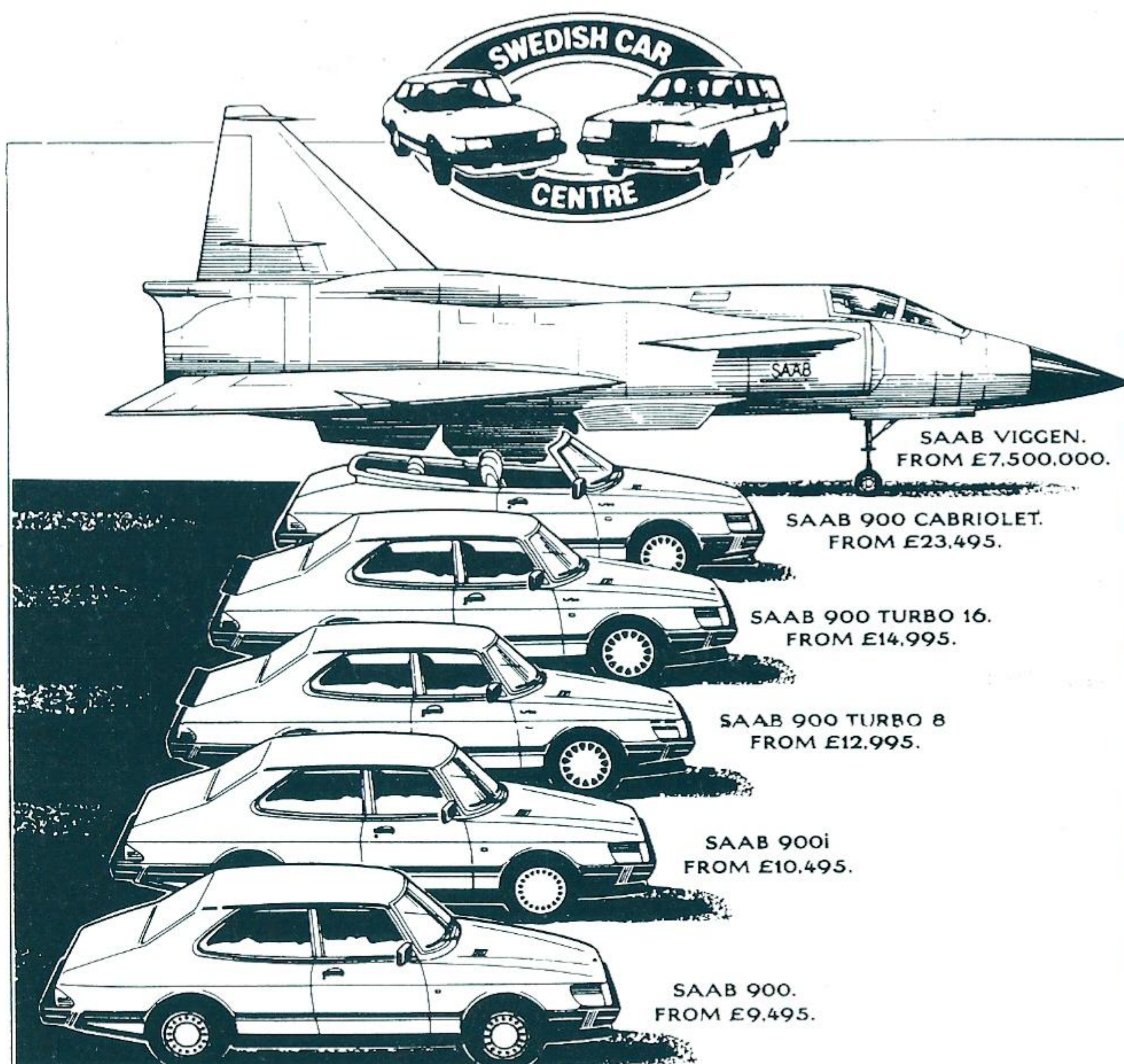


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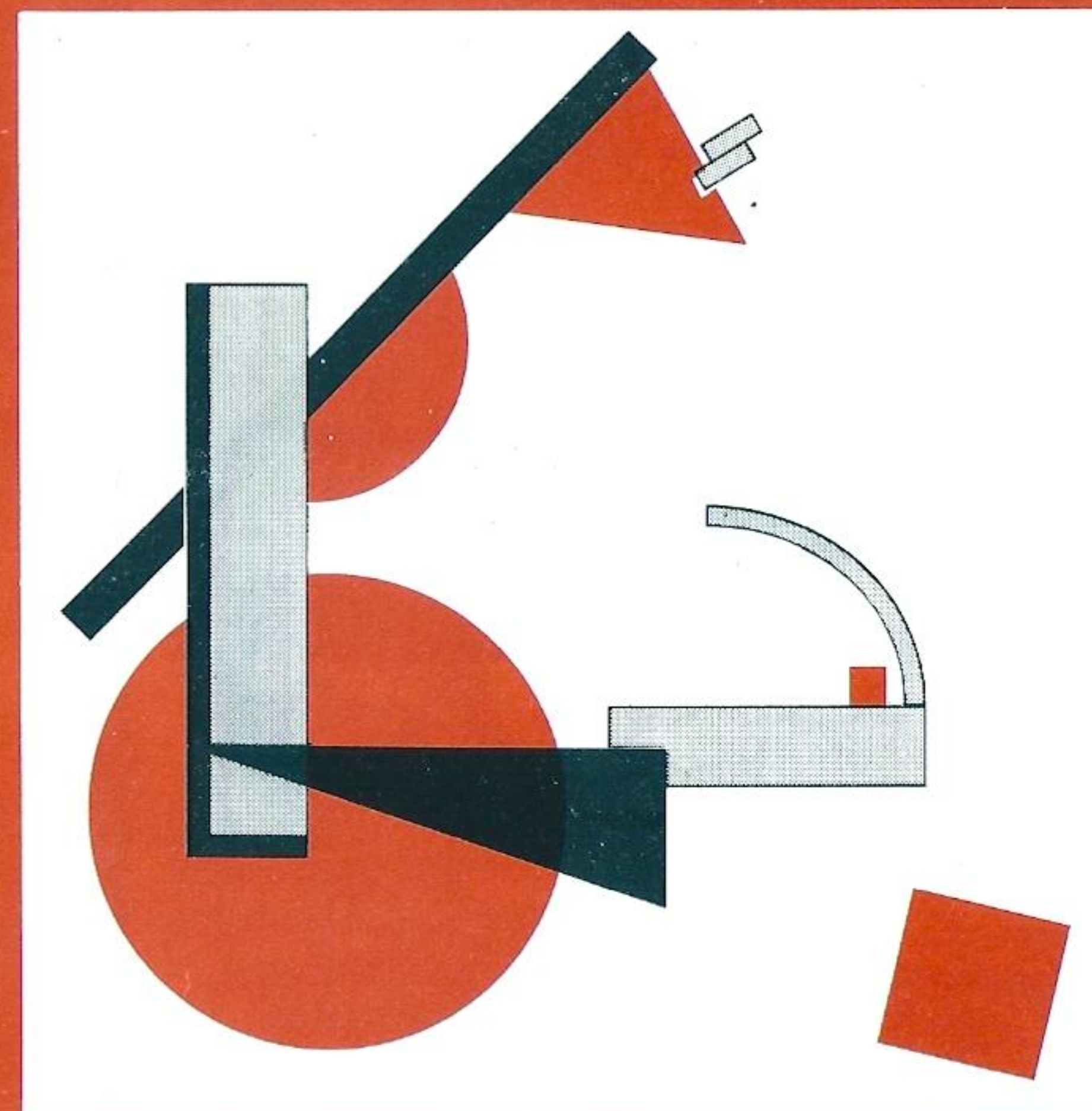
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