

Evgenii Vakhtangov's Fantastic Realism: Evolving Interpretations of a Term

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In 1922, as he was dying of invasive stomach cancer in Civil War era Moscow, the theater director Evgenii Vakhtangov (1883-1922), Konstantin Stanislavsky's (1863-1938) rebellious disciple, produced two legendary plays. Semyon Ansky's mystically-ecstatic *The Dybbuk* was performed in Hebrew in the Jewish theater-studio Habima and premiered on January 31, 1922. Carlo Gozzi's festive *Princess Turandot* was staged in the Moscow Art Theater's Third Studio and premiered on February 28 of the same year. The two plays reflected the quest of an artist who spanned the East and the West: the Kabbalah and the world of Jewish mysticism, and an Italian fairytale produced in a *Commedia dell'arte* style. These productions vividly illustrated the eclecticism and cosmopolitanism of Russian modernism – the search for new theatrical forms and, at the same time, the search for a new spirituality.

On April 10th and 11th of 1922, just a month before his death, Vakhtangov spoke with his students Boris Zakhava (1896-1976) and Kseniya Kotlubai (1890-1931), who made a stenogram of these “Two conversations with students.” In these conversations Vakhtangov clearly defined the theatrical principles of Stanislavsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940), and juxtaposed them with his own directorial method. Meyerhold, in Vakhtangov's view, believed that «the spectator should not for even a second forget that he is at the theater», while Stanislavsky was convinced that «the spectator must forget that he is at the theater». Therefore, Vakhtangov joked, ‘theatricality’ became a curse in the Moscow Art

Theater (Vakhtangov 1922: 429).¹ Vakhtangov declared: «I would like to call what I am doing ‘fantastic realism’... In the theater, there should be neither naturalism nor realism; there should be only fantastic realism» (*ibidem*: 437). Vakhtangov was searching for the eternal masks, comparing his directorial method to that of Nikolai Gogol's phantasmagoric oeuvre: «One can learn naturalism in the theater, naturalism is impersonal. Realism also can be learned. But Gogol's world is the world of fantastic realism» (*ibidem*: 436).

Unlike Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, Vakhtangov did not live long enough to write extensively about the theoretical elements of his artistic method, and he had not previously mentioned fantastic realism per se in his working notes or lectures. Thus, this term became his final artistic testament that his pupils and theater scholars were destined to comprehend, interpret and reinterpret in retrospect. Within changing cultural and political surroundings the interpretations of this term were characterized by a certain fluidity, constantly evolving and adjusting during the Soviet era according to the strict rules of Socialist realism, and then evolving further after the collapse of the Soviet Union during the gradual desovietization of Vakhtangov's legacy. This paper explores the evolving interpretation of Vakhtangov *fantastic realism* over time after his death. First, it traces the initial reaction of contemporaneous spectators and critics in the 1920's, second it discusses misinterpretations and mistranslations of the term during the Soviet era. Third, it focuses on more recent contributions to the field by Vladislav Ivanov and Andrei Malaev-Babel. Lastly, it will demonstrate that even 100 years after Vakhtangov's death, his artistic credo

and the spiritual search of his pupils are still open to new vistas of interpretation, as neither theater historians nor Vakhtangov's biographers have explored linkages between the director's close surroundings and the Secret Order of the Russian Knights Templar. New research may shed new light on the Order of Light (the central organization of the Templars in Soviet Russia), offering new perspectives on understanding the artistic mission of Vakhtangov and his pupils.

Fate had laid out a mission for Vakhtangov: to direct his pupils as they acted out two of the most powerful chords glorifying the Modernist era. *The Dybbuk* was a tragic lament; *The Princess Turandot* an ode to joy. At the heart of *The Dybbuk* lay an ancient Hebrew legend about the afterlife of the human soul and reincarnation; at the heart of *The Princess Turandot*, lay a fairytale about a whimsical princess who did not wish to marry and a foreign prince conquered by her beauty. In *The Dybbuk*, earthly love was doomed and only death could unite the lovers for eternity, while the frightening shtetl masks created an atmosphere of phantasmagoria and horror on stage. In *Turandot*, everything ended with the couple's happy wedding, while the Italian masks entertained the audience with their mischievous jokes. Both productions became artistic syntheses, where agile pantomimes were inseparable from the musical score, the acting from the costumes and the stage design. In both cases, the flabbergasted spectators admitted that they had experienced a theatrical miracle: Vakhtangov's productions had carried them to otherworldly dimensions. *The Dybbuk* was, from start to finish, transcendental, and *Princess Turandot* – theatrical.

