

## Stanislavski: Contexts and Influences

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## **Chapter Three**

### **Stanislavski: Contexts and Influences**

**Rose Whyman**

This chapter traces the professional life of Konstantin Sergeevich Stanislavski and the trajectory of his work as a director in relation to the emergence of realism in Russian theatre, as well as in Europe. As a director, Stanislavski was primarily concerned with the quality of the acting. The development of Stanislavski's ideas of realism and non-realism continue to be pertinent to theatre and acting in the present day, throughout the world.

Analyses of Stanislavski's work and realisms and naturalisms should also take into account shifts in the intellectual, artistic, socio-political contexts. Over Stanislavski's lifetime, there were moves from a view of realism that was wide enough to encompass a Gogolian grotesque view of the discordances of Russian life to ideas of artistic realism emerging during Stanislavski's establishment with Vladimir Ivanovich Nemirovich-Danchenko of the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) in 1898. Psychological realism, avant-garde rejections of it in explorations of symbolism and theatrical modes, and their synthesis, were exemplified by the later work of the MAT studios including Evgenii Bogrationovich Vakhtangov's fantastic realism. These ideas were explored and widely debated in the revolutionary period of Russian history until the imposition of socialist realism under Stalin.

While many such ideas characterized the development of artistic thought in the Western world in the period of modernism, the particular relationship between artist and society in Russia carried the wave of change forward differently than in Western Europe. Though aspects of Stanislavski's aesthetic remained constant, other aspects changed, conscious as he was that theatre should both reflect and question its times. As a result of this, he had more in common with avant-garde movements than is often supposed.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Realism and naturalism in Europe and Russia**

Stanislavski was a director and an actor. As a director, he invented new forms and approaches to acting within them and it was at the nexus of directing and acting that

he made some of his profound discoveries. These remain of major importance to theatre.

Both Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko were aware of developments in Western European theatre which became increasingly influential in Russian theatre in the late nineteenth century. Stanislavski was born in Moscow in 1863, as is well-known, into a wealthy merchant family, and was brought up visiting ballet, opera, and the theatre, much of which toured from Europe. He began his experiments on acting in the family theatre group, the Alekseev Circle, founded in 1887. He studied at the Paris Conservatoire, visited the Comédie-Française in the late 1880s, and throughout his life had contact with theatres in France, Germany, and other European countries. The naturalist plays of Henrik Ibsen and Gerhart Hauptmann were crucial in the early repertoire of MAT and so was the work of Anton Chekhov, which made a significant contribution to the New Drama, a term given to the transitional stage from nineteenth-century drama to modernism.

Chekhov was born in 1861 just before Stanislavski, by which time the notion of “realism” in relation to art had been discussed in Parisian circles, including questions of aesthetics, form and content, truthfulness to life, and whether art should represent the grotesque. In 1855, painter Gustave Courbet claimed that though labeled as a realist, he wants to paint “the manners, ideas and appearance of my time as I see them, in a word to make living art.”<sup>2</sup> Another leading figure was novelist Gustave Flaubert, who believed that great art was impersonal, involving an extinction of the artist’s personality.<sup>3</sup> Chekhov’s short stories, for which he gained fame before his theatre writing, have been compared with those of Flaubert’s protege Guy de Maupassant, whose work Chekhov knew well. A reaction against romanticism, the realism of the French artists, generally speaking, proposed to represent life as it really was, rather than idealizing the beauty of life.

André Antoine created the Théâtre Libre in 1887 influenced by Émile Zola,<sup>4</sup> while in 1888 Stanislavski and others founded The Moscow Society of Art and Literature (Society). Naturalist work was controversial – shocking even, in its depiction of social behaviour contravening moral and norms. The Théâtre Libre was a private club and staged plays that other theatres could not, such as Henrik Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, which dealt with the topic of syphilis (see Chapter One). Further productions included work by Leo Tolstoy, August Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*, and works by Gerhart

Hauptmann. Stanislavski's work with the Society also included the work of Tolstoy and Hauptmann along with classics by Alexander Pushkin, William Shakespeare, and Friedrich Schiller. Though Stanislavski was to visit Antoine much later, in 1922, when on tour with the MAT, he was in touch with European ideas, clearly echoing what Zola had called the continued "evolution" of theatre forms in new theatre, and citing Antoine in discussing the task of "young theatre" to be the renewal of dramatic art at the first meeting of the studio he created in 1905.<sup>5</sup>

The New Drama aimed to convey the modernity of everyday life from the complex perspective of "the everyday considered as a routinized realm of inauthenticity, alienation, and boredom" and as a "sphere of potential meaning and redemption."<sup>6</sup> The plays were characterized by "an atmosphere of general unease [...] not just social forms and institutions, but the basis of society, the family and the worlds of work and everyday life, where everything is upside down, in ferment, undefined [...]."<sup>7</sup> This New Drama needed a new style of directing to achieve naturalistic effect. Jean Jullien coined the term "fourth wall," where the actor does not acknowledge audience and the audience join in the illusion, enhancing the sense of involvement and identification with the characters. As Christopher Innes writes: "Where plot was the dominant element in both melodrama and the well-made plays, characterization is the basis of Naturalism – and the ambiguity of motive asserted by Strindberg is also in deliberate contrast to the singular passionate temperament of the earlier Romantic protagonists."<sup>8</sup> Rather than heroic or romantic types, naturalistic theatre aimed for psychologically accurate portrayals of individuals. New ideas about directing and acting emerged with the introduction of the visual box set of naturalist theatre and authenticity in set and costume.

In terms of directing, Antoine praised the German Meininger Ensemble theatre for its realistic stage effects and precision of locations in set design, breaking new ground theatrically and which he saw in 1888. The company toured to Moscow with its repertoire of classic plays in 1885 and 1890; Nemirovich-Danchenko saw the productions on the first tour, and Stanislavski on the second. Stanislavski had attempted historical accuracy in costume, set, and properties in directing plays for the Alekseev Circle<sup>9</sup> and studied the Meininger's "period authenticity, crowd scenes, visually beautiful staging, amazing discipline"<sup>10</sup> in his work with the Society.

