



Vladimir Stenberg (Russian, 1899–1982) and Georgii Stenberg (Russian, 1900–1933)
Poster: Performances of the Moscow Kamerny Theater, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées,
Paris (March 6–23, 1923), 1923

Lithograph
31 7/8 x 21 7/8" (81 x 55.6 cm)
Merrill C. Berman Collection

The prominent Russian avant-garde artists (and brothers) Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg produced a large body of work, initially achieving fame as Constructivist sculptors and later working as theatrical designers and architects. The brothers' foremost theatrical designs were commissioned by the Moscow Kamerny (Chamber) Theater, founded in 1914 by Alexander Tairov, the first theater director to embrace Cubo-Futurism. Tairov's vision of a "kinetic and architectonic, rather than a literary or illustrative theatrical experience" was well-suited to the Stenberg philosophy. The Kamerny Theater did not explore the everyday or psychological side of individual characters. Instead, Tairov attached great significance to acting technique, and he considered movement a central component of the overall stage design.

What made the Kamerny Theater especially unusual for Soviet audiences was the breadth and sophistication of its dramatic repertory, which featured the work of Asian as well as European playwrights. Fascinated by American theater, Tairov also mounted productions based on American novels and plays.

Touring with Tairov's theater in 1923, the Stenberg brothers visited Paris, where they exhibited their work and met Pablo Picasso. While in Paris, the Kamerny Theater performed five plays from its repertoire, all listed on this poster: Racine's *Phèdre*; Scribe's *Adrienne Lecouvreur*; Wilde's *Salomé*; Hoffmann's *Princesse Brambille*; and Lecocq's *Girofié-Girofla*.

Tairov's contemporary interpretation of Racine's seventeenth century dramatic tragedy, in particular, caused strong criticism in the French press. According to some French critics, such performances were "an attempt by the Bolsheviks to destroy the French theater." Many members of the French avant-garde, however, welcomed the Kamerny Theater for its innovations against conservative stage conventions. Jean Cocteau, for example, wrote a laudatory article published on the front page of the *Nouvelles littéraires* on March 17, 1923, in which he called Tairov's staging of *Phèdre* "a masterpiece." Cocteau asked his like-minded friends to sign the manifesto "Pour le théâtre Kamerny," in defense of the Tairov's theater. Among the twenty-one signatories of this manifesto, published in *Comoedia* on March 23, 1923, were such leading French avant-garde figures as the composer Francis Poulenc; the poet and playwright Tristan Tzara; and the artists Robert Delaunay, Fernand Léger, and Pablo Picasso.