The key to understanding Vakhtangov's directorial style lies precisely in this transcendental theatricality.² His stage creations reached beyond earthly boundaries, as he created a unique microcosm on stage. Vakhtangov's final two legendary productions represented an escape from harsh post-revolutionary reality into a world of spirituality and artistic imagination. The director critically rethought the necessity of truthfulness to real life and emotions on stage preached by his mentor, Stanislavsky, and gave a tribute to Meyerhold's experimental spirit. Vakhtangov was dreaming of a theater that would touch

people's souls, transforming reality. In his last productions he tried to reach beyond the borders of the physical world, creating a new microcosm on stage. Theater, according to Vakhtangov, should not reflect reality but rather should heal the human soul of the spectators experiencing the miracle. As Yurii Zavadsky (1894 - 1977) summarized: «He dreamed of a theater, which should rebuild human consciousness, about art, which should reincarnate a person, and not about art that entertains» (Ivanov 2011: I, 518).

Initial Reactions of Contemporaneous Spectators and Critics

The historical study of the performing arts before the era of television and video-recording is an elusive field since the action on stage and the directorial style could be reproduced only through the subjective reminiscences of the theatergoers. During early 1920s, the contemporaneous critics and spectators of *The Dybbuk* and *Princess Turandot* were describing their bewilderment, the ecstatic experience, and stage magic, seeing in Vakhtangov's directorial style a revolt against Stanislavsky, using epithets that were strongly suggesting fantasticality if not otherworldliness of the whole experience. *Princess Turandot* was perceived by some critics as being in «polar opposition» to the Moscow Art Theater (Rafes 1922: 471-472). Vakhtangov's directing was compared with «an alchemist who found a philosopher's stone» and his spectators followed the action on stage «almost separating from their seats» (Miklashevsky 1923: 498). *The Dybbuk* was called an 'ecstatic' production that unbalances one's entire spiritual equilibrium (Micaelo 1922: 282). One critic wrote that Vakhtangov's productions display «[...] fantasticality in reality and reality in fantasticality. People are like chimeras and chimeras are like people. Mysticism as everyday life and everyday life as mysticism» (Margolin 1922: 286).

In his emotional 1922 article, the Russian director and writer Nikolai Evreinov (1878-1953) mourned Vakhtangov's early death, proclaiming him a 'director-protestant' and 'the real stage reformer'. Evreinov was convinced that Vakhtangov rejected Stanislavsky's 'realist ideology', feeling that the



Moscow Art Theater's acting style was 'a dead-end', and wrote that «E.B. Vakhtangov, looking for a way out, bravely has chosen the path of theatricality, that was so vehemently and for such a long time cursed by K.S. Stanislavsky with the assembly of 'believers in his religion'» (Evreinov 1922: 293). In turn, Zavadsky remembered that despite the fact that *The Dybbuk* was performed in Hebrew that most of the spectators and Vakhtangov himself did not know, the words were not important:

It seemed that you were plunged into some sort of a strange dream, even incomprehensible, but disturbing, exciting, turning your heart over! It seemed that you touched the secrets of earthly existence, ascended into the spheres of previously unknown experiences, faced terrible demonic forces of evil, invisibly populating a woeful human life...

It was grandiose, and although the play was performed in the tiny space of the 'Habima' theater, it seemed that you were pulled beyond the bounds of time and space by the power of art (Zavadsky 2011: 541).

Nadezhda Bromlei perceived *Princess Turandot* as «a little prophecy about transfiguration of the world, since the destiny of art should eventually surpass all the destinies of all other spiritual teaching, and to disenchant the tragedy of man's solitude and blindness» (Bromlei 1923:39). She vividly described the phenomenal lightness of the production, believing that in his spiritual directing Vakhtangov was able to overcome gravity, creating a unique stage mirage-like performance: «he forces them [performers] to raise into to air, and they believe him to the point, when they were able to raise into the air. What could be lighter than 'Turandot' hanging in the air and moving in the air similar to Fata Morgana» (*ibidem*: 38). Bromlei defines the finale of Vakhtangov's creative career as «an epiphany before death», when *The Dybbuk* was «the greatest mystical theater act» and *Princess Turandot* «the mystery of the great lightness» (Bromlei 1922: 581-582).

In his 1923 critical evaluation of *Turandot*, Pavel Markov (1897-1980), an influential critic and theater historian, remarked that the production was a synthesis of all the previous experimentation of Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Alexander Tairov (1885-1950) on the Russian pre- and post-revolutionary stage. According to Markov, Vakhtangov was breaking the theatrical forms of his predecessors, putting them together according to

his directorial whim. Despite the eclectic nature of *Princess Turandot*, Markov sees in it a «transparent harmony of joy» (Markov 1923: 50). This collection of impressions, reviews and memoirs helps to reconstruct the powerful emotional, artistic and spiritual effect of Vakhtangov's two last productions on contemporaneous spectators, clarifying the notion of transcendental theatricality and fantastic realism on stage.