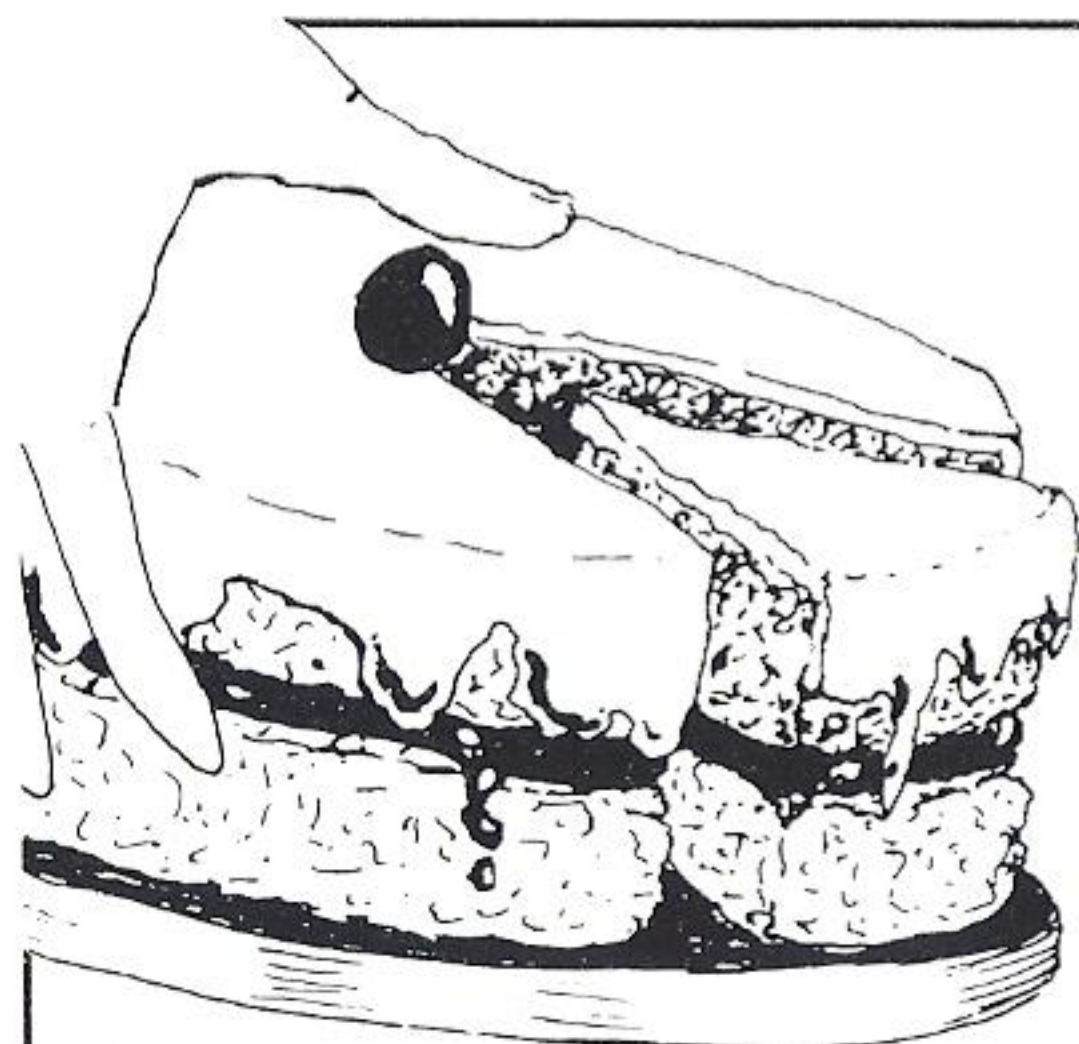
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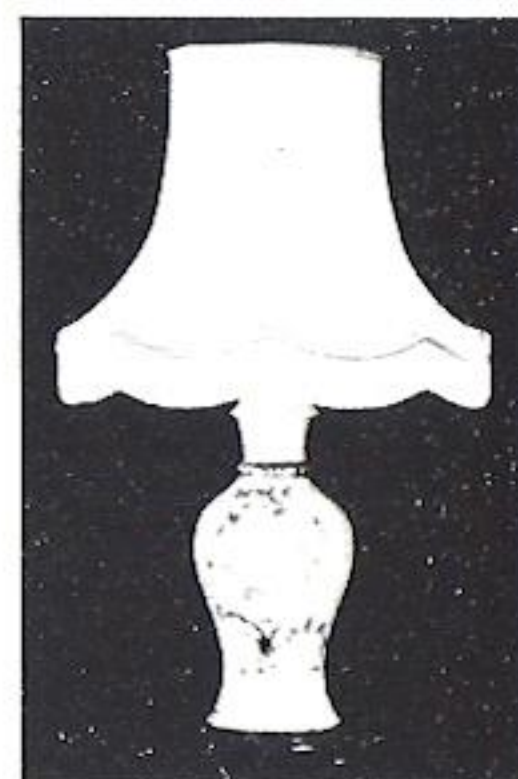
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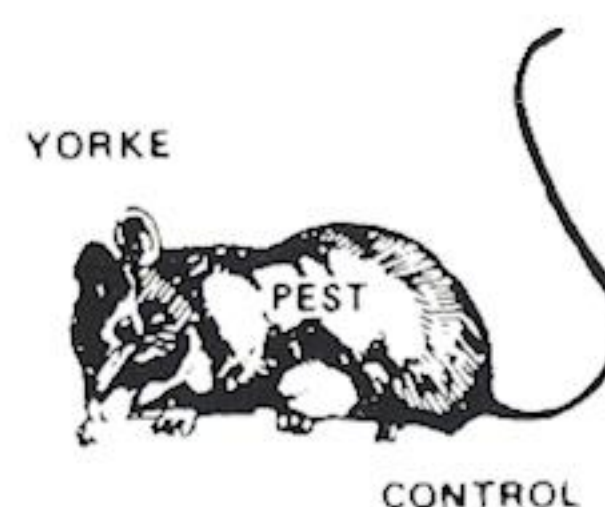
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FIRST PERFORMANCE 19th MARCH 1988

