i>Leftie</i>, staged with brilliant designs by Kustodieva in 1925 under the title of <i>The Flea</i>, and his adaptation of Hecht and MacArthur's Broadway hit <i>The Front Page</i> for the Vakhtangov Theatre. The crisis over the rejection of his play <i>Attila</i> in the late 1920s was a major factor in his leaving the USSR in 1931.</p>

**3. References to the research** (indicative maximum of six references)

- [1] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Flight (Бег)*, edited with Introduction, Notes and Vocabulary by J.A.E. Curtis, (Bristol Classical Press, 1997, 88 pp.). Available on request. Publisher is an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, academic division.
- [2] J.A.E. Curtis, 'A Theatrical Battle of Wits: Bulgakov, Maiakovskii and Meierkhol'd', *Modern Language Review*, 108.3 (2013), 921-46. In REF2 [*Modern Language Review* readers' reports: 'Overall summary: This is an excellent article: well-argued, well-evidenced and well-written.']
- [3] J.A.E. Curtis, *The Englishman from Lebedian'. A Life of Evgeny Zamiatin (1884-1937)*, (Academic Studies Press, published October 2013, 145,000 words). In REF 2 [Reader's report: 'This is a very good manuscript. It is a well-written, deeply researched treatment of a major figure in twentieth-century Russian literature. [...] distinguished not just by the range of its research but also by its balance [...] the writing overall is wonderful.']

**4. Details of the impact** (indicative maximum 750 words)

Curtis's reputation as a specialist on Russian literature, with particular reference to drama, has led to collaborations with several leading and high profile British theatre companies since 2008, supporting them in staging Russian drama (or dramatising Russian prose texts) in a wide variety of ways. Her work has had several key impacts including 1) improving the quality of translations available to theatres; 2) improving the quality of performances through educating the cast on the specifics of Russian literary history and theatrical practice; 3) contributing to the professional practice of theatres, by enabling the directors and backstage teams to provide a more authentic or convincing staging; and 4) engaging the interest and enriching the experience of audiences within and beyond theatres, through talks, podcasts and the writing of features for theatre programmes. The beneficiaries have included theatre companies themselves (directors, cast and crew), a playwright, and theatre-goers as well as the wider general public.

**1) improving the quality of translations available to theatres**

Based on her research in Russian Theatre outlined in §3, Curtis has been involved in evaluating translations as well as creating a new translation of a Russian play for use in theatres. Through doing this she has improved the standard of translations in use, giving the actors and audiences a more accurate portrayal of the original text. In 2009 she was involved in reviewing for the **Royal Shakespeare Company** (RSC) the translations of two newly-commissioned plays, Vorozhbit's *The Grainstore*, and the Durnenkovs' *Drunks*. In 2011 she made a literal translation of Galin's *Stars in the Morning Sky*, for the Belgrade Theatre (Coventry). She was able to give advice to the playwright adapting her translation for the stage, allowing him to overcome difficulties in the work: 'I'm very glad I made the visit, and came home feeling much clearer' he said <sup>[1]</sup>.

**2) improving the quality of performances through educating the cast**

Curtis has led significant educational work with casts of actors, allowing them to delve into the specifics of Russian literary history and theatrical practice, thus enabling them to create more accurate portrayals, using authentic methods. She delivers education mainly in the form of talks and workshops with the casts. In 2008 the Artistic Director of the RSC, named Curtis his 'Special Adviser' as he prepared a 3-year project of theatre from and about Russia This included Curtis providing six workshops in Stratford and London for about 150 people, including the entire acting company, as well as many other RSC staff (producers, directors, administrative team, props, music, movement etc.). The sessions offered an introduction to Russian history and language, and a Q&A about the plays they were working on. These workshops were felt by the company to be very useful to them: 'Thank you again for your inspiring help.'<sup>[2]</sup>. When Curtis interviewed the Artistic Director for the RSC's International Council, in the presence of HRH Prince Michael of Kent, one RSC officer commented that 'One of the catering staff [...] is doing theatre studies and said she learned more in that hour than she has in hours of college lectures!' <sup>[2]</sup>. In 2010 Curtis also fulfilled

an invitation from the Director of the **National Theatre (NT)**, to talk to the cast of *The White Guard* about Bulgakov and the historical background to the play.<sup>[3]</sup>