Vakhtangov's multifaceted directing consisted of a variety of stage techniques such as reliance on vivid theatricality, humor, eccentricity, attention to form, grotesquerie, self-irony, exquisite taste and the rejection of banality. Moreover, such stage elements as reliance on the rhythmic foundation of the performance, musicality, plasticity, and the cultivation of synthesis of all the arts are also associated with Vakhtangov's directorial style. All these features were displayed in his *Princess Turandot*. Indeed, these are the core and tangible features of his stagecraft. The spiritual dimensions of his oeuvre and his efforts to remove boundaries between the earthly and otherworldly realities on stage was also quintessential for Vakhtangov's artistic quest that reached its peak in his *Dybbuk*. Over time the Habima theater-studio was erased from the history of Soviet theater. The ecstatic *Dybbuk* first migrated to the West, and then became the foundation for the National Theater of Israel. The joyous *Princess Turandot*, with its enchanting waltz, settled down in the center of Moscow and became the cornerstone of the Vakhtangov Acting School. In this way, the spirituality of Vakhtangov's artistic method was sterilized by the will of fate – instead of transcendental theatricality, all that remained was theatricality. It was safer this way. 'Fantastic realism' started to evolve, gradually changing into 'imaginative' realism.

Misinterpretations and Mistranslations of the Term during the Soviet Era

Paradoxically, while in the 1920s the departure from Stanislavsky's teaching was seen as a great directorial breakthrough, starting with the Stalinist era the critical interpretations became drastically different. Zakhava, who had joined with Kotlubai in 1922 to conduct the conversations with his teacher where Vakhtangov had defined his

artistic method as fantastic realism, became one of the most zealous creators of Vakhtangov's new personae, camouflaging him as a realist, a dedicated follower of Stanislavsky's principles and even a precursor of Socialist Realism. In his 1969 memoirs about his teacher, Zakhava claimed that the transcript of the two conversations with students was published twice in «imperfect shape» (Zakhava 1969: 289). Then he significantly reinterpreted the meaning of the word fantastic, making a linguistic connection between the Russian word for fantastic (*fantasticheskii*) and the verb to fantasize/to imagine (*nafantazirovat'*), insisting that Vakhtangov's term was referencing imagination and not fantasticality (*ibidem*: 291). Perhaps to satisfy the demands of Soviet censorship, Zakhava went so far as to suggest that his teacher was a precursor of Socialist Realism:

In fact, calling his realism 'fantastic' or 'theatrical', Vakhtangov fought for the right to express his subjective attitude to what he was depicting, for the right to evaluate events, people and their actions from the point of his own world outlook, to make his 'judgment' on them as was demanded by N.G. Chernyshevsky. This is precisely how the party art of socialist realism manifests itself nowadays. (*Ibidem*)

Most importantly, Zakhava sought to establish close ties between the Stanislavsky system that was generally accepted in the USSR and Vakhtangov's creative career, blaming all the critics who tried in the past one way or another to contradict his view. He wrote: «They [theater critics] tried to tear Vakhtangov away from Stanislavsky from two sides: Both 'left' and 'right'», adding that «[...] Vakhtangov firmly held his teacher's hand, and there was no force that could break this firm handshake» (*ibidem*: 307). Zakhava solemnly declared that «Vakhtangov's method is the brightest, most modern form of the manifestation of that great truth that Stanislavsky so forcefully established in the theatrical art» (*ibidem*: 308). One can speculate that such obvious distortion of the truth was dictated not only by the desire of a dedicated student to save the legacy of his teacher from ideological attacks, but also by the fact that Zakhava was a member of the Communist Party, had the title of People's Artist of the USSR, was a recipient of State prizes during the Stalinist era, and from 1939 to 1976 served as the Director (Rector) of the famous Moscow Shchukin Theater

School where Stanislavsky's system was seen as the only acceptable method of acting at that time, and Vakhtangov's transcendental artistic search was intentionally forgotten. Zakhava's work was quite influential among theater scholars in Russia and abroad, since he was the first to hear his teacher's definition and witnessed Vakhtangov's last days.

