

Title: Casting and Crashing the Two Bits: Theatricality in Olesha's *Envy*

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"The world of Olesha is the world of sport and the circus." (quoted in Peppard, 15)

This observation by Victor Shklovskii has been fleshed out by considerable scholarship on that aspect of Yurii Olesha's poetics (Peppard). Considering that the contemporary theater trends included many experiments at incorporating sports and circus into drama, this paper suggests that those features are just members of a set of prominent theatrical elements in the work of Olesha (who eventually became a dramatist and friend to Meyerhold).

Olesha's best regarded work, *Envy* (1927), is a novel that is structured around performance, spectatorship, and perception. Readers often note that the switch from the first to third person in the second part of the work changes our overall impression of the characters and creates many of the well-known ambiguities of the novel. Performance also provides much of the thematic content of the novel, from speeches at the Two Bits sausage factory to soccer virtuosity to the imagined "parade of emotions." This paper presents an analysis of the theatrical elements of *Envy* in the context of contemporary theater innovations of Meyerhold in the 1920s. The analysis finds in Olesha's text commentary on such emblematic Meyerholdian practices as the "Biomechanics" method of actor training and Constructivist set design. Interpreting the findings, first, in the context of the shift from Symbolist to Futurist theory in Meyerhold's theater and, second, in conjunction with the behavior and fate of the main characters, the paper ultimately suggests one solution to the central mystery of the novel: What is Ophelia, Ivan Babichev's mysterious "machine" named for the tragic Shakespearean heroine?

#### Bibliography

Peppard, Victor. *The Poetics of Yury Olesha*. Gainesville: U. of Florida, 1998.