

**ON DRAMATURGICAL MASTERY OF I.L. LEONTYEV (SCHEGLOV),
1880S/1890S**

A. A. Novikova

Far Eastern Federal University, 35 Nekrasov St., Ussuriysk, Russian Federation 692500

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ABSTRACT

The article attempts to analyse originality of the dramatic works by Leontyev (Shcheglov), consider some specific features of the playwright's talent and disclose the genre diversity of his plays written in the 1880-90s. The interpretation of a number of comedies allows defining the playwright's dramatic techniques and the specific character of the Russian society presented in his plays.

Keywords: literature, drama, genres, comedy, vaudeville, plots, types, characters.

INTRODUCTION

The issues addressed in the article are of particular relevance because of the research subject importance for understanding the history of literature, especially in the context of a continued interest of literary scholars in the works by A.P. Chekhov and other authors of his time, whose writings constitute the body of literature of the last third of the XIX century.

The works by many A.P. Chekhov's literary companions were in the focus of criticism among the liberal Narodniks and Democrats. The heated discussions and debates on the pages of newspapers and magazines in pre-Revolutionary Russia are clear evidences of the importance of the body of work of these "second-echelon" writers.

Author Correspondence, e-mail: author@gmail.com

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The correspondence of A.P. Chekhov with his contemporaries, as well as the newspaper and magazine articles about such writers of the turn of the last century as I.N. Potapenko, A.I.P. Chekhov, I.L. Leontyev (Shcheglov), V.V. Bilibin, V.A. Tikhonov and some others, clearly show that there was no unanimous opinion among the critics of periodicals about their work. It is believed that each of the writers "found his own Chekhov", expressed his opinion on the contemporary literary process and learned his writing skills from Chekhov.

It is only natural that today Chekhov scholars reconsider the attitude to the body of work of the minor writers of the period. The achievements in their studies will undoubtedly allow us to deepen our understanding of the works of the "second-echelon" authors, now "often thoroughly forgotten, though they strived to meet similar challenges in their writings" (Turkov 1996).

In the beginning of the XXI century a real breakthrough in the national literary criticism was the book "Chekhov Plus... Predecessors, Contemporaries, Successors" by V.B. Kataev. The author expressed the general idea that "search for the sources of literary renovation..." and "search for a new way of talking to the reader" were typical not only for the major authors but also for a mass of literary workers that are condescendingly referred to as "modest realists" or "those minor writers" (Kataev, 2004).

One of such "modest realists" of the late XIX and early XX century was Ivan Leontyevich Leontyev (1865-1911, pseudonym – I. Shcheglov). In the literary reviews and journalistic articles of the last third of the XIX century, many literary critics, and in particular K.K. Arsenjev, praised the undoubted talent of I. Shcheglov and originality of the young author's writing style ("ability to observe realities", use "clever" satirical tools and imbue his texts with "journalistic actuality") (Arsenjev, 1888).

The letters of A.P. Chekhov to Leontyev (Shcheglov) are no less important for purposes of our study. Thus, on 22 February, 1888, A.P. Chekhov wrote, "Apart from your talent, you are multifaceted, like an actor of the old school who can perform equally well in tragedies, vaudevilles, operettas or melodramas. This diversity, which you can't find in Albov, Barantsevich, Yasinsky or even Korolenko, should not be considered a symptom of carelessness, as some critics believe, but as a proof of inner wealth. I salute you with all my heart!" (Chekhov Letters, vol. 2). The evidence of the development of Leontyev (Shcheglov) as a writer can be found in other Chekhov's letters written in 1892 (9 March, 24 and 30 October, 3 November) and 1894 (05 July). "Passing remarks" by A.P. Chekhov about different people and "the most trivial routine details" – everything, according to the memoirs of Leontyev (Shcheglov), "came from his lips enriched with original fresh colours, that subtle

charm of life and humour which is almost inexpressible on paper" (Leontyev (Shcheglov) 1986).

It is worth noting that Chekhov singled I.L. Leontyev (Shcheglov) out among the young writers, considering him an "eminent figure", praised his first dramatic works, while discouraging him of excessive infatuation with theatre (Novikova 2010), in spite of the success of his plays with the audience. V.B. Kataev identified an original treatment of plots by the playwright and the "revision of a traditional mocking denunciation of certain character types and phenomena", which may be the characteristics of Leontyev's works that attracted the sympathetic attention of Chekhov (Kataev 1982).