In 1959, the actor and theater director Ruben Simonov, who was one of Vakhtangov's favorite pupils in the MAT Third Studio, published in Russia a book called *With Vakhtangov (S Vakhtangovym)* where he reminisces about his teacher's career and his legacy (Simonov 1959). Simonov was appointed to be the artistic director of Vakhtangov's theater company in 1939 during the height of the Stalinist purges, and led that institution for three decades until his death in 1968, never joining the Communist Party. When he was writing the book, Simonov also had the title of People's Artist of the USSR and had won numerous state prizes for his stage work. In this book, written during the late Stalinist era but published after Stalin's death, Simonov aimed to separate Vakhtangov's name from such dangerous epithets as modernist, mystic and expressionist, since they would not fit within the narrow ideological frame of Socialist Realism and could be dangerous for the destiny of the theater that bore Vakhtangov's name.

In 1963, Simonov asked Miriam Goldina (a former actress of the Habima Studio, then living in the United States) to translate his book into English. Goldina writes: «[...] I gladly agreed, as I was sure that Ruben Simonov, a true disciple, was the man to present Eugene Vakhtangov to America» (Simonov 1969: viii). Therefore, the book was a combined tribute of two pupils—one from the Third Moscow Art Theater Studio and the other from the Habima studio—seeking to bring the word of their teacher to the West. The English version had a very different title *Stanislavski's Protégée. Evgenii Vakhtangov* - a peculiar twist, connecting Vakhtangov's name to that of the internationally known theater reformer Stanislavsky, possibly dictated by the US book market. This English version greatly contributed to the trend of translating the term for Vakhtangov's method into English as *imaginative realism* based on imagination and fantasy, insisting that the root of fantastic is the same as fantasy.

Simonov writes: «Often during the rehearsals of *Turandot*, in an effort to formulate his creative credo, he [Vakhtangov] used two words: ‘fantastic realism’. Of course that definition, to a certain degree, is relative» (*ibidem*: 145). Simonov juggled with the two terms – fantasticality and the role of fantasy in the creative process. One must read between the lines of this book written under Soviet censorship with the use of Aesopian language. The two words fantastic realism, defining the essence of Vakhtangov’s stagecraft, needed to be rephrased for ideological reasons – the interpretation of the artistic imagination was a safe haven and, like Zakhava, Simonov methodically tried to bridge the gap between Vakhtangov and Stanislavsky’s system with its reliance on actors’ emotional memory and imagination.

Ironically, in her forward written after Simonov’s death, Goldina uses precisely the terms that the author tried to eliminate such as ‘fantastic’ and ‘mystic-poetic’. She recollects *Princess Turandot* as «a graceful production sparking with joy and laughter and composed of elements of the fantastic, the grotesque, and naturalism» while *The Dybbuk* was at once «mystic-poetic and nightmarish» (*ibidem*: vii). One wonders whether such clarifications, contradictory to Simonov’s narrative, were intentional: as an American, Goldina had the freedom to share her truth about the Teacher with the Western world.

While Vakhtangov’s disciples were forced to put varying levels of ideological makeup on their teacher’s personae and his artistic legacy, they were determined to save the theater of his name and his school of acting. His pupils worshiped his memory and his invisible spirit was present in their productions, acting, and teaching.

The next stage of mistranslation into English came with the volume *Evgeny Vakhtangov* published in the USSR in 1982 (Vendrovskaya, Kaptereva). Vakhtangov’s discourse on fantastic realism was translated in this text as ‘imaginative’ (Vendrovskaya, Kaptereva 1982: 151-158). This mistranslation reappears again and again in the leading English language scholarship on Vakhtangov. For example, in his influential 1989 *Modernism to Realism on the Soviet Stage: Tairov-Vakhtangov-Okhlopkov*, Nick Worrall used the

term ‘imaginative realism’ and cites Vakhtangov’s two conversations with students as: «The theater should not contain naturalism or realism, but it should have imaginative realism». In this way, Worrall cited verbatim from the Soviet 1982 English language edition and not from the Russian original of Vakhtangov’s transcript (Worrall 1989: 139)³.

Reconstructing Vakhtangov’s Legacy and Restoring the Meaning of the Term

In the 1990s, the Russian theater scholar Vladislav Ivanov began the process of desovietization of Vakhtangov and his legacy. In his *Habima Russian Seasons (Russkie sezony Gabima)* Ivanov writes:

In the course of many years, Vakhtangov was turned to Russia with his *Princess Turandot*. [...] While he entered world theater history mainly as a creator of *The Dybbuk*. These two images are so diverse, that it seems in time, that we are talking about two different artists (Ivanov 1999: 113).

