

André Sanfaçon
Université Laval

E. Anthony Swift — *Popular Theater and Society in Tsarist Russia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. Pp. xiv, 346.

The late imperial period in Russia witnessed a veritable explosion of “people’s theatres”, created with the special purpose of entertaining and edifying the lower classes. In this study, E. Anthony Swift traces the origins and significance of the popular theatre movement in the “two capitals” of St. Petersburg and Moscow from the early 1860s, when the idea of using theatre as a means of public enlightenment first attracted widespread attention, to the unprecedented, albeit temporary, freedom of 1917. Whether sponsored by members of the intelligentsia, factory owners, or the Ministry of Finance, these experiments literally provided a stage, argues Swift, for the crucial contest over cultural power that animated *fin-de-siècle* Russia.

Theatre in Russia had served as a political tool from the time of Peter the Great’s westernization drive of the early eighteenth century. Both Peter I and Catherine II sought to reach the common people through drama; although neither was particularly successful, these early efforts set a precedent for later experiments. For most of the nineteenth century, the network of official state theatres dominated theatrical life in the Empire. Indeed, the imperial theatres preserved a monopoly on the public performance of plays until 1882. These were socially exclusive public spaces, catering to the educated elites. The lower classes of the cities flocked, instead, to the temporary carnival theatres (*balagany*) that popped up during Shrovetide or Easter week. Here they enjoyed pantomimes (performances in Russian were forbidden), puppet shows, magic, and various other types of entertainment.

Long before the end of the imperial theatre monopoly in 1882, a variety of constituencies in Russian educated society were challenging state restrictions on public performances and calling for some sort of popular theatre to bridge this gap between elite and popular entertainment and to transform lower-class taste and values. After all, the liberation of the serfs in 1861 had urgently raised the problem of the education and cultural integration of the common people. Moreover, in the following decades, Russia experienced continuous and rapid urbanization, which generated social disorder and fears about a decline in popular morality. For all of these challenges, theatre seemed the perfect civilizing solution.

Swift presents the struggle against the imperial theatre monopoly as an indication of educated society flexing its muscles against the autocracy and of the emergence of a public sphere in late imperial Russia. For many theatre activists, the stage offered an arena for Aesopian political discussion as well as public enlightenment; indeed, Swift quotes a theatre critic who in 1899 compared the Russian stage to the parliaments of western European countries. As a result, certain groups within the government feared that the lower classes might become infected with the ideas of the intelligentsia if special theatres were opened for them. However, other representatives of the autocracy

looked favourably on popular theatres as agents of civilization and social control. Thus debates about the people's theatre were also debates about the *narod* (common people): Who were the people? Should theatre strive primarily to educate or to entertain? To dumb down or to raise up? As Swift argues, this discussion demonstrates how the intelligentsia and the state shared common assumptions about the link between art and politics, about the perniciousness of commercial entertainment, and about the common people's alleged susceptibility to visual impressions.

Swift charts the development of popular theatres from the much-debated and short-lived first major experiment at the 1872 Moscow Polytechnic Exposition to the competing efforts of factory owners, commercial enterprises, and philanthropists from educated society after the end of the monopoly in the 1880s. Throughout the study, he emphasizes the production process and political contests about public space and repertoire rather than the actual content of performances. Drawing on extensive research in archives and the press of the day, Swift richly evokes the atmosphere of the theatre world in late imperial Russia, the ambitions and aspirations, the personal tensions and the political conflicts.

A particularly valuable aspect of Swift's approach is his understanding of the theatre's function as a cultural crossroads, rather than a conveyor belt of elite values. Using reader response theory, which emphasizes the role of audiences in producing meaning, Swift devotes considerable attention to audience reception. His analysis of audience surveys conducted by theatre sponsors and the observations of various contemporaries suggests that working-class theatre-goers brought their own expectations to a performance, which shaped their understanding of the work in ways often quite different from those of more educated audiences. Although the goal of popular theatre was to transform audiences, the surveys thus suggest that this was not a simple process. They also indicate that one cannot easily link tastes in drama to political views: radical, "conscious" workers seem to have shared their less politicized neighbours' love for melodramas, even though these were decried by socialist leaders as a strategy to mute class consciousness. Swift is not entirely successful in his claim to emphasize this process of consumption over the content of the texts involved, but this section certainly constitutes one of the most interesting parts of the book.

As Swift points out, virtually no one was actually willing to leave popular theatre to the people. He offers a fascinating discussion of what happened to the expectations of elite cultural enlighteners when the "people" themselves began to organize theatre groups in the early twentieth century. Workers' theatres emphasized participation, respectability, self-education — and the classical nineteenth-century canon of socially critical, realistic art. Whereas their intelligentsia mentors may have envisioned the workers' theatres as sites for providing access to middle-class culture and bridging class divides, workers involved in drama circles tended to emphasize their social and ideological functions as class institutions. At the same time, working-class actors would resist the efforts of Social Democratic intellectuals to insist that workers should create an entirely new "proletarian culture" rather than appropriate the culture of the intelligentsia for their own purposes.

This book engages crucial themes in the cultural history of late imperial Russia:

the meeting of elite and popular cultures, the development of consumer culture, the relationship between official and educated Russia, the dilemmas of the intelligentsia's civilizing mission, and the social challenges presented by industrialization and urbanization. It opens a window onto the vivid urban popular culture of the day. Although Swift explicitly restricts his scope to Moscow and St. Petersburg, it would have been interesting to examine the impact of this movement beyond the capitals. One would also like to know more about the factory theatres that seem to have been so successful. Swift could have developed further his interesting argument about popular theatres as democratic spaces. At times, also, the organization of the narrative seems choppy or confusing. For example, Swift describes the results of audience surveys before telling the reader how these surveys were carried out. Despite these quibbles, he has produced a stimulating study of the world of popular theatre and the political debates it animated. It can be read profitably alongside Gary Thurston's *The Popular Theatre Movement in Russia*, which places more emphasis on the repertoire of these people's theatres.

Heather J. Coleman
University of Calgary

Michael Szonyi — *Practicing Kinship: Lineage and Descent in Late Imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. Pp. xii, 313.

This study of common-descent group organization on an island in the Min River, near Fuzhou city on the South China coast, over the Ming and Qing periods (1368–1911) is, simply put, one of the most impressive works of Chinese history I have read in several years. It is brilliantly researched, most importantly in the published and unpublished written genealogies of the descent groups themselves, but supplemented with careful fieldwork: reading of local stone inscriptions, oral interviews, and observation of sites and recently revived ritual performances. The book is steeped in currently fashionable cultural theory and uses its language routinely, but never to the distraction of its narrative. Most impressively of all, Michael Szonyi's work displays an analytical rigour and a precision of argumentation that makes it a model of historical scholarship.

Formation of locally rooted kinship groups based on patrilineal descent — known in English as “lineages” or (less favoured nowadays) “clans” — was the single most pervasive tool of social organization in late imperial China, and its steady increase in popularity and importance was probably the most basic trend distinguishing the social history of this era. It was ideologically unassailable and, as Timothy Brook and Kai-wing Chow have shown, conveyed upon lineage members a mantle of neo-Confucian moral correctness and cultural superiority. Yet, in practice, the purpose of lineage organization was pragmatic and situational; the burden of a growing amount of recent research to which this book contributes is to show the surprising and remarkable range of utilities to which kinship-group formation might be put. As Szonyi very effectively demonstrates, however, this instrumentalism by no means