



Boris Kustodiev (Russian, 1878–1927)  
Poster: Evgenii Zamiatin's *Blokha* (The Flea), Second  
Moscow Art Theater, Moscow (February 11, 1925), 1925  
Lithograph  
27 7/8 x 42 1/4" (70.8 x 107.3 cm)  
Merrill C. Berman Collection

Evgenii Zamiatin's *Blokha* (The Flea) was a farce in four acts based on the 1881 tale *Levsha: Skaz o Tul'skom kosom levshе i o stal'noi blokhe* (The Left-Hander. The Tale of Cross-eyed Lefty from Tula and the Steel Flea) by Nikolai Leskov. It was produced by Aleksei Dikii and directed by Vladimir Gotovtsev at the Moscow Art Theater-2 (MKhAT-2), Moscow, on February 11, 1925, with music by Viktor Oransky and sets, costumes, and stage designs by Boris Kustodiev.

Kustodiev had come to prominence for his genre paintings depicting the inhabitants and life of provincial Russian towns. Typical subjects were peasant fairs, festivals, taverns, and merchants' wives. He exhibited his work with the St. Petersburg *Mir iskusstva* (World of Art) group and the Moscow *Soiuz russkikh khudozhnikov* (Union of Russian Artists).

The artist started working in the theater in 1911. His sets and costumes for the production of *The Flea* at the Moscow Art Theater made this event the hit of the Moscow theater season of 1925. Much influenced by peasant art, Kustodiev employed the style of *lubok* (popular print) for these designs. In accordance with Zamiatin's comic strategies, Kustodiev employed exaggeration, transforming the usual forms of objects and emphasizing the grotesqueness of the action by distorting regular proportions of the figures. Kustodiev worked closely with Zamiatin, who corrected and revised some of the artist's designs.

Dikii's production stood in contrast to contemporaneous avant-garde experiments in the Soviet theater that were being promoted by the theater directors Vsevolod Meyerhold and Alexander Tairov. Anatoly Lunacharsky, People's Commissar of Education, even stated that this production "had triumphed over Constructivism." Nonetheless, Konstantin Stanislavsky, a co-founder of Moscow Art Theater and a promoter of Realism on stage, found Dikii's production too experimental. Stanislavsky exited the performance noting that from this moment on his "path with the MKhAT-2 diverge."

The following year, in 1926, Kustodiev designed another poster for the Leningrad production of *The Flea* by the Bolshoi Drama Theater.