In 2011, Ivanov and his colleagues at the State Institute of Art Studies in Moscow published *Evgenii Vakhtangov: Documents and Testimonies* (Evgenii Vakhtangov. Dokumenty i svidetelstva) in two volumes dedicated to Vakhtangov’s life and work (Ivanov 2011), and then another volume *Evgenii Vakhtangov in Theater Criticism (Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatralnoi kritike)* dedicated to the critical responses to Vakhtangov’s productions (Ivanov 2016). These three volumes enriched Vakhtangov scholarship with new data, some of which had never been published before. Ivanov clarifies that strict ideological censorship of the Soviet era publications removed from the texts everything «that could complicate the canonization of Vakhtangov as one of the founders of the Soviet theater» (Ivanov 2011: I, 14). Ivanov eliminates the layers of ideological makeup, reconstructing the notes, diaries, personal letters, memoirs and other documents without censorship, as they were originally written. The biography and the artistic credo of a great director are perceived through his own writing as well as his communications with his colleagues and friends. The brevity of his life and, at the same time, the swiftness of his artistic development are striking, since within just several years he was transformed from being a student of

Stanislavsky to being the teacher of the system, and then a theatrical Messiah. The method of fantastic realism with its transcendental theatricality is also fully rehabilitated through the kaleidoscopic materials illustrating the director's vivid interest in Eastern and Western mystical teaching, his plans to produce a play based on the Bible, and his hypnotic influence on his pupils.

In turn, Andrei Malaev-Babel made a valuable contribution to the English language scholarship with his 2011 *Vakhtangov Sourcebook* and 2013 *Yevgeny Vakhtangov: A Critical Portrait*. Malaev-Babel's well researched and detailed publications on Vakhtangov's creative career and biography are supplemented with the definition of various theatrical terms, and meticulously organized collections of documents, letters and reminiscences. Like Ivanov, Malaev-Babel contributes to the reconstruction of Vakhtangov's personae as a modernist director and a rebel of genius who aimed to revolutionize stagecraft. Nevertheless, Malaev-Babel employs the term *fantastic realism* rather freely, creating the impression that even in the earlier stages of his career Vakhtangov's directorial method was much more defined and articulated than it was in reality since, using Ivanov's words «the director did not leave theatrical manifestos and systematic teaching» (Ivanov 2011: I, 14). In his publication, Malaev-Babel's usage of such subtitles as 'Axioms of Fantastic Realism', 'Expressive Means of Fantastic Realism', 'Theatrical Models of Fantastic Realism' and so forth creates the misperception that fantastic realism was developed and systematic method of teaching and directing, rather than an artistic quest (Malaev-Babel 2011: 127-137). It was not accidental that in his 1922 eulogy to Vakhtangov, Meyerhold defined Vakhtangov's directorial style as 'preliminary action', suggesting that «He [Vakhtangov] prepared himself to start... and died» (Ivanov 2011: II, 60)⁴.

Fantastic Realism and the Mission of the Russian Knights Templar

It would seem that by the end of the second decade of the 21st century, one hundred years after Vakhtangov's two final masterpieces premiered in Civil War era Moscow, that his legacy and

the artistic path of his pupils would have been thoroughly studied, both in Russia and abroad. However, quite unexpectedly, while researching Vakhtangov's epistolary romance with his former student Vera Zavadsky (1895-1930), the author of this article found materials about the involvement of Vakhtangov's close associates in the secret society of the Russian Knights Templar. This revelation had a flavor of fantasticality since it appears that individuals in Vakhtangov's most intimate surroundings and several leading members of the MAT Third Studio were Knights Templar. This information opens up new perspectives for interpreting the term *fantastic realism*, as well as the accomplishments of Vakhtangov's disciples after his death with their worship of their teacher's name and their determination to save his legacy, even if it this meant adding layers of ideological makeup.

The Russian Templars' artistic search and social activity during the time of political upheaval in Russia in the early 20th Century had the highest civil, moral and spiritual goals and obligations not necessarily of a revolutionary or political nature. They viewed the theater stage as an arena for actors and directors to connect their audiences with a transcendental reality (Nikitin 2000: 108). The main goal of the Order was the spiritual rebirth of a person whose noble soul should resist any falsehood or evil (*ibidem*: 65). The Templars advocated apolitical art designed to serve humanity. Such goals were in harmony with Vakhtangov's artistic credo.

Who were the Russian Knights Templar, what was their artistic mission in post-revolutionary Russia, and why have their close ties with the post-revolutionary *bohemian milieu* been unknown to subsequent generations of Russian culture and theater scholars? The answer to some of these questions stems from the strict vow of secrecy that, upon initiation, obligated the Russian Knights Templar to conceal their identities even from their close family members⁵. The involvement of leading theater practitioners with this secret spiritual society was an important part of artistic creativity that, starting in the mid-1920s, posed a serious danger to one's career and life itself. During the mass arrests of the Russian Templars in 1930, the majority of the written materials were

destroyed either by the Templars themselves or by the secret police that confiscated them. Nikitin states:

The inner life of mystic society and orders, as a rule, remains a secret not only for their contemporaries, but also for subsequent generations, and if it accidentally breaks loose, it does it just enough to evoke conjectures and assumptions that only exacerbate the atmosphere of mystery (Nikitin 2000: 5).