The Questors presents

# THE BED BUG

By **VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY**

Translated by **KATHLEEN COOK-HORUJY**

Published by **RADUGA PUBLISHERS MOSCOW**

Directed by **CAROL METCALFE**

Designed by **JOHN STACEY**

Music by **ERIC KIRBY**

Lighting designed by **ANDREW DAVIE**

Television and Sound sequences by **IAN HOWLETT**

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Mayakovsky wrote **The Bedbug** "a comedy extravaganza in nine scenes", in 1928. It was first produced in 1929 at the Meyerhold State Theatre directed by Meyerhold.

After the work was completed, but before its first production, Mayakovsky made changes to it as a result of his discussions with those involved.

"This is an extravaganza in five acts and nine scenes. I find it hard to regard myself alone as the author of this comedy. The material processed and included in it is a mass of everyday facts that flowed into my hands and head from all sides during my newspaper and publicistic work, particularly on **Komsomolskaya pravda**.

These facts, insignificant if taken separately, were compressed and moulded by me into the two central figures in the comedy: Prisyarkin, who later changes his name to the more refined Pierre Skripkin, formerly a worker and now a fiance, and Oleg the Bard, a boot-licking ex-householder who lives by his wits.

My newspaper work culminated in the writing of my comedy—topical, controversial and tendentious.

The problem is to expose present-day philistinism.

I did my best to make my comedy different from the usual descriptive sort written long after the event.

The main difficulty was to translate the facts into the theatre's language of action and entertainment.

Those who are to give it life have said "it's good". This does not mean that I think it is marvellous. Plays are not artistic masterpieces. A play is a weapon in our struggle. It must be sharpened and honed by large collectives.

We shall discuss the play before its production at many Komsomol meetings and, if necessary, make changes in the text and the situations."

Article by Mayakovsky on the "Bed Bug" 1929

One minor result of these changes is a confusion in the date referred to in the first part of the play; sometimes 1928, sometimes 1929. Clearly Mayakovsky wanted that part of the play to be **now** for his audience and updated it by one year when the production came not in the year of writing, 1928, but in the following year.

For us of course these first four scenes cannot possibly be now, but as for the second part — that is a different matter. Mayakovsky set that 50 years later — or as he put it "Ten five-year periods of construction and struggle later". That is 1978 or 1979 depending on which starting date you take.

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Mayakovsky often repeated statements like that quoted above expressing his wish that his works should not be ossified but adopted and changed to make them more effective "weapons in the struggle".

The only change I have made is the dating of the second part which I have placed 60 rather than 50 years after the opening scenes, which neatly brings us therefore from 1928 to 1988.

Changing this dating necessitated making a minor change in Scene 5 where Mayakovsky envisaged a world-wide referendum being conducted through radio where as these days global television link-ups are an everyday occurrence. We have substituted television for radio, but the textual changes made have been very slight. Perhaps you would have preferred the amusement of Mayakovsky's slightly erroneous predictions about the technology of the later half of the 20th Century. Remember however, that Mayakovsky altered his starting date by the year to bring the play as close as possible to that first audience. I hope that by bringing Mayakovsky's **future** close to us I have been true, not only to his general wishes, but also to the intention behind this work.

Mayakovsky made the following speech in response to comments that the play made inadequate disclosure of the social essence of philistinism; several workers pointed out that some of Mayakovsky's passages were incomprehensible.