After strengthening his professional literary positions in the end of the XIX century, Leontyev (Shcheglov) continued writing in the beginning of the XX century – however, both readers and literary critics soon forgot him for many decades. They resumed interest in his works only in the end of 1980s, but at that time his name was already closely connected with the name of A.P. Chekhov.

Some years later P.I. Ovcharova published an article in the bibliographical dictionary "Russian Writers" about the literary works by Leontyev (Shcheglov) and his activity as an editor of the literary section of the newspaper "Slovo" (1906) and a staff writer of the "Yearbook of the Imperial Theatres" (1908) (Ovcharova 1990).

After analysing the meteoric rise and fall of popularity and literary activity of Leontyev (Shcheglov) and considering the assessment of his works by pre-Revolutionary critics and present-day literary scholars (Novikova 2013), we may come to the conclusion that his literary and ideological positions have not yet been fully clarified, and his literary legacy is of varying quality and literary merit. There have not been any studies on his dramatic works so far, therefore this article is the first research effort of understanding the legacy of Leontyev (Shcheglov) as a playwright.

His first comedic play "The Enamoured Major" (a joke in one act) was published in November 1877. Since that time he had been regularly publishing his fiction and drama. In particular, his second comedy "Citizens" was published in 1879 – it was most probably written under the influence of "The Government Inspector" by N.V. Gogol (Shcheglov I. 1879).

The genre of "Citizens" is defined as a one-act comedy, and it has obvious satirical elements allowing us to imagine the inimitable atmosphere of the "huge event" taking place in the town of Oslobodsk (the action is set in the town club). The list of characters sounds as a brilliant satire on the officials present in the club: Boris Ilyich Chertopolokh, the mayor of Oslobodsk;

Pyotr Ivanovich Popovka, a town clerk (a cheerful, round and fat person, constantly puffing, wheezing and short breathed; he is fond of saying, "May God blast me!"); Ivan Andreevich Sladchaishiy, a member of the town municipal council (talkative, but his speech is slurred and incomprehensible). Among other characters we can see Apraksin "with pretensions to dandyism"; Galaktionov – "without any pretensions"; Big councillor – "with a beefy frame and protodeacon's octaves"; Small councillor – "a short man, descant"; playwright Zhuravlev; police chief Nikolay Petrovich Stepanov and a club attendant. It is easy to discern typical images of Russian provincial town officials in these succinct descriptions of the characters. The reason for the meeting of the "distinguished gentlemen" in the club is a newspaper article by an unknown author about habits and morals of the Oslobodsk inhabitants. It was signed "Zh." The article read by Ivan Andreevich Sladchaishiy lists the most "innocent" ways of governing the town ("The municipal council... *is absolutely idle...*", the mayor is *definitely a very competent scoundrel...*", in the town there is a reign of "*universal anarchy!*", etc.) (___ Author? year ___ p. 13). Everybody's attention is focused on the question, "Who wrote this article?" – they want to know the name of the author. All the characters are very excited, which is reflected in the rapid pace of the lines delivered from all directions, "Well, as they say, *the unexpected always happens....* How could it happen that the damned satirist named each and every single one?"; "Who? Who put it all on blast? Risen, I come to life! If only I knew who squeaked... I'll find him *and give him no quarter – I'll grind him, I'll crash him down, strangle and squash him!!!* If only I found out who... Oh, if only I could find him!" (Mayor); "*He is not pas!*", "*Defendue!*", "*Indeed, a complete inutile!*" (Apraksin); "With 'Zh.?' Whose surname begins with Zh. in our town? But wait a minute: Zhoh, Isaak Moiseich Zhoh!" (Popovka), etc. (p. 19, *emphasis mine – A.N.*). Finally, suspicion falls on playwright Zhuravlev, who appeared at the club, craving for some "scandal", "piquant affair" for a plot of his "original comedy", which leads officials to the conclusion that he must be the author of the article ("Well, by God, it must be him... definitely, *such a wretch!*" – Zh-Zhuravlev!!!"; "Oh-ho! We've caught you, Mr. Correspondent, haven't we? Well, now we'll give you the works, we'll settle with you in the best possible way... "Oh-ho!") (___ Author? year ___ p. 34). The created comic situation is resolved in a completely unexpected way: the Small councillor comes out from behind the curtain, comes to the proscenium and utters a single phrase, "Gentlemen! Please, just do not tell anybody – I wrote it!" (he chuckles into his fist). – The curtain falls." (___ Author? year ___ p. 34).