The secret files and archival documents about the Russian Templars became available only in the late 1990s and early 2000s thanks to the groundbreaking research and publications of the Russian philologist, Andrei Nikitin (1935-2005). Nikitin's work opened the veil of secrecy, exposing the Templars' spiritual and moral resistance to the New Soviet World⁶. Thanks to his scholarly reputation and the fact that his father was a posthumously rehabilitated Knight Templar, Nikitin was able to access the archives of the OGPU-NKVD-NKGB. Nikitin notes that in many cases he was not allowed to get full access to the Templars' cases. As a rule, the materials confiscated during the arrests were not available to researchers⁷. The founder of the order of the Templars in Soviet Russia was Apollon Karelin (1863-1926), a prominent Russian anarchist who became a Templar while in exile in France, and after his return to Russia in 1917 started working to found an Eastern branch of the Order with its central Moscow organization called the 'Order of Light' (Nikitin 2000: 98). Karelin started to prepare a leading group of Knights Templar among the *bohemian* and university youth as early as 1919.

According to archival materials and reports, both Zavadsky (Prince Kalaf) and Simonov (Truffaldino), who were the leading actors in the *Princess Turandot* production and worked as Vakhtangov's close assistants during the rehearsals, were both Knights Templars. Furthermore, Zavadsky's sister Vera, who was the object of Vakhtangov's secret platonic fascination, was a Templar of high degree who was involved in recruiting and initiating new Knights. Other pupils, such as the actress and later leading acting professor in the Shchukin Theater Institute, Vera L'vova (1898-1985), the poet Pavel Antokolsky (1896-1978), and Vakhtangov's close friend and colleague, the actor and director Mikhail Chekhov

(1891-1955), just to name a few, were all active members of the Order⁸.

Mirroring the Knights Templar's view of the Russian Revolution of 1917, Vakhtangov and his pupils also viewed the revolution not as a political, but rather a mystical event. This notion already in retrospective was vividly illustrated by Zavadsky who, after being arrested in 1930 together with other Templars during the massive attack on members of the intelligentsia associated with the secret societies and spiritual organizations, provided testimony to the Soviet secret police (OGPU) about his personal views and artistic evolution.⁹ It is significant that, when answering the questions of investigators about the Templars' central organization The Order of Light, Zavadsky spoke about Vakhtangov as his spiritual teacher:

I can tell about my inner ideological evolution: I entered the revolution as an idealist – I was a student of Vakhtangov, Stanislavsky's student, and this period included the elements of pure idealism with a bias towards mysticism.

This is how I entered the revolution – as an idealist with a mystical bias...

(Nikitin 2003: II, 56)¹⁰.

During his next interrogation, Zavadsky again confirmed that his philosophical and spiritual world outlook was under Vakhtangov's strong influence: « [...] raised by my theater teacher, Vakhtangov more idealistically, I was interested in the various philosophical and mystical problems» (Nikitin 2003: II, 58)¹¹. Ironically, Zavadsky simultaneously denied his participation in the activity of the central organization of the Russian Templars – Order of Light - pretending that he was not aware of any such organization, and at the same time protects the Order by bravely stating that such an organization could only bring the highest moral and spiritual standards to the art world:

If they were nurtured by the same idealistic-mystical philosophy that we were talking about before, then most likely their goals were in raising the moral value of art and artist. The goals of purification of art from lies, selfishness, hypocrisy etc. – possible diversion into the field of spiritual perfection of a person and an artist (Nikitin 2003: II, 58)¹².

Zavadsky was released from prison due to the possible help of Stanislavsky and Avel Yenukidze

(1877-1937), the prominent Georgian Bolshevik and member of the Soviet Central Committee in Moscow (Nikitin 2000: 161). However, the arrests, persecution and exile of the Soviet artistic intelligentsia associated with the secret societies, and the accusations of counter-revolutionary activities sent a powerful message to those who for various reasons were not targeted. The fear of persecution and then the 1934 declaration of socialist realism as the only acceptable method for Soviet art required the gradual reinterpretation of the real meaning of Vakhtangov's fantastic realism.

The knightly code of honor with its high morality, as well as the very concept of knighthood with its rituals and symbols, were undoubtedly attractive to the young theater practitioners not only from a moral and spiritual but also theatrical point of view since it contains an element of role playing and performativity. Using Nikitin's words:

The knight appeared to be a person who voluntarily took upon himself the mission of serving good and light in the world, a symbol of honor, fortitude, courage, and strict fulfillment of duty: he turned out to be the most vivid and all-embracing ideal image, understandable to every young, somewhat [intellectually] developed and well-read person (Nikitin 2003: II, 24).

