**Foregger, Nikolai Mikhailovich (b. 6 April 6, 1892, Kiev, Ukraine; d. 8 June, 8, 1939, Moscow, USSR)**

**Summary**

A Soviet artist, critic, designer, choreographer and theatre director, Nikolai Mikhailovich Foregger graduated from Law School at Kiev University, with a specialisation in medieval French theatre. In the early 1910s, he came under the influence of Alexandra Exter and members of the Futurist movement. In the 1920s, his ‘Studio Foregger’ (Mastfor) concentrated on working with the actor’s body, elaborating a system of ‘small forms’ or one-act theatre pieces, which borrowed new movement techniques from circus, street and factory in an attempt to ‘desanctify’ traditional theatre. Foregger reclaimed historical forms from the popular theatre such as the commedia dell’arte and the itinerant theatre, combining them with contemporary ‘low’ forms such as cabaret, music-hall, and variety theatre and enhancing them with parodies of representatives of the new Soviet society – NEPmen, loquacious intellectuals and even Party bureaucrats. The resulting performances were popular, sophisticated, and successful. Within the Soviet theatrical avant-garde, Foregger is also remembered for his ‘eccentric’ or ‘mechanical’ dances, which required a specific kind of physical training.

**Life and Work**

In 1916 Foregger collaborated with Alexander Tairov’s Moscow Chamber Theatre as an assistant stage designer before embarking upon his own productions for St. Petersburg’s Crooked Mirror cabaret. In 1918 he organised his own cabaret called the Theatre of the Four Masks in his Moscow apartment, staging antique French farces and prompting actors to concentrate on mimicry rather than on psychological techniques. In 1919, along with other theatre people such as Boris Erdman and Kas’ian Goleizovsky, Foregger joined the Circus Department of Narkompros (People’s Commissariat for Enlightenment), guided by the maxim that the ‘theatre and the circus are Siamese twins’. In 1920 he organised his own studio, Mastfor, giving performances which integrated pantomime, eccentric dance and acrobatics with success. Two years later, the studio moved into government-subsidised premises in the Arbat quarter of downtown Moscow. In the 1920s, Mastfor made several tours of Leningrad (as St. Petersburg became in 1924).

Foregger explored two apparently contradictory paths. One involved almost infantile improvisation, with children’s jokes, clowning, and other foolery, evident in his drawings and costume designs, which recalled popular Russian prints known as *lubki*. The other path involved imitating or mimicking the Taylorist movements of the Central Institute of Labour (TsIT). This was especially the case of Foregger’s eccentric or machine dances, which demanded rigorous physical training of the actor and dancer. Accordingly, Foregger developed a system of theatrical-physical training, in which bio-mechanics, acrobatics and strenuous physical and psycho-physiological practices were used to create a new and completely versatile actor/dancer.

Mastfor attracted the era’s leading avant-garde talents. The playwright Vladimir Mass contributed experimental dramatic texts; the future film director Sergei Eisenstein radical sets and costumes; and Boris Ber and Matvei Blantner, avant-garde music. Foregger’s production of the melodrama *Child Abductor* (1922) had geometric drawings by Eisenstein and used stroboscopic lamps to create the impression of a silent movie. Other celebrated productions were Vladimir Mayakovsky’s *Good Attitude towards Horses* (1921) and Charles Lecocq’s operetta *Secret of the Canary Islands* (based on *La Princesse des Canaries*) (1923).

In 1922, Foregger presented his *Machine Dances* and *Mechanical Dances* to demonstrate, as he wrote, the ‘ideal organisation of movements of someone from the New Era’. The *Machine Dances* were intended to mimic the individual parts of a machine – the movement of its gears, conveyer belts and wheels. By contrast, the *Mechanical Dances* sought to reproduce the precision of mechanised movements performed to a metronome.

In 1924, the Mastfor premises burned down, and the troupe was forced to disband. However, between 1925 and 1933, Foregger worked with the Blue Blouse agitational groups, supporting the democratic idea that the mass spectator should also be involved in the stage action. But with the growing hostility of the Soviet regime towards critical, satirical and parodic theatre, Foregger was compelled to return to more traditional stage forms. Thus, apart from his collaboration on a 1926 production of Sergei Prokofiev’s *Love for the Three Oranges*, he spent the last fifteen years of his life working in the opera and ballet theatres of Kharkov, Kiev, Kuibishev and other regional cities. Foregger died from tuberculosis in Moscow in 1939.

**Selected List of Works**

*Good Attitude towards Horses* (1921)

*Child Abductor* (1922)

*Secret of the Canary Islands* (1923)

**References and Further Reading**

Sherbakov ,V. (1996) (ed.) ‘Teatral’nye manifesty Nikolaia Foreggera’ [‘Theatre manifestos of Nikolai Foregger], (1996), *Mnemozina. Dokumenty i fakty russkogo teatra XX veka* [*Mnemozina. Documents and Facts of the Twentieth-Century Russian Theatre*] 1: 45-79. (Foregger’s major theatrical manifestos plus commentary)

Chepalov, А. (2001) *Sud’ba peresmeshnika ili Novye stranstviia Frakassa* [*The Destiny of a Banterer or New Peregrinations of Fracassa*], Kharkov: AVEK. (A fundamental essay on Foregger’s life and art)

Sirotkina, I. (2011) ‘Tantsy mashin’ [‘Machine Dances’] in Sirotkina I. (ed.) *Svobodnoe dvizhenie i plasticheskii tanets v Rossii* [Free Movement and Plastic Dance in Russia], Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie: 102-14. (An analysis of Foregger’s machine dances)

**Paratextual Material**

Please see the images that have been included as separate files.

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