While Stanislavski had access to general ideas about theatre and realism, and the specifics of the French naturalist movement, modernist theatre also saw the rapid emergence of symbolism. The symbolists rejected the idea of art as representational, emphasizing the poetic as a way to evoke inner – even mystical – experiences. The work of Chekhov and other New Drama writers increasingly embraced ideas from both movements. Moreover, in the 1880s, “the question unleashed by naturalism was precisely whether anti-idealist realism (not realism in general) could be art?”<sup>11</sup> While the New Drama did not depict human beings as idealized, many still considered the task of art as being to uplift, to point the way to the ideal, to beauty, truth, and nature. For Stanislavski, working in the Russian context, there were further ideas about the social purpose of art.

### **Naturalness in acting**

As in Western Europe, Russian literary realism emerged in the nineteenth century as a reaction against romanticism and idealism, fueling aesthetic debates about form and content, natural acting and truth to life. Against the backdrop of the European movements, Stanislavski developed his aesthetic, drawing from Russian social realist criticism and nineteenth-century discussions on acting by Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol, the work of the Maly Theatre actor Mikhail Semionovich Shchepkin, and the call for a more “natural” style in Russian acting and the later aesthetic theories of Leo Tolstoy.

In the 1830s, literary critic Vissarion Grigorievich Belinsky, drawing from the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm von Schelling (1775–1854) – who founded a school of romantic philosophy – articulated the role of the artist in society as that of spiritual leader in the nation, with the purpose of art being to serve the truth. Belinsky called upon artists to address Russia’s social problems, including serfdom. The school of social realists that he and others inspired saw the purpose of literature being the discussion of social and political reform.

In the same decade, the major Russian poet Alexander Pushkin questions the persistence of ideas that “the *beautiful*” was found in the “imitation of the beauties of nature and that the chief merit of art lies in its *usefulness*.”<sup>12</sup> He continues: “Verisimilitude is still considered to be the principal condition and to form the basis of dramatic art [...] but where lies the verisimilitude in a building divided into two

parts, one of which is filled with spectators?” He defines the kind of verisimilitude that should be asked of a dramatist as “the outpourings of the human spirit,” “truth concerning the passions, a verisimilitude in the feelings experienced in given situations” rather than the strict observation of costumes, period, and local colour. His contemporary, Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol, believed that the actor should express human truths even in tragic-grotesque work, where a distorted reality was being presented.

The actor who exemplified all this was Mikhail Semionovich Shchepkin (1788–1863), a serf who gained freedom through his acting ability and became “the emblem of change and progress in nineteenth-century Russia.”<sup>13</sup> He conveyed the tragedies of little people, the victims of social pressures depicted by Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Turgenev. “Shchepkin’s *forte* was precisely this heightening of the specific case to the abstract human level [...] simplicity and naturalness sounded a note that would be fully orchestrated by Stanislavski, and through him, would retune the entire Western theatre.” In this, he departed from the histrionic acting style of the neo-classical, romantic theatre,<sup>14</sup> to a style approaching what became known as psychological realism. His aim was to depict human behaviour, based on his observations in life.

Shchepkin’s work founded a tradition of “natural” acting at the Maly Theatre in Moscow. Stanislavski stated that it was this theatre “more than any school that influenced the development of my mind. It taught me how to observe and see the beautiful.”<sup>15</sup> He saw the vandalism of the Maly by Red Guards in the Revolution of 1917 as “sacrilege [...] as if they had raped my mother, as if they had insulted the memory of Mikhail Semionovich.”<sup>16</sup> However, what was considered natural in Shchepkin’s epoch may have changed in accordance with changing theatrical conventions. Photographs of Stanislavski in costume and make-up for many of his roles may seem grotesque rather than natural today. What exactly did Stanislavski mean by “natural,” “truthful” acting and “the beautiful”?

He addresses the actor-as-artist: “You live on the stage naturally, according to the laws of nature [...] you have correct life, which is not only psychical but also physical. In it is truth. You have believed it not with the mind but with the feeling of your own organic, physical nature.”<sup>17</sup> This truth involves the actor expressing human reactions, rather than melodramatic emotion. Only nature is creativity, “it alone

possesses in perfection the internal and external creative apparatus of experiencing and incarnation [...].”<sup>18</sup> Creative nature is subconscious and can be helped indirectly, through conscious psycho-technique and psychological study. Studying him/herself, the actor can be trained to develop truthful expression, meaning one that was familiar within life.

His idealized view was similar to that of German romantic writer Friedrich von Schiller, who writes that art should ennoble “by embodying or pointing to the ideal, which ultimately was the full and free expression of human nature.”<sup>19</sup> There were two aspects: “actual” human nature and the ideal, beautiful, “genuine” human nature. Stanislavski writes:

The beautiful elevates the soul and stirs its finest feelings, leaving indelible, deep tracks in emotion and other kinds of memory. The most beautiful thing of all is nature itself [...]. Don't be squeamish about the dark side of nature. And don't forget either that there are positive things hidden among negative phenomena, that there is an element of beauty in what is most ugly, just as the beautiful contains things which are not beautiful.<sup>20</sup>

Actors should observe themselves, study their own individual psychology, their intangible spiritual nature, in order to access its “truth,” to know themselves. Drawing on the study of oneself, the actor can develop characters with whom their audiences can connect, because they are the expression of common humanity, and thus they behave according to what were considered the laws of nature in the nineteenth century. This is the only way for an actor to express life fully, to avoid stereotypical characters who do not convey the life of the human spirit.<sup>21</sup> When actors do not access their own experience to inform the role but seek to represent it, however skilfully, they are going against nature.<sup>22</sup>

While these formulations were arrived at later, from its foundation in 1898, the work of MAT explored ideas of realism and psychological truth. Stanislavski states his and Nemirovich-Danchenko's credo, “We rebelled against the old style of acting, ‘theatricality’, spurious emotion, declamation and overacting.”<sup>23</sup> However, there was a significant difference in emphasis between the two. While Nemirovich-Danchenko said that the new direction in the actor's art would “squeeze out the romantic repertoire and romantic style of acting,”<sup>24</sup> he remained focused on the idea

that dramatic literature, the written text, was primarily what made theatre art, whereas Stanislavski had a different idea about the place of text, believing that the great actor's creation of a role was comparable with that of the writer. Both could exemplify the art of truth, Stanislavski believed, and the actor is co-author with the playwright. For all artists, he held, the creative process is the same but takes different forms, for "the dramaturgist on paper, the actor with trembling nerves in his flesh."<sup>25</sup> Despite the differences between the two, according to O.A. Radishcheva, the methods of both led to realism and the art of experiencing.<sup>26</sup>

### **MAT productions: naturalism to realism (1898–1903)**

The arguments about naturalism and realism between Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko reflect the wider arguments with some different nuances. Stanislavski had directed realist works by Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy, and Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky with the Society, and at first continued working in the same way at MAT.<sup>27</sup> As well as Shakespeare and the European New Drama of Ibsen, and Hauptmann, early productions also included work by Russian realists Aleksei Nikolaevich Tolstoy and Aleksandr Nikolaevich Ostrovsky. Ostrovsky was a nineteenth-century writer influenced by Gogol, whose realism consisted of the depiction of ordinary people of Tsarist society, such as merchants and bureaucrats.