Vakhtangov was the Knight of Theater, but was the director himself a Knight Templar or, if not, was he aware of the activities of the Order of Light, its spiritual and moral doctrine and the fact that his leading pupils were Knights Templars who passionately believed in their mission to fight the evil of darkness and ignorance and to bring Light to the world through artistic creations? While his studios and then Vakhtangov's theater were frequently mentioned in the interrogations of the arrested Russian Templars, Vakhtangov's name *per se* was not mentioned. There is no doubt that many documents about the activities of the Templars were burned by the Templars themselves in early 1930 with the beginning of the mass arrests of members of the society. Nevertheless, an analysis of Vakhtangov's personal correspondence and some biographical information through the prism of the moral values, vows and spirituality of the Order, suggests that he was aware of the existence of the Order of Light and shared the artistic mission of its Knights.

The reevaluation of documents and biographical facts suggests that the director could have had some ties to the Order of Light. On a purely biographical level, Vakhtangov's preoccupation with immortality during the last years of his life would make the Order's main rule for membership--a belief in immortality and the eternal life of the human soul—very comforting.

One of the important documents for understanding Vakhtangov's artistic credo is his 1919 article «The artist will be asked...» that during the Soviet era was taken out from its original context of philosophical and spiritual quests and was presented as the ideological manifesto of a revolutionary director-innovator, calling on all honest artists to serve the people and the Revolution. Vakhtangov wrote: «If an artist wishes to create 'new [art]', to create after She – the Revolution – has come, he must create 'together' with the People. Not *for* them, nor *for their sake*, not *outside of* them, but *with* them» (Vakhtangov 1919: 270).

If we re-read this text, it becomes clear that it is brimming with romantic fascination with revolution as a concept of universal renewal. Vakhtangov views the metaphysical idea of merging the artist's soul with the soul of the people as the only righteous artistic path. It is no accident that the epigraph for the article is taken from the words of one of the spiritual leaders of Russian symbolism, Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866-1949), and that those words anticipate its transcendental meaning: «The artist will be asked, when the Guest arrives, why he has not filled his sanctuary lamps with chrism» (*ibidem*: 269).

Throughout the article, Vakhtangov seems to echo Ivanov's style and rhetoric. The mission of a true artist is to achieve a breakthrough into the world beyond and, in a state of creative ecstasy, become one with God and the World Soul - a concept that also echoes the Russian Templars' view on the mission of an artist. Vakhtangov writes:

If an artist is chosen to carry the spark of Immortality, he must fix his eyes of his soul on the People, as that which was created by the People - is immortal. The People are now creating new forms of life. Create through the Revolution, since they did not and do not have other means to shout to the world about Injustice. (*Ibidem*: 270)

Vakhtangov's preoccupation with immortality as it is reflected in his article "The Artist will be Asked" corresponds with the Templars' belief in the immortality of the human soul and individual responsibility for the destiny of the world.

Furthermore, Vakhtangov's letter to Vera Zavadsky written in June 4, 1919 is striking in its poetic beauty, but also by some knowledge that the two of them are now sharing an almost tangible faith in their meeting in the hereafter. As mentioned, Vera was a Knight Templar of High degree, who was initiating other Knights into the Order of Light. Vakhtangov, who was married and had a son, addresses Vera as «The only one and beautiful" who was "sent to earth to bring Light..." (Ivanov 2011: II, 294-296). Vakhtangov continues:

In my life You – are the only one.
You – were sent.
Mother, those who I loved, mother of my son, my son –
did not open for me at all the meaning of life, since I have
not experienced such pure and delightful excitement.

These lines are ambiguous, since they not only signal a declaration of love and devotion, but also suggest that Vera is a carrier of some sort of the highest level of spiritual enlightenment that brought new light to Vakhtangov's life.

Vakhtangov concludes his poetic and enigmatic letter with the lines:

And You – Light like Sun.
And You – Great like God.
And You - The only one like Life.
And you – Unavoidable like Death
Do not be sad.
Let us live out our days as long as we are destined to.
(*Ibidem*)

Finally, the fact that on his deathbed Vakhtangov was determined to rehearse and perform the role of Master Pierre in Nadezhda Bromlej's mystical play *Archangel Michael* also suggests ties with the Russian Templars' spirituality. According to Nikitin: "The cult of the Archangel Michael was especially widespread among the Templars..." (Nikitin 2003: I, 25).