### 3) contributing to the professional practice of theatres, for more convincing stagings

From 2009 to 2011, Curtis as 'special advisor' to RSC's Artistic Director found herself regularly responding to queries from RSC departments about any aspect of their Russian projects, including helping the set designers, text and voice coach, sound designer, and prop-makers to create authentic materials (artefacts, images, music etc.). 'This is fantastic! Everything we need - thank you so much, I don't know what I'd do without you!' <sup>[2]</sup> In 2010 Curtis also helped the RSC Director and her designer with project planning for Rona Munro's *Little Eagles* (about Gagarin and the Soviet space programme). The Director said 'The notes and references are incredibly useful. [...] Thank you for all your ongoing knowledge and advice!' <sup>[4]</sup>. Michael Billington in the Guardian gave the production 4 stars and wrote 'It is a huge subject, but Munro, director Roxana Silbert and designer Ti Green admirably convey the excitement of scientific progress [...] Munro is also good on the interaction between politics and science[...] Munro makes history come alive...' <sup>[1]</sup>

Curtis also took up an invitation from the Director of **Complicité**, to meet and discuss his ideas for staging an adaptation of the notoriously difficult *The Master and Margarita* by Bulgakov, at the Barbican in 2012. Curtis' research on this Russian author, the basis of her advice to the Director, in turn made a contribution to how this adaptation was staged. The production was widely reviewed in the mainstream and theatre press; WhatsOnStage review of the production online says 'Complicité's extraordinary staging of Bulgakov's *'unadaptable'* The Master and Margarita has returned to the Barbican, providing a welcome opportunity for those of us who missed it the first time to see what all the fuss is about[...] the fuss is still justified, and I staggered out after three and half hours feeling much as I expected to - utterly overwhelmed with ideas and imagery.' <sup>[ii]</sup> The production also got attention in the social media sphere. One blogger tried to explain the impact of viewing such a complex story and production. He said 'As I left the Barbican after seeing Complicité's take on *The Master and Margarita*, I thought to myself that was simply extraordinary but I have no idea why and tweeted something to that effect. I couldn't really explain it in any kind of meaningful way and in some ways even if I could, it still wouldn't do it justice[...]but it did tap into something more visceral. I found myself inexplicably moved at several moments[...]ultimately that did it for me: I certainly didn't 'get' it all but it really didn't matter for me in the final analysis.' <sup>[iii]</sup>

### 4) enriching the experience of audiences within and beyond theatres

After featuring in BBC programmes about Russian theatre on Chekhov (Radio 3), and on Bulgakov (Radio 4), Curtis was approached by the National Theatre to write the programme notes for their production of Bulgakov's *The White Guard* in 2010. This allowed her to give the audience an in-depth understanding of the story and the history and cultural references behind it. NT Head of Publications wrote to Curtis: 'Thank you so much; this looks perfect. I think you've taken just the right tone for our audience'<sup>[5]</sup>. An art blogger wrote 'The background is supremely well explained in the programme essay by the Oxford Russianist, Julie Curtis, one of the best such efforts I've ever read.' <sup>[iv]</sup> Another reviewer said 'the £3 programme is a gem containing helpful excerpts and comments by Julie Curtis of Wolfson College, Oxford. The quotations I wrote above are all taken from her notes.' <sup>[v]</sup> Curtis was asked to conduct an interview with Michael Boyd about Pushkin's play *Boris Godunov*, which provided the main feature for the show's programme. She also wrote other features for programmes in 2012 including for the **Belgrade Theatre's** production of Galin's *Stars in the Morning Sky* and the Barbican's production of *The Master and Margarita*, and did a members' talk and discussion for the Barbican audience on 5 January 2013. She gave them an insight into the background and key themes of the novel, after which they split into smaller groups to share their thoughts in a book-club style discussion. They gained a deeper understanding of the