SPEECH AT THE DISCUSSION OF THE PLAY  
**THE BEDBUG** AT THE **PRAVDA** WORKER-CORRESPONDENTS' CLUB  
2 February 1929\*

My play shows a man who breaks away from his class with a bang for personal gain. He is a model of political appeasement. I do not want to raise the problem without trying to destroy its roots. The point is not possessions, but breaking away from one's class. Philistinism in everyday life leads to philistinism in politics. What I have been asked to insert in the play is not philistinism, but counter-revolution. It is the class struggle, plain and simple. Five, ten thousand plays should be written on this subject. And I shall write on it too. If the workers say I have not come close enough to them, I shall go closer. But they must come closer too. When people say there are no positive characters in **The Bedbug** I think of Gogol's "After the Theatre". The criticism is similar. There is no positive character in **The Government Inspector** either. Comedy is not an "Excelsior powdered glue" that "will mend Venus de Milo and the chamberpot too." Comedy is aimed in one direction. We've had enough positive characters. Fifty years from now Prisyarkin will be considered a beast. This evening I have to write fifty slogans on the single theme: you should wash your hands before meals. If you say that worker-correspondents write about this philistinism too, I take that as praise: it means we are fighting together and we will win together.

Carol Metcalf

---



**CAST:**

<b>JILLYANN HEALY</b>	Rosalia Pavlovna ( a hairdresser, Elzevira's Mother), Cleaner, Fireman, Doctor, Newsboy T.V. Reporter, Director of the Zoo.
<b>LORRAINE HILL</b>	Zoya Beryozkina, Fireman, T.V. Reporter, Chorus Girl, Zoo Official
<b>DAVID KAY</b>	Prisyarkin (later called Pierre Skripkin)
<b>NIGEL LAWRENCE</b>	Button Seller, Barefoot youth, Wedding-Guest, Fireman, Floor Manager, T.V. Reporter, Doctor, Chief Reporter, Chairman of City Council.
<b>CLAUDIA McNULTY</b>	Herring Seller, Girl, Matron of Honour, Fireman Irina Ivanova, Doctor, Veterinary, Girl with Rose, Zoo Organiser, City Councillor.
<b>RENATA NASH</b>	Bra Seller, Mechanic, Elzevira Renaissance, Fireman, Old Woman, T.V. Reporter, Laboratory Assistant, Drunk Woman, Zoo Official, City Councillor.
<b>KEN RATCLIFFE</b>	Oleg Bard, Fireman, T.V. Producer, T.V. Reporter, Newsboy, Doctor, Drunk Man, Old Man, City Councillor.
<b>SUE WEST</b>	Toy Seller, Girl with broom, Best Man, Chief Fireman, Young Woman, T.V. Reporter, Newsboy, Doctor, Girl Reporter, Old Woman, Council Official, City Councillor.
<b>ALAN WIDDRINGTON</b>	Whetstone Seller, Inventor, David Osipovich (A hairdresser, Elzevira's Father), Fireman, T.V. Reporter, Newsboy, Professor, Photographer, Old Man, Zoo Official, City Councillor.
<b>DIANA NESBITT</b>	Chorus Girl

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## MAYAKOVSKY, VLADIMIR (VLADIMIROVICH)

(July 7, 1893–April 14, 1930), Russian poet and dramatist, was born in the Georgian village of Bagdadi, now called Mayakovsky. His father, a forest ranger, was an impoverished member of a family of minor Russian gentry which had lived in Georgia for several generations; he died of blood poisoning while Mayakovsky was still a child. His widow took her son and two daughters to Moscow, where they knew no one and where they lived in extreme poverty on an inadequate pension, eked out by taking in lodgers and doing odd jobs. A natural rebel, Mayakovsky became an active Bolshevik revolutionary at the age of fourteen. He was three times arrested, once for helping prisoners to escape from jail, and he himself spent eleven months in Butyrki prison — five months in solitary confinement. With only interrupted schooling, he was largely self-taught until in 1911 he entered the Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. There he met David Burliuk, under whose influence and patronage he became a poet and joined the newly emerging futurist movement.