However, there was always a desire to experiment and develop, although the directing needed to "catch-up" with the ideas about an actor's investigations. In the Society's production of Dostoevsky's *Village of Stepanchikogo* in 1891, Stanislavski's directing methods, according to his ideas of truth as in life, began with staging plans detailing the actions and expressions of each character. Later, he was able to progress from this dictatorial directing to a method taking into account the actor's individuality. Meanwhile, in 1895, the production of Karl Gutschov's *Uriel Acosta* was recognized for the realism of the crowd scenes and of Stanislavski's unheroic acting. So was his interpretation of Othello in 1896 recognized as a "modern man with all his neuroses and frustrations," a "big simple-minded baby" as Laurence Senelick notes.<sup>28</sup>

Working with a new generation of actors at MAT in 1898, Stanislavski defines this realism: "Art must separate, soar above the clouds, touching high themes and characters, but dealing with them in a lifelike and truthful way."<sup>29</sup> Within this overall



aim, there were parallel lines of development of different styles of MAT productions. In Aleksei Tolstoy's *Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich* and *The Death of Ivan the Terrible*, the aim was to get away from the established and clichéd style of production in historical plays about old Russia and the Meiningen method, drawing for accurate visual detail from paintings, served well.<sup>30</sup> Stanislavski designated these productions, along with *Julius Caesar*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Antigone*, Hauptmann's *Drayman Henschel*, and Leo Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness*, as the MAT's historico-realist line.<sup>31</sup> Before staging *The Death of Ivan*, when seeing French theatre in summer 1899, he stated his aim in art, writing "to achieve in both tragedy and in frivolous farce lifelikeness and the most realistic actuality."<sup>32</sup> The French productions had shown him that without such realism, the theatre becomes "a toy." Assessing this work from a later perspective, he writes that "historical realism led to outer truth."<sup>33</sup> When the play opened in 1899, with Stanislavski as Ivan, he was seen as being "too weak [...] too naturalistically senile and petty," but as usual the detail of the staging was praised and there were fifty performances.<sup>34</sup>

Nemirovich-Danchenko was critical. Seeing in Stanislavski's directorial plan for Hauptmann's *The Lonely Ones* a Zolaesque naturalism which he did not like, he writes to Chekhov, "Now we are occupied with *The Lonely Ones*. It is very difficult [...] because I am cold towards the shallow tricks of external colouring which Alekseyev has planned."<sup>35</sup> Stanislavski later saw that he had begun at MAT as with the Society, to seek authenticity in terms of props and costumes and so on, in the attempt to create "life" on stage. This naturalism was "the indiscriminate reproduction of the surface of life," whereas the realism he sought was the exploration of the "relationships and tendencies lying under the surface."<sup>36</sup>

Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko both directed productions, with others joining the directorial team as time went on, and Stanislavski continued to act leading roles. It was recognized that he was not suited to tragic roles; he preferred comic or contemporary roles, character parts, in which he could "wipe himself out" – in Shchepkin's phrase<sup>37</sup> – and adopt external mannerisms, using costume and make-up to create a sense of character, which informed internal experiencing.

The development of Stanislavski's directing and acting was prompted by his collaboration and conflicts with Anton Chekhov and his New Drama, whose "poetic realism" aimed to convey the social ferment of the times and to depict the lives of

ordinary men and women from a range of social classes. Like other realist writers, Chekhov aspired to write objectively in his stories and plays and worked on techniques of doing so; unlike Zola and Maupassant, this was more compassionate. He aimed to draw his reader or audience member into the interior world of the character without passing judgment. Stanislavski writes of Chekhov's plays being disappointing on the first encounter, with little plot or external action.<sup>38</sup> As Chekhov said, *The Seagull* has "much conversation about literature, little action and five tons of love."<sup>39</sup> Stanislavski used the methods he had established, aiming to create "mood" with elaborate realistic sound effects, writing a detailed *mise-en-scène* in order to help the actors to create the interiority of the characters as there was so little external dramatic action. Some aspects of the staging were radical for the time, in terms of being true to life: in Act 1, the characters in the audience of Konstantin Treplev's play sat with their backs to the actual audience. The emotion of the characters was expressed by subtle physical actions such as Masha's speech about her unrequited love for Konstantin, involving drawing with her fork on the tablecloth, digging it in to suggest her emotion. Audiences responded to this and to Chekhov's knowledge of people. In Stanislavski's encounter with Chekhov's originality, a new way to direct and to act emerged. "At times he is an *impressionist*, at others, when necessary, a *realist*, at others almost a *naturalist*."<sup>40</sup> The work on *The Seagull* (with *Uncle Vanya* following in 1899 and *Three Sisters* in 1901) was the beginning of the "line of intuition and feeling," which directly led to "inner truth" as opposed to finding this from external realistic truth.<sup>41</sup> The MAT productions of Chekhov were all very successful and were imitated by other theatres in Russia.