The author used such comedy writing techniques as funny "telling" surnames of the play characters, satirical descriptions of their appearance and expressiveness of their speech (a

mixture of foreign, colloquial and even rude words and expressions). The main motif of the comedy is ridicule of the members of the municipal council and the inhabitants of the town of Oslobodsk, their habits and morals. After the publication of the short story "The Horse Name" by A.P. Chekhov in 1885, the contemporary readers might have noticed some similarity between the Chekhov's heroes and characters of the play "Citizens", but there were no comments on this issue in any pre-Revolutionary critical reviews (neither was it mentioned by any present-day literary scholars).

The satire, which gave the play a special flavour, found its continuation in other one-act comedies by the playwright. Under the influence of A.P. Chekhov, I.L. Leontyev (Shcheglov) gradually developed his talent and the dramatic skills which he described in a practical guide for theatre enthusiasts "The Natural School of Performing Arts", perhaps the only one of its kind at that time (published under the pseudonym of Old Theatregoer) (Leontyev (Shcheglov) 1885).

In subsequent years (1887-1895) Leontyev (Shcheglov) wrote several sketches, vaudevilles and comedies in one, two or three acts ("In the Caucasian Mountains", "Theatre Sparrow", "The Suburban Husband: His Adventures, Observations, and Disappointments", "The Comedian by Nature", "The Honourable Theatregoers", etc.) The playwright was recognized by the theatre audience, and his plays were performed with great success on the stages of theatres both in the Russian capital and in the provinces. It was the most creative period of his career, especially taking into account the fact that it was when he wrote the comedy "The Suburban Husband" that brought him exceptional success. With intuitive understanding of his readers' demands, he included some scenes of jealousy and accidents occurring to the wife of the "suburban husband" into his "Diary" written at the Caucasian Spas (1886, 2nd ed.). A comic effect is created by an episode of Marya Dmitrievna's falling from a horse and her infatuation with a young Circassian "in a fur cap and with a dagger in his belt"; nothing but disapproval can be caused by abhorrent verses about the "suburban husband" and his wife and an effort of Jean to challenge the young man to a duel, and other situations. The "spa public" blatantly and openly laughs at marriage, matrimonial honour and "the greatest human treasures - love!" ("Which way are we headed? O mores! O mores! Alas!" exclaimed Jean). Finally, "the wife ran away, like that Moscow merchant's wife, with the scamp to his mountain village." And further on, "I've accidentally lost my wife", "something very dangerous happened – the family hearth is destroyed" (the last entry in the diary of the "suburban husband"). The scenes seem to be written in a relaxed style, with humour and ease, but the words of the "suburban husband" are full of deep meaning and reveal a hidden tragedy

of family relations, decline in morality and ethics among representatives of "high society" who consider themselves "respectable and well-educated" people (I. Shcheglov 1886).

The early 1900s were not the days of glory for the playwright, but he continued establishing himself both as a stage director and a dramatist in the genre of theatrical "sketches". However, it is well-known that the epoch in which Leontyev (Shcheglov) lived prompted, sometimes in order to please the petty-bourgeois public, "its own stories, heroes and those narrative principles that were typical for many writers of Chekhov's times" (Rusnauka 2015).

The innovative character of the works by Leontyev (Shcheglov) manifested itself in the development of the dramatic genres that were new for the Russian theatre at the turn of the last century. All these genres have the same thematic focus – they show the audience the life of provincial military garrisons and the hopeless, dull life of actors. The precise, elegant, witty representation of characters and social mores is the most valuable quality of the writer's theatrical sketches. Many of his plots (like those of Chekhov's works) were based on humorous situations, innocent misunderstandings or on comic incidents from theatrical life. The playwright's criticism was not so much directed against some individuals, but rather against the moral and mental decline of the Russian society as a whole. Following the principles of the realist art of the last third of the XIX century, the writer could not avoid some naturalistic trends, although this does not diminish the significance of his drama. However, many aspects of the literary legacy of Leontyev (Shcheglov) and the original character of his dramatic skills remain open to further research. They can be the focus and subject matter of future studies.

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