Mayakovsky's unique style was developing rapidly. He hated "The writing" sentimentality, and prettiness, and went to the opposite extreme in his own poetry, employing the rough talk of the streets, deliberate grammatical heresies, and all kinds of ucologisms. He wrote much blank verse, but also made brilliant (and quite untranslatable) use of a rich variety of rhyme schemes, assonance, and alliteration. His rhythms are powerful but irregular, based on the number of stressed syllables in a line, without regard for the unstressed syllables. In his public readings, Mayakovsky declaimed his poems with spellbinding effect in a staccato marching style which is indicated typographically by the very short lines, spilling down the page in a characteristic staircase shape: "Hey!/Gentlemen!/Lovers/of sacrilege,/crime,/ and carnage,/ have you seen/ the terror of terrors —/my face/when/I/am absolutely calm?" (From "A Cloud in Trousers.")

Though he was attractive to women, it is always the tragic aspects of love which he emphasizes, for as Patricia Blake says, "in love, as in all things, Mayakovsky favored the impossible. He always chose women who were unavailable to him for some reason or other." The most celebrated of these hopeless romances is his triangular relationship with Lilya Brik and her husband Osip. For fifteen years he publicly lamented her coldness and inconstancy, beginning a few months after their first meeting with **Fleyta-pozvonochinik** (1915, translated as "The Backbone Flute"). Patricia Blake has called this "surely the most savage indictment of a woman and womanhood to be formulated in our time . . . . And why? Lily, the terrible, the accursed Lily has left Mayakovsky for another man."

Mayakovsky welcomed the 1917 Revolution as "my" revolution, and harnessed his gigantic energy to its service. He was a skilled caricaturist, and he was soon working night and day producing hundreds of propaganda and information posters, each with a rhyming caption or slogan, as well as revolutionary poems and plays and film scripts. This "one-man factory" also founded and edited the journal **LEF** (Left Arts Front), toured the country

reciting his poetry, acted, lectured, and painted in the name of the Revolution. Mayakovsky's two prose plays are caustic satires on the growing philistinism and bureaucracy of Soviet life. In the first part of **Klop** (1928, translated by Max Hayward as **The Bedbug**), the main character is the bug-ridden, guitar-strumming, vodka-soaked Prisyppkin, the personification of all the vulgarity and triviality of the party members who had fallen into the debauched and drunken ways of the bourgeoisie. A fire breaks out at his wedding party and the fire brigade is called, but the jets of water from the hoses freeze and preserve the dead-drunk Prisyppkin inside a block of ice. The second part takes place in the rational and utopian communist society of fifty years later, when Prisyppkin is revived, along with a bedbug on his collar. Prisyppkin has brought all his old qualities of ignorance, bragging, and vanity with him, and to prevent the spread of these diseases, he and his bedbug are put into a cage. At the end the people gather to stare in at him as he drinks his vodka, plays his guitar, and sings sentimental songs. But the communist millennium is portrayed as a de-humanized world where not only vodka but sex and romance no longer exist, and some critics have regarded Prisyppkin, lost and frightened in a loveless society, as the real hero of the second part and the author's alter ego.

**Banya** (1930, translated by A.R. MacAndrew, as "The Bathhouse") attacks the ever-increasing bureaucracy of the Soviet state, with its officials who swagger and bully, take bribes, and spout socialist phrases that have become meaningless under the raging verbal inflation. As in Gogol's **Inspector General**, another comedy satirizing Russian officialdom, the officials are portrayed as grotesque buffoons whose exposure is carried out through the introduction of an outsider. In this case the catalyst is the Phosphorescent Woman, who arrives with a time machine which whisks the ordinary people into the future communist millennium, jettisoning the parasites on the way. The play naturally aroused the anger of the cultural bureaucrats and was bitterly attacked.

A month later Mayakovsky shot himself, playing Russian roulette with a single cartridge in his revolver. He had been deeply disturbed and angered by the suicide of Yesenin five years earlier, and in the poem "Sergei Esenin" (To Sergei Yesenin, 1926) he had criticized Yesenin for taking the line of least resistance and making an easy exit from life. The reasons for his own suicide have occasioned much speculation. His disillusion at the course the Revolution had taken, the harsh attacks of his literary opponents, and especially his unhappy love for an **emigree** Russian girl much younger than himself, may all have been factors. But this was not the first time he had played Russian roulette, and as Roman Jakobson pointed out, the theme of the poet's suicide, of gambling one's life away, had haunted Mayakovsky's poetry almost from the first. His intoxication with Bolshevism, his dramatic involvements with women, his obsession with suicide, and his poetry may all be seen as reflections of an alienated personality, alternating between bouts of depression and manic activity.





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