The notion of the division of the "unconscious" into the "subconscious" and the "superconscious" by Stanislavski was important.<sup>42</sup> Experiencing was engendered in the creative process as the actor draws on life experiences that have been stored subconsciously, and the superconscious denoted that which transcended individual experience, and related to "spirituality," in Stanislavski's non-religious understanding of the term. He learned "the proper meaning of what we call realism. Realism ends where the superconscious begins."<sup>43</sup> Moreover, "*Symbolism, Impressionism* and all the other subtle isms belong to the superconscious. They begin where ultranaturalism ends. But only when an actor's behaviour, both mental and physical, onstage is

spontaneous, normal according to the laws of nature, can the superconscious emerge from its secret places.”<sup>44</sup>

The differences between Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko on naturalism and realism continued to be debated. The socio-political line began as follows.<sup>45</sup> Nemirovich aroused an interest in Ibsen and Stanislavski staged *Hedda Gabler* in 1899, *An Enemy of the People* in 1900 (though for him this also belonged to the line of intuition and feeling), and *Ghosts* in 1905. In 1906, Nemirovich-Danchenko staged *Brand*. He wrote that he had found the 1902 production of Maxim Gorky’s *Lower Depths* – a searing play set in a Moscow doss-house which Stanislavski had researched by visiting communities of homeless and impoverished people at Khitrov Market – unnecessarily naturalistic.<sup>46</sup> The 1902 production of Gorky’s *Philistines* was seen as having been overburdened by detail and “contrived character traits.”<sup>47</sup> The production of Tolstoy’s *Power of Darkness* (which Stanislavski said veered from the line of intuition and feeling into the line of the everyday)<sup>48</sup> premiered in 1902 and included giving a small role to a peasant woman, brought in originally to advise on peasant customs. Her presence highlighted the artificiality of the theatre setting and was markedly different to that of the actors, rather than enhancing truth to life. Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote to Stanislavski that the Gorky plays and *The Power of Darkness* constituted a trend in the repertoire towards “grubby naturalism.”<sup>49</sup> Stanislavski thought the directing problem was that he had not perfected the actors’ technique,<sup>50</sup> writing:

Realism on stage only seems to be naturalism when it is not justified internally by the artist [...] the external realism of the production of *The Power of Darkness* revealed the absence of inner justification in those of us who were acting in it. The stage was taken over by things, objects, banal outward events which crushed the inner meaning of the play and characters.<sup>51</sup>

While Stanislavski to some extent agreed with Nemirovich-Danchenko, continuing to seek the route to inner as well as outer truth, underpinning the disputes between them was a different interpretation of concepts of realism. Both aspired to what was termed “artistic realism,” but each interpreted this differently. For Nemirovich, the realism of a production was artistic when the directors and actors interpreted the writer correctly. For Stanislavski, it was the truth of life expressed in the play<sup>52</sup> – life as art. The actor

should not think of social and political problems, but should simply “be genuine and honest.”<sup>53</sup>

The production of *Julius Caesar* in 1903, directed by Nemirovich-Danchenko with Stanislavski collaborating on particular aspects, ran for eighty-four performances. Nemirovich praised Stanislavski as Brutus, and Vasilii Ivanovich Kachalov’s performance as Caesar was seen as outstanding. Stanislavski writes: “As far as the rest of the acting was concerned, once again there were uneven moments. We were not capable of fighting, the staging once again slid from intuition and feeling into [...] historical naturalism.”<sup>54</sup> It was not so much a Shakespearean tragedy as “Rome in Caesar’s time”, with a plethora of characteristic details about the period. The production was too “picturesque” in Stanislavski’s view, while many of the characteristics of life in Rome planned by Stanislavski were, for Nemirovich, unnecessary as they interfered with the political emphases.<sup>55</sup>

An argument about artistic realism ensued. Nemirovich-Danchenko considered that he had achieved artistic realism, whereas Stanislavski considered that, as in *The Lower Depths*, the production was at the level of the Maly Theatre, “traditional conventional realism” lacking “fullness of life.”

Discussions of artistic realism related it to visual art, how realist painters depicted life but each with their own interpretation. Stanislavski compared the artistic realism of *Julius Caesar* to the style of Polish artist Stepan Bakałowicz, who was noted for his Ancient Roman historical scenes.<sup>56</sup> Stanislavski wanted to convey Nemirovich’s interpretation, “to describe the fall of the Republic of Rome and its agony” in the style of Ilya Efimovich Repin’s realism, which he considered most appropriate for the MAT. Repin and Viktor Mikhailovich Vasnetsov at that time expressed his ideal of artistic truth, “having studied to see beauty in the dirty peasant.” The influence of ideas from the visual arts on Stanislavski’s directing are evident.

### **MAT and anti-naturalism: productions 1903–08**

The MAT’s work was criticised by anti-naturalists from the World of Art movement, which included artists and set designers who worked with Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, Vsevolod Emilievich Meyerhold, and Alexander Yakolevich Tairov’s Kamerny theatre, which was also a place for avant-garde experiments. A debate was

prompted in 1902 – the year when Meyerhold, who had been one of the founder MAT members, left – by the publication by symbolist critic Valery Briusov of an essay entitled ‘Unnecessary Truth’. In this, he argued that external truth as in naturalism is less important than the communication of the artist’s soul. The actor should be primary. Symbolism freed the poet from the form and logic of the natural world; the theatre must free the actor from “the unnecessary truth of material objects and cluttered stages [...] obscuring the spiritual side of life on stage, the performer’s creative emotion.”<sup>57</sup> Theatre cannot reproduce real life but should create theatrically conventionalized, stylized settings to enhance the theatrical experience, as ancient theatre had.

Stanislavski eventually rose to these challenges, appointing Meyerhold to work in a studio theatre in 1905 to develop an acting style that would be appropriate for symbolist drama. Stanislavski was frustrated with the inability of the actor to express abstract ideas, as the language of movement and gesture at the time could either be natural and lifelike, as he had taught, or the clichéd gesture of the former romantic theatre. Painters such as Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel, writers such as Belgian symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck and Ibsen expressed the superconscious, the life of the human spirit, whereas the actor at that point could not, physically or vocally.<sup>58</sup> Meyerhold was developing “Theatre of Fantasy” – “theatre as a reaction against naturalism, theatre of conventionality even, but a theatre of the spirit.”<sup>59</sup> He was interested in the work of Maeterlinck, Polish symbolist Stanisław Przybyszewski, and Italian Gabriele D'Annunzio. The search was to justify the absence of external action in symbolist work. The experiments of the Studio on Maeterlinck’s *The Death of Tintagiles* and Hauptmann’s *Schluck and Jau* were shortlived; Meyerhold did not fully achieve this by the time of the 1905 Revolution, which interfered with the work. Meyerhold carried on his own work at the theatre of actress Vera Kommissarzhevskaya in St Petersburg.