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play from hearing Curtis' research insights and the discussion allowed them to explore areas that had particularly engaged them. <sup>[vi]</sup>

Curtis has also been involved in digital media outreach activities that have served to help a global audience to feel closer to the plays and the history and ideas behind them. She co-featured in a National Theatre film, broadcast as an introduction to John Hodge's play about Bulgakov (*Collaborators*) when it was shown in cinemas worldwide on 1 December 2011. This was part of the National Theatre Live project (the National Theatre's groundbreaking project to broadcast the best of British theatre live from the London stage to cinemas across the UK and around the world, productions to date reaching audiences of over 800,000 in 22 countries). Curtis' film helped cinema audiences to get closer to the author and story before watching the production. They also created a 20-minute podcast based on this which can be accessed on the NT website and iTunes page <sup>[vii]</sup> One blogger wrote 'This is a handy podcast pre/post show viewing to get a more in-depth look into the real-life character of Mikhail Bulgakov, played by Alex Jennings. A great listen! She has also presented on other NT video podcasts 'An introduction to Collaborators' and 'An Introduction to Anton Chekhov' <sup>[viii]</sup>. The Chekhov video features in the 'Playwright' section of the NT website, with videos designed to give the viewer explanations of a well-written play from the perspective of a playwright and advice for first time writers. It enables audience engagement pre- and post-performance. The videos are free to watch, and to demonstrate the reach, the videos in the collection have been viewed 1.5 million times according to the annual report for 2011-12. <sup>[ix]</sup>

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)Testimonial evidence:

- [1] Email statement (on file) from a playwright
- [2] Email statement (on file) from the Artistic Director, RSC
- [3] Email statement (on file) from the Director of NT
- [4] Email statement (on file) from Director of RSC
- [5] Email statement (on file) from Head of Publications, NT

Other sources of corroboration:

- [i] Michael Billington, Little Eagles – Review, Guardian, 21 April 2011  
<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/apr/21/little-eagles-review>
- [ii] Michael Coveney, The Master and Margarita, WhatsOnStage, 22 March 2012,  
[http://www.whatsonstage.com/west-end-theatre/reviews/03-2012/the-master-and-margarita\\_4968.html](http://www.whatsonstage.com/west-end-theatre/reviews/03-2012/the-master-and-margarita_4968.html)
- [iii] 'Ought to be Clowns' blog, 23 March 2012,  
<http://oughttobecrowns.blogspot.co.uk/2012/03/review-master-and-margarita-complicite.html#sthash.Ebkq6Qh2.dpuf>
- [iv] Paul Levy, Arts Journal weblog, 26 March 2010,  
<http://www.artsjournal.com/plainenglish/2010/03/hit-or-miss.html>
- [v] 'Mark Ronan's Theatre Reviews', 16 May 2010,  
<http://markronan.wordpress.com/tag/the-white-guard/>
- [vi] Barbican talk and discussion 5 January 2013,  
<https://www.barbican.org.uk/theatre/event-detail.asp?ID=14163>
- [vii] A 20-minute podcast, which can be accessed on the National Theatre's iTunes page: (no.31), 'Dr Julie Curtis on Mikhail Bulgakov', <http://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/national-theatre-podcast/id486761654>
- [viii] Short film on Chekhov available on the National Theatre website:  
<http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/66380/the-cherry-orchard/anton-chekhov.html>
- [ix] National Theatre Annual Report 2011-12  
<http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/sites/all/libraries/files/documents/National-Theatre-Annual-Report-2011-2012.pdf>