Is it plausible to assume that fantastic realism was not only a theatrical method, but a certain spiritual agenda interconnected with the Order of Light – the organization of the Russian Knights Templars?

More research needs to be done to fully understand this phenomena of the spiritual underground and its impact on Vakhtangov's legacy and how his pupils-Templars carried on his testament in their Soviet surroundings. There are many reasons to believe that the secret activities of the Templars did not cease due to the political persecutions and that in one way or another they continued to carry out their mission as stage practitioners and educators.

As incredible as it sounds, the topic of Vakhtangov's disciples – Knight Templars resurfaced in 1962 during the KGB interrogation of Alexander Paul (1897-1965). Paul was a Knight Templar who was sent to the GULAG, but then became an informer who was allowed to teach Western literature in a leading Moscow theater institution and have a permanent position in the Shchukin Theater School associated with the Vakhtangov Academic Theater.

In response to an interrogator's question: «Which Knights Templar, members of the Order of Light do you know, who would be members of the Order of Light and currently reside in Moscow?» Paul replied:

I already showed that the organization of the knightly Order of Light was secret and therefore not all members knew each other... I can name Zavadsky, head of the Moscow Mossovet Theater... < > and Simonov, Ruben Nikolaevich, People's Artist of the USSR, Head of E. Vakhtangov Theater (Nikitin 2003: II, 189)

The timeframe of this interrogation and Paul's statement about Vakhtangov's two favorite pupils' knightly status even in 1962 suggests that it would be valuable to re-evaluate their artistic biographies through the prism of their dedication to both the credo of their teacher and to their knightly ideals, removing the layers of ideological makeup. While there is an obvious flavor of fantasticality in the recent findings, the interrogations and documentation from the secret archives are real and call for thorough scholarly attention and evaluation. The rich and understudied topic of the Knights Templar in Vakhtangov's close surroundings can shed new light on fantastic realism and should be evaluated since Vakhtangov's pupils remained active as knights of stagecraft until the ends of their lives, teaching, directing, acting and nurturing generations of students and spectators.

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Notes

1 All translations from Russian are by the author, unless otherwise notified.

2 Transcendental theatricality is a term suggested by the author, O. Partan.

3 In his endnotes Worrall clarifies that the term fantastic was 'amended' by the Soviet translations as imaginative and prefers to use this translation anyway (Worrall, 1989: 213).

4 Following a well-established trend in the English language scholarship on Vakhtangov, in her 2013 *Stanislavski: The Basics*, Rose Whyman once again uses the term *imaginative realism* instead of fantastic. In the chapter dedicated to Stanislavsky's influence and legacy in Russia, Wyman writes: «Building on the *system*, Vakhtangov developed the concept of *imaginative realism*, and Michael Chekhov went a step further in emphasizing the importance of the actor's imagination, as opposed to Stanislavski's emotional truth» (Wyman 2013: 138).

Encyclopedia Britannica online defines Vakhtangov's method as 'fantastic realism' <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Yevgeny-Bagratiyevich-Vakhtangov> (last accessed on 01/08/2020).

5 Being a granddaughter of Ruben Simonov I did not know that my grandfather was the Knight Templar. In my recent interview with Prof. Anna Brusser of Shchukin Theater Institute, a granddaughter of Vakhtangov's pupil Vera Lvova who also was a Knight Templar, I learned that her grandmother had never talked about this organiza-

tion to her family members.

6 Nikitin's father—the theater designer Leonid Nikitin (1896-1942)—was a Knights Templar of a high degree who was arrested and sent into exile twice, first in 1930 and then in 1940, where he died in a GULAG infirmary in 1942, during WWII. Thanks to Nikitin-the-son's scholarly reputation and the fact that his father was posthumously rehabilitated, the scholar was able to access the archives of the OGPU-NKVD-NKGB. On numerous occasions, Nikitin admits that he was not allowed to get full access to the Templars' case files. As a rule, the materials confiscated during the arrests were not available to researchers.

8 While the findings on the Knights Templar have not previously been studied in conjunction with Vakhtangov's close circle, it is generally known that Vakhtangov's close friends and colleagues such as Nadezhda Bromlei (1884-1966) and Michael Chekhov were both anthroposophists, influenced by Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical mysticism, and believed in the existence of an intellectually comprehensible spiritual reality. Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925) was an Austrian philosopher, architect and anthroposophist and the head of an anthroposophical esoteric spiritual movement.

9 OGPU – was the Soviet Union secret police from 1924-1934. It was previously known as the Cheka and was later renamed as the NKVD.

10 Zavadsky's interrogation on 14/09/1930.

11 Zavadsky's interrogation on 25/09/1930.

12 Zavadsky's interrogation on 01/10/1930.