In 1906, Meyerhold wrote an essay entitled ‘The Naturalistic Theatre and the Theatre of Mood.’ Citing artistic theories of Schopenhauer, Voltaire, and others, he reiterated that the naturalism of some MAT productions left no room for the spectator’s imagination. He related that Chekhov had responded to hearing that the production of *Seagull* would have off-stage sound effects of frogs croaking, dragonflies humming, and dogs barking, with the objection that the stage was art.

“There is a genre painting by Kramskoy in which the faces are portrayed superbly. What would happen if you cut the nose out of one of the paintings and substituted a real one? The nose would be ‘realistic’ but the picture would be ruined.”<sup>60</sup> Meyerhold asserted that naturalism has conventions of its own. Historical productions turned the stage into an “antique shop” and the production of *Julius Caesar* had neglected to convey the rhythmical construction of the play with its conflict of two forces, the plebeians versus “Caesarism,” and the emphasis on make-up and costume neglected the expressive, plastic potential of the actor’s body.

Stanislavski continued to try to ensure that MAT was keeping up with the times in experimenting with symbolism and the other modernist movements. Though Stanislavski had mixed feelings about Maeterlinck’s work, Chekhov had taken great interest in it and three one-act plays had been staged in 1904. The line of fantasy and intuition developing from Ostrovsky’s *The Snow Maiden* of 1900 led from this to Maeterlinck’s *The Bluebird* in 1908 directed by Stanislavski.

In 1906, the year when Stanislavski began to formulate his System of acting, he enrolled Briusov and Tolstoyan Leopold Antonovich Sulerzhitskii into the MAT. More stylization was attempted the first time the System was applied in *The Drama of Life* in 1907. Stanislavski was trying to work out a new starting point to rehearsal, using improvisation, rather than the normal round-the-table analysis, to Nemirovich-Danchenko’s dismay. However, this production was well received, apparently winning him over, and this and *The Bluebird* were seen as moving away from naturalism. Stanislavski writes, “The decadents are pleased, the realists disturbed, the bourgeois offended” and that “The Left applauded and shouted ‘Death to realism!’ and the Right, ‘Shame on the Art Theatre! Down with the decadents! Long live the old kind of theatre!’”<sup>61</sup>

Laurence Senelick notes, “Briusov was ecstatic, feeling that the MAT had definitively turned its back on kitchen-sink realism. It would chalk up twenty-seven performances, a decent number but far from the popularity of Ibsen’s *Brand*.”<sup>62</sup> A further attempt to combine realism and stylization took place in *Life of Man*, in 1907. Nemirovich-Danchenko was disturbed, protesting that the method was derived from the shortcomings of the actors, not the play.<sup>63</sup> The result was the *grotesque* – very fashionable at the time.<sup>64</sup>

Art critic A.V. Lunacharskii, who was to become the first Soviet People's Commissar of Education, responsible for culture and education after the 1917 Revolution, defended MAT, criticizing Meyerhold's plans for a conventionalized theatre.

In a speech in October 1908, on the tenth anniversary of the MAT, Stanislavski asserts:

Shchepkin, Chekhov and our theatre have merged into a general aspiration for artistic simplicity and truth on stage [...] Following the evolutions of our art, we have completed a full circle and after ten years we have returned again to realism, enriched by work and experience [...] This period will be consecrated to creativity, based on simple and natural principles of the psychology and physiology of human nature.<sup>65</sup>

Latterly, there had been a more fruitful period as they began to combine “the old with the new” and to bring out the “new” more expressively. *Woe from Wit* of 1906 and the 1908 production of Gogol's *The Government Inspector* (where Stanislavski began to use the vocabulary of the System) were the best examples of this.<sup>66</sup> The ferment over realism was artistically productive.

### **Artistic maturity (1909 onwards)**

After this, a refined realism – similar to that of *Drama of Life* and *Life of Man* – was sought. In 1909, the MAT Board decided on a production of Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*, and *Hamlet* with Edward Gordon Craig – a new collaborator for Stanislavski (as was dancer Isadora Duncan) – and Leonid Andreyev's *Anathema*, among other plays.

Nemirovich-Danchenko staged *Anathema* in 1909. In Stanislavski's synopsis of Nemirovich's discussion of the production, he criticized the artistic direction of the theatre, its lack of progressiveness, loss of civil boldness, and the trivialization of its realism in that theatre form and the writer's role had been moved to the background. Nemirovich contends “realism refined to the symbolic.”<sup>67</sup>

Stanislavski directed *A Month in the Country*, also playing the role of Rakitin in 1909. It was a huge success; the significance of Stanislavski's artistic contribution as a director was seen to be as significant as Turgenev's and brought about further

discoveries concerning the System. Stanislavski was studying the work of Théodule Ribot, which was to help him with his ideas of attention and affective memory. He used a Tolstoyan aesthetic; Tolstoy's self-observation and understanding of humanity was a model, and views on the purpose of art as emotional infection were influential.

*Hamlet*, in 1911, though critically acclaimed was a difficult process in terms of working with Craig and brought new disappointments for Stanislavski. He and Nemirovich-Danchenko had hoped for a new branch of realistic art.<sup>68</sup> Instead, Stanislavski "realised that the actors of the Art Theatre had mastered some new inner techniques and had used them with notable success in the contemporary repertoire, but we had not found the appropriate ways and means to communicate plays of heroic stature and there were still many years of hard work to do."<sup>69</sup> He states, "Again we confuse and again we enrich realism. I do not doubt that each abstraction, stylisation, impressionism on stage is achieved by refined and deepened realism. All other paths are false and dead. Meyerhold proved this." He is referring to the Studio experiments and Meyerhold's work with Vera Komissarzhevskaya."<sup>70</sup>

Stanislavski was at a further stage of development of the System, using new exercises in the work on *Hamlet* and also in Tolstoy's *The Living Corpse*. At first, he writes about the link between experiencing and "bodily nature" – "the unbroken link of physical sensation with spiritual experiencings is a law established by nature itself, the return journey for the arousal of our will" from the physical to the spiritual.<sup>71</sup> Delsartean Sergei Mikhailovich Volkonskii was also involved as Stanislavski attempted new experiments with external expression, including voice work, and had introduced Stanislavski to the work of Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, whose work Stanislavski had seen at Hellerau, with stage design by Adolphe Appia. In 1912, Jaques-Dalcroze gave a demonstration of eurhythmics with his students at MAT.

