

# CABARET

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Cabaret came late to Russia, but once the French, German, and Swiss culture spread eastward in the first decade of the twentieth century, a uniquely Russian form took root, later influencing European cabarets. While Russian theater is internationally renowned -- as just the names Chekhov and Stanislavsky confirm -- the theatrical presentations in cabarets are less so, despite the brilliance of the poets and performers involved.

The French word "cabaret" originally meant two things: a plebeian pub or wine-house, and a type of tray that held a variety of different foods or drinks. By its generic meaning a cabaret is an intimate night spot where audiences enjoy alcoholic drinks while listening to singers and stand up comics. While sophisticates quibble over precise definitions, most will agree on the cabaret's essential elements. A cabaret is performed usually in a small room where the audience sits around small tables, and where stars and tyros alike face no restrictions on the type of music or genre or combinations thereof, can experiment with *avant-garde* material never before performed, and can "personally" interact with the audience. The cabaret removes the "fourth wall" between artist and audience, thus heightening the synergy between the two. Rodolphe Salis – a failed artist turned tavern keeper –

established the first *cabaret artistique* called *Le Chat Noir* (“The Black Cat”) in Paris, where writers, artists, and composers could entertain each other with their latest poems and songs in a Montmartre pub.

Cabarets soon mushroomed across Europe, its Swiss and Austrian varieties influencing Russian artists directly. Russian emigrés performed, for example, in balalaika bands at the Café Voltaire, founded by Hugo Ball in 1916 in Zürich, Switzerland. The influence of Vienna-based cabarets like *Die Fledermaus* (“the bat”) is reflected in the name of the first Russia cabaret: “Bat.”

This tiny theater was opened on February 29, 1908 by Nikita Baliev, an actor with the Moscow Art Theater (MKhAT) in tune with the prevailing mood in Russia. In the years following the revolution of 1905, Russian intellectual life shifted from the insulated world of the *salon* to the zesty world of the cabaret, the *balagan* (show), and the circus. New political and social concerns compelled the theater to bring art to the masses. Operating perhaps as the *alter ego* – or, in Freudian terms, the *id* - of MkhAT, the “Bat” served as a night spot for actors to unwind after performances, mocking the seriousness of Stanislavsky's method. This cabaret originated from the traditional “cabbage parties” (*kapustniki*) preceding Lent (which in imperial Russia involved a period of forced abstinence both from theatrical diversion as well as voluntary abstinence from meat). Housed in a cellar near Red Square, the “Bat” had by 1915 become the focal point of Moscow night life and remained so until its closure in 1919.

While the format of the Russian cabaret -- a confined stage in a small restaurant providing amusement through variety sequences -- owed much to Western models,

the uniqueness of the shows can be attributed to the individuality of Nikita Baliev and indigenous Russian folk culture. In one show entitled *Life's Metamorphoses*, Baliev installed red lamps under the tables that blinked in time with the music. In another show, he asked everyone to sing "Akh, akh, ekh, im!" -- to impersonate someone sneezing. As Teffi (pseudonym of Nadezhda Buchinskaia), a composer for the "Bat" recalled "Everything was the invention of one man --Nikita Baliev. He asserted his individuality so totally that assistants would only hinder him. He was a real sorcerer."

The Russian cabaret also flourished due to its links with the conventions of the indigenous folk theater - the *balagan*, the *skomorokhi* (traveling buffoons), and the *narodnoe gulianie* (popular promenading). It incorporated the folk theater's elements – clowning, quick repartee, the *pliaska* (Russian dance), and brisk sequence of numbers. Baliev employed key writers and producers, including Andreev, Bely, Briusov, Gorodetsky, (Alexei) Tolstoi, Luzhskii, Meyerhold, Moskvina, Sadovskoi, and Shchepkina-Kupernik. Famous artists performed at the "Bat," including Chaliapin, Sobinov, and Stanislavsky. In 1916-1918 Kasian Goleizovsky, the great Constructivist balletmaster of the 1920s, directed performances.

Like most visionaries ahead of their time in the Soviet Union, however, Baliev was arrested. When released in 1919 after five days of confinement, he fled to Paris with the renamed *Chauve-Souris* ("bat" in French) which toured Europe and the United States extensively. In 1922 the Baliev Company moved to New York, where Baliev entertained enthusiastic audiences until his death in 1936. Baliev and the

“Bat” inspired many imitations, most notably the “Blue Bird” (*Der Blaue Vogel*), founded in Berlin by the actor Yasha Yuzhnyi in 1920.

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