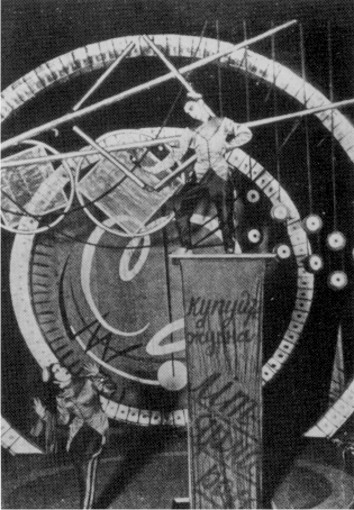
**Berezil' Theatre (БЕРЕЗІЛЬ)**

Innovative theatre company founded by director and actor Oleksandr "Les'" KURBAS in 1922. Active for just over a decade, the Berezil shaped the theatrical landscape of Soviet Ukraine and theatre in Ukrainian. Kurbas organized the *Mystets'ke obiednannia Berezil'* (Artistic Organization Berezil') in 1922 in Kyiv on the basis of two previous companies. Patronized by the Red Army, as well as by local Party and state institutions, the Berezil expanded to include not only a theatre company, but also several affiliate studios, a museum, director's lab, studio school and theatre journal. The Party-state acknowledged this success and moved the company to Kharkiv, Soviet Ukraine's capital, in 1926. The theatre produced a wide variety of works, from expressionist propaganda pieces like Georg Kaiser's *Haz* (Gas, 1922), to Ukrainian translations of world classics like Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1924), to new Soviet classics, like Mykola KULISH's *Narodnyi Malakhii* (The People's Malakhii, 1927). The Berezil' became known for its close collaboration with Soviet Ukrainian playwright Mykola Kulish, and it was after Kulish's last play, 1933's *Maklena Grasa*, that the Commissariat of Enlightenment sent Kurbas into exile and changed the theatre's name to the *Teatr imeni T.H. Shevchenka* (The Taras Shevchenko Theatre).



The Berezil' was the most innovative theatre company in Soviet Ukraine and one of the most innovative in the Soviet Union. Although active for only eleven years, the Berezil', founded by director and actor Oleksandr "Les'" Kurbas, transformed the Soviet theatrical landscape. The Berezil' emerged from two earlier companies: the *Molodyi teatr* (Young Theatre, 1917-1919), an experimental troupe in Kyiv, and the *Kyidramte* (Kyiv Dramatic Theatre, 1920-1921), a Civil-War era itinerant troupe that garnered Red Army patronage. Kurbas returned to Kyiv in 1922 and founded the *Mystets'ke ob'ednannia Berezil'* (Artistic Organization Berezil'). The company grew to include over 300 artistic and technical personnel, five workshops (including outposts in Boryspil' and Bila Tserkva), a directors' laboratory, a museum, and a periodical, *Barykady teatru* (Theatrical Barricades). In 1926 the Soviet Ukrainian Party-state moved the Berezil' to Kharkiv and granted them republic-level funding. After a series of scandalous productions, the Commissariat of Enlightenment removed Kurbas from the position of artistic director in 1933 (he was soon arrested) and changed the name of the theatre to the Taras Shevchenko Theatre in 1934.

The Berezil' is inseparable from its artistic director, Les Kurbas. He not only directed productions, but also mentored an entire generation of theatre artists through his work with the directors' laboratory and his rehearsal techniques for actors. One of Kurbas' most powerful techniques was *peretvorennia*, transformation, where actors discovered a physical gesture that represented the internal psychological states of their characters. While similar to Michael Chekhov's "psychological gesture," MEYERHOLD's biomechanics, or Brecht's *gestus*, Kurbas' methods emerged from his own synthesis of theatrical experiences from the German and Polish-language theaters in pre-war Vienna and Lemberg (i.e., today's Lviv), and interwar Berlin.

The Berezil' offered various styles of plays, but all were designed to challenge the spectator with experimental physicality, sets, and new techniques, such as using film media onstage. Georg Kaiser's *Gas* was the troupe's first success in 1923, followed shortly by Upton Sinclair's *Jimmie Higgins*, which included a film component not previously seen on the Soviet stage. Kurbas focused on Ukrainian translations of world classics, including Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1924), Friedrich Schiller's *Die Verschwörung des Fiesco zu Genua* (Fiesco: or the Genoese Conspiracy; Ukr. Zmova Fiesko v Henui) and Fernand Crommelynck's *Les Tripes d'Or* (Gold in the Guts; Ukr., Zolote cherevo). The Berezil also embraced mass culture with the variety shows *Allo na khvyli 477* (Hello from Radio 477, 1929) and *Chotyry Chemberleny* (Four Chamberlains, 1932). The Berezil collaborated with playwright Mykola Kulish, who wrote his best plays for the company, including *Narodnyi Malakhii* (The People's Malakhii), *Myna Mazailo*, *Patetychna Sonata* (Sonata Pathétique), and *Maklena Grasa*. It was the *Maklena* production that led to Kurbas’ removal by the Commissariat of Enlightenment in 1934.

Many of the most famous cultural figures in Soviet Ukraine emerged from the Berezil' including Soviet actors Amvrosii Buchma, Natalia Uzhvii, and Marian Krushel'nyts'kyi, directors Vasyl' Vasyl'ko and Borys Tiahno, and designers Anatol' Petryts'kyi and Vadym Meller.

**References and Further Reading**

Cherkashyn, Roman and Iuliia Fomina. *My—Berezil'tsi*. Memoirs of the actors who preserved much of Kurbas' memory.

Ermakova, Natalia. *Berezil’s’ka kul’tura: Istoriia, dosvid*. Kyiv: Feniks, 2012. The culmination of a lifetime of work on the theatre company with extensive references.

Hirniak, Iosyp. *Spomyny*. New York: Smoloskyp, 1982. Foundational memoir by former Berezil member and postwar émigré, Iosyp Hirniak.

Labin's'kyi, Mykola. *Les' Kurbas: Filosofiia teatru*. Kyiv: Osnova, 2001. Most updated compilation of documents, letters, and directors' laboratory notes.

Makaryk, Irene Rima. *The Undiscovered Bourn: Les Kurbas, Ukrainian Modernism, and Early Soviet Cultural Politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. The best synthesis of Kurbas' work with the Berezil'.

Irene Rima Makaryk and Virlana Tkacz, eds. *Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Experimentation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. Collection of articles, many focused on Kurbas and the Berezil', on the modernist period in Kyiv.

Vasyl'ko, Vasyl'. *Les' Kurbas: Spohady suchasnikiv*. Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 1969. The first compilation of memoirs about Kurbas, and by extension, the Berezil'.

url for photo of the Berezil' production of *Hello from Radio 477*:

<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CB%5CE%5CBerezil.htm>

**Mayhill C. Fowler, Stetson University**