Meyerhold and A. Ya Golovin wrote to Stanislavski that they were concerned he was carrying by himself the entire weight of the crisis emanating from the struggle between two tendencies at MAT: "the old," "naturalistic" and the "new" "way out to new paths."<sup>72</sup> There was a problem finding suitable contemporary writing, and classics were seen as the main repertoire. Stanislavski wrote, before the 1913 production of Molière's *Le Malade imaginaire*, explaining "we have to find a genuine (not Meyerholdian) - emotionally experienced, succulent grotesque. I am mortally afraid of a flop [...]"<sup>73</sup> The production was a great success, reviving the theatre.



What followed were experiments with *commedia dell'arte* in Carlo Goldoni's *The Mistress of the Inn*,<sup>74</sup> then the outbreak of war in 1914 meant that there was a call for patriotic plays. Stanislavski thought that "stage war at such a time is an insult and a caricature."<sup>75</sup> MAT responded by mounting three short Pushkin plays: *The Stone Guest*, *A Feast in Time of War*, and *Mozart and Salieri* – where Stanislavski played Salieri. In view of the context, Stanislavski looked for a contemporary analogy, comparing the atmosphere of the city being destroyed by plague in *A Feast*, with the atmosphere of Belgium under German occupation. Some found this naive, if not funny. V.M. Bebutov and Alexander Benois, set designer from the World of Art working with MAT, explained to Stanislavski that Pushkin was an enemy of crude naturalism and Stanislavski withdrew the idea.<sup>76</sup> The impact of external events on theatre became increasingly significant.

### **The studios: debates with Vakhtangov and Mikhail Chekhov**

The System was adopted by MAT but with opposition, so Stanislavski decided to create a theatre studio in 1912 to develop his work on it. His protege Vakhtangov had worked at MAT since 1911 but was not getting good opportunities. Mikhail (Michael) Aleksandrovich Chekhov joined the studio from 1912 to 1917. Vakhtangov was seen as creating a theatre at the "intersection between two artistic extremes [...] the 'realism' of Stanislavsky at one end of the scale and the conventionalized theatre represented by Meyerhold at the other."<sup>77</sup> Moreover, in 1922, Vakhtangov wrote to Nemirovich-Danchenko saying that he had joined together what he had learned from Nemirovich and from Stanislavski.<sup>78</sup> Chekhov explained that Nemirovich always found the "main line", the "scaffolding" of the performance, and Stanislavski, the "human, warm-hearted feelings, emotions, atmosphere." Vakhtangov also drew from Tairov's approach.<sup>79</sup>

Sulerzhitskii was the first director and spiritual leader of the studio propounding "spiritual naturalism" derived from Tolstoy's philosophies. Theatre should reveal the essential humanity of people and communicate the "life of the human spirit." Herman Heierman's *The Wreck of the Hope* (1913), Vladimir Volkenstein's *Wandering Minstrels* (1914), and Charles Dickens' *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1914) were developed with Richard Boleslavsky and Boris Mikhailovich

Sushkievich, supervised by Sulerzhitskii and Stanislavski, encouraging experiencing and improvisation, and working with the actors as creative individuals.

Vakhtangov began directing independently and, while espousing Sulerzhitskii's spiritual ideals, developed his own approach, causing problems with his mentors. When working on Hauptmann's *The Festival of Peace* in 1913, Vakhtangov emphasized internal at the expense of external technique, leading the actors into inwardly focused emotional states apparently lacking clarity of external expression. Others thought that the actors' performances possessed an unusual truth, a full commitment by the actor to the life on stage.<sup>80</sup> Rudnitsky writes: "'Relatively quickly,' recalled Alexei Popov, 'in the course of something like two or three years of vertiginous fame, in the Studio were sown the seeds of an ironic attitude to the "system" and to the ethical foundation of Stanislavsky's teaching.'"<sup>81</sup>

Sulerzhitskii died in 1916; Nemirovich-Danchenko expressed disappointment in the Studio, where "the deeply naturalistic direction of KSS remains,"<sup>82</sup> while Stanislavski warned the studio about the bad influence of the theatre.<sup>83</sup> The First Studio was followed by the Second and others, with Vakhtangov and Mikhail Chekhov setting up their own studios. In 1924, the First Studio became the Second Moscow Art Theatre. Vakhtangov formed the Mansurov Studio (which had become the Third MAT Studio in 1919).

Stanislavski, in the move from external to inner truth, began to emphasize the actor's belief. In response to the assertion that everything on stage is false, he writes:

In the theatre what is important is not whether Othello's dagger is *papier mâché* or metal, but whether the actor's inner feeling truly, genuinely justifies Othello's suicide [...] the more real surroundings are onstage, the nearer to nature the actor's experiencing should be, but often what we see is quite different. A realistic setting is created, décor, props, everything about them is true, but the truth of the feelings and experiencing in acting is forgotten.<sup>84</sup>

Vakhtangov found this insufficient, pointing out a contradiction "between the stage attention of the actor and his creative attitude to the object of his attention."<sup>85</sup> For example, the actor has to admire a landscape when in fact s/he is looking at a prop window, beyond which is the rubbish in the wings. Vakhtangov developed a formula:

“I perceive (see, hear, smell etc) everything as it is given, I relate to everything as it is set.”

Since performing as Salieri in 1915, Stanislavski had begun new experiments with outer expression, believing he had achieved the inner feeling but not the outer realization of the role.<sup>86</sup> In Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm* in 1918, Vakhtangov strove for fusion of the actor and image. Stanislavski had discussed enabling the actor to overcome the unnatural situation on stage by fusion of the personality of the actor with the personality of the character. Vakhtangov’s aim was to encourage the actors to “‘live in the image’ of the character, not to ‘be’ the character.”<sup>87</sup> He developed fantastic realism, whereby the actor’s fantasy was central to the creative process as imagination in action, and the actor’s ability to fully express the image of the character.<sup>88</sup>

Stanislavski’s working relationship with Mikhail Chekhov was similarly conflicted. In 1917, Stanislavski directed *Twelfth Night*, with Chekhov as Malvolio, in the First Studio. Chekhov always stated that his own method was rooted in the System and writes that in the very successful MAT production of Gogol’s *Government Inspector* in 1921, Stanislavski gave him the keys to the role, the root of his ideas of “psychological gesture.”<sup>89</sup> Ref?

After a personal crisis in 1918, Mikhail Chekhov opened his own studio, moving further away from Stanislavski to a metaphysical vision influenced by his belief in anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner’s spiritual philosophy. Though Stanislavski appears to have used some of Chekhov’s anthroposophy-influenced ideas on acting in his talks in the Bolshoi Opera Studio, 1918–22, he saw Chekhov’s *Hamlet* as a betrayal.<sup>90</sup> It has been suggested that he was upset because his own production of Byron’s *Cain*, intended to be a “modern mystery play,” had failed in the same theatre.<sup>91</sup> Chekhov in his own method as time went on worked with the image of the character, archetypes, and gesture, drawing from Vakhtangov’s emphasis on the essence of the character, rather than from similarities of experience with the actor or external characteristics. The Russian Anthroposophical Society, deemed suspect along with other mystical movements, was closed in 1923 and Chekhov and his work denounced in 1927. He emigrated and met Stanislavski for the last time in 1928 in Berlin, where they discussed the differences between them, mainly whether the actor

should bring personal feelings into creative work.<sup>92</sup> Mikhail Chekhov's ideas would develop into a lasting approach over time.

### **Revolution and the 1920s**

At the MAT, in the year of the 1917 Revolution, Stanislavski rehearsed the role of Rostanev in *The Village of Stepanchikogo*, based on Dostoyevsky's novel. Nemirovich-Danchenko as director withdrew him from the cast after 156 rehearsals, saying that he had failed to bring life to the part. Stanislavski lost confidence and thereafter played only roles he had created previously. He put his faith in the work of the studios.<sup>93</sup> The post-Revolutionary period proved difficult for MAT, as for other theatres, financially and in terms of repertoire. Lunacharskii declared:

The Revolution said to the theatre: 'Theatre, I need you. I need you, but not so that I, the Revolution, can relax in comfortable seats in a beautiful hall and enjoy a show after all the hard work and battles [...] I need you as a helper, as a searchlight, as an advisor. I want to see my friends and enemies on your stage [...] I want also to study them through your methods.'<sup>94</sup>

The role to be played by MAT was uncertain. One solution came from the reforms by Elena Malinovskaya, who was given responsibility for the State Academic Theatres. Given the task to improve the standard of acting in opera at the Bolshoi Theatre, Stanislavski organized the Bolshoi Opera Studio from 1918, with productive results. In 1922, directing *Evgeny Onegin* (*Eugene Onegin*) at the Bolshoi Theatre, he writes, "I have even convinced case-hardened artists of the Bolshoi theatre that even in opera one can live by the authentic creative feeling of the actor"(see chapter four).<sup>95</sup>

In 1919, all theatres were nationalized and MAT was renamed the Moscow Art Academic Theatre (MAAT). Difficulties arose in 1919 during the Civil War, when part of the MAAT troupe including Olga Knipper-Chekhova, the widow of Anton Chekhov, and Kachalov, who were touring the Ukraine, could not return through war zones to Moscow. They spent the next three years touring Europe.

Despite the atheism of Marxism and the revolutionary leaders, there was an interest in the early period of the Revolution in modern mystery plays, and Stanislavski worked on Byron's *Cain*, which he had been unable to produce in 1907 because of objections by the church. Seeing the theme as the nature of good and evil,

he directed it in 1920 “as a mystery play performed in a Gothic cathedral, with Lucifer as an anarchist, God a conservative and Cain a Bolshevik.”<sup>96</sup> Costs for the design proved prohibitive and there were further problems. The production had only eight performances and the MAAT was seen as being incapable of responding to the contemporary situation.

Lunacharskii attempted to protect the theatre, though officials of the Theatrical Section of the Commissariat for Enlightenment – including Meyerhold, who had become Head in 1920 – regarded it as obsolete. Meyerhold began the “Theatrical October” movement to create a new proletarian theatre. He and V.M. Bebutov published ‘The Solitude of Stanislavski’ in 1921, praising Stanislavski’s genius, asking him to leave MAAT and join Theatrical October.<sup>97</sup> *The Government Inspector* was produced in 1921 and, just before Vakhtangov’s death, the Knipper-Chekhova and Kachalov group returned. Stanislavski had no thought of leaving MAAT but writes to Nemirovich-Danchenko, in 1922, “To go on in the old way is impossible, but we lack the people to embark on a new way.”<sup>98</sup> He said that they had to be careful not to admit to being apolitical, in view of the need to be seen as a Soviet theatre, and to emphasize publicly how well they were treated by the Soviet government, although that was not true.

Stanislavski formed an ensemble from new and old actors to rework former MAT productions *Tsar Fiodor*, *The Lower Depths*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*, and *A Provincial Lady*, for a tour in Europe and America. It had been agreed with the government that this tour could take place to raise money, and to promote Russian theatre internationally, while the other parts of the company remained in Russia under the leadership of Nemirovich-Danchenko and others. In 1922, the Communist Party was disregarding Lunacharskii’s recommendations on the Academic theatres and threatening closures, and problems regarding the future and administration of these theatres continued while the tours took place.

Certain troupe members such as Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaia were to remain in America, inspiring the work of Lee Strasberg and others with their teachings of the System and its emphases (including Vakhtangov’s innovations). Meanwhile Stanislavski worked on the English version of *My Life in Art*, which was published in 1924. The company was received with great acclaim for the productions

named above, and others that were added during the tours, but unfortunately the funds that it was hoped the tours would generate did not materialize.

### **Back to Ostrovsky!**

Stanislavski finally returned in 1924 to a Soviet Union where Lenin had died and Meyerhold and the avant-garde were in the ascendant. In 1922, an article ‘On the Ideological Front,’ in *Pravda*, by a member of the Proletarian Cultural Organization, V.F. Pletnyov, asserted the need for the proletariat to reconstruct the basis of art from the root, “having broken with all previous cultures, especially bourgeois culture.”<sup>99</sup> A movement called Back to Ostrovsky was launched in 1923 by Lunacharskii, re-asserting the necessity of the Russian realist tradition. In this conflicted situation, Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote to Stanislavski in 1924 that

*Uncle Vanya* is out of the question. *Three Sisters* should not even begin rehearsal, considering the content and the age of the actors and actresses. *The Cherry Orchard* will not be allowed [...] they won’t allow a play which is seen to lament the lost estates of the gentry [...] *Ivanov* is completely out of tune with this positive, ‘cheerful’ epoch.<sup>100</sup>

Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote to the State Academic Council indicating the understanding that productions from the old repertoire which were “fully acceptable as works of literature” but had an obsolete stage format, would not be acceptable either.<sup>101</sup>

A new program of work for MAT was launched, and Ostrovsky’s *The Ardent Heart*, experimenting further with the grotesque, directed by Stanislavski and I.Ya. Sudakov, was successful, earning accolades from Meyerhold. Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The White Guard*, based on his novel *The Days of the Turbins*, was staged in 1926. Stanislavski had been reluctant, thinking it was agit-prop,<sup>102</sup> but then supported the production through a period where the fact that it centered on the fortunes of a “White” – therefore, anti-revolutionary – family in the Ukraine in the Civil War drew controversy ideologically, though it was a huge popular success. Withdrawn because of the pressures in 1929, it was reinstated in 1932 when it was revealed that it was Joseph Stalin’s favorite play, because it demonstrated, ultimately, the invincibility of the Red, Bolshevik forces.

Anton Chekhov productions were reinstated and the work with opera (in 1926, *Evgeny Onegin*, *Marriage of Figaro*) at the Bolshoi and the new Stanislavski Opera Studio was successful. Work began on the adaptation of Vsevolod Ivanov's *The Armoured Train No. 14-69*, about the conflicts of the Civil War and the conversion of a peasant farmer to Bolshevism. Despite difficulties, it was staged in 1927 to great acclaim.

In 1928, Stanislavski had a heart attack while appearing as Vershinin in *Three Sisters*. He did not perform again but continued directing and writing for the last ten years of his life.

In the same year, Leonid Leonov's *Untilovsk* had only twenty performances and Lunacharskii viewed it as a backward step. V.P. Kataev's *Embezzlers* was in rehearsal along with *Boris Godunov* at the Opera Studio, but was taken off after only eighteen performances. Work began on Bulgakov's *Flight*, but it was attacked as counter-revolutionary by the Union of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) and Stalin deemed it anti-Soviet. Stanislavski wrote to the editors of newspapers *Izvestia*, *Pravda*, and *Contemporary Theatre* explaining: "The evolution of our theatre along the paths of contemporary socialisation is taking place with great difficulty, but I think that each of our contemporary plays staged by the theatre, not to mention *Armoured Train*, has explained much and given much to the theatre" and protesting against "unfounded attacks."<sup>103</sup> In *My Life in Art*, he asserted the importance and difficulty of capturing "the essence of the life of the present-day man [...] created by suffering, struggle, acts of bravery amid disasters, hunger and revolutionary turmoil of unprecedented cruelty,"<sup>104</sup> and asserted that there was as yet no dramatist who could capture this, as Chekhov had captured the essence of Russian life at the beginning of the MAT. The revolutionaries wanted new for the sake of new, theatricalism, conventionalism, external methods. He expanded on these ideas in 1929 in a letter from Nice to the MAT Collective, where as well as new writers he envisages "authentic actors who know how to speak, not just in words and voices but also with their eyes, soulful outbursts, radiant emotions, commands of the will," along with new staging methods, "not, of course, of the kind and I have cultivated for so long and which have come to be the cliché known as Stanislavskian naturalism [...] not [...] that now considered new and fashionable [...] but [...] that will help and not hinder the Actor." However, he laments, "where is one to find this *Actor*?"<sup>105</sup>

Stanislavski continued to deplore the present state of acting, while preparing *An Actor's Work* for publication, wrestling with problems including how to discuss experiencing emotions without the book being deemed "ultra-naturalistic."<sup>106</sup> Unfortunately, the initial publication in America of the first part of the work as *An Actor Prepares* gave the impression that the actor's experiencing was the core of the System, neglecting the training in embodiment of the second part of the work. Nonetheless its influence was profound.

### **The final period and socialist realism**

A production of *Othello* in 1930 was initially seen as successful but had to be withdrawn after the sudden death of one cast member and the accident of another. In 1931, A.N. Afinogenov's *Fear* and Bulgakov's adaptation of Gogol's *Dead Souls* began to be planned at MAAT, with *Boris Godunov*, *The Golden Cockerel*, and *The Barber of Seville* at the Opera Theatre. In January 1931, at a meeting of RAPP, MAAT was accused by Afinogenov of having "idealistic roots [...] inimical to the method of proletarian theatre."<sup>107</sup> The System's methodology was also condemned, but Stanislavski discussed this with Afinogenov. *Fear*, about the reluctance of elderly intellectuals to accept the Soviets, took place in December, directed by Sudakov. It was regarded as a great conquest for Soviet theatre

Gorky, now regarded as the quintessential Soviet playwright, drew Stanislavski's attention to *The Suicide*, N.R. Erdman's satire of Soviet society. Stanislavski sent the script to Stalin, stating: "The means the author uses to show real-life petit-bourgeois people and their abnormality is totally novel and yet completely in accord with Russian realism and its best representatives like Gogol and Shchedrin and is close to the direction our own theatres take."<sup>108</sup> Stalin replied that he thought the play was harmful, and, in the increasing repression of the arts, Erdman's play was banned and not performed until the 1970s.

In January 1932, Stanislavski addressed the Delegates to the Eighth All-Union Congress of Art Workers, continuing to emphasize that theatrical art had "forgotten the most important thing – the inner essence [...] Young drama has achieved a few successes in the technique of writing, but a revolutionary theme will be deepened within the psychology of modern human beings. Russian literature, which up to now [...] is grounded in negative types, seeks positive images of its heroes."<sup>109</sup> In order to



compete with cinema, the work of the actor should be developed in a way that avoided “formalism and the lack of personal responsibility” – approaches that result in the actor “overstraining” and in “hackwork.”

That year, the Central Committee of the Communist Party’s resolution, ‘On Restructuring Literary and Artistic Organisations,’ marked the official end to radical experimentation in the arts, and Meyerhold’s system of training, biomechanics, was attacked. In 1934, the concept of socialist realism became dogmatized, with Gorky’s original view of art used as a basis for Stalin’s distorted view of reality dictating the way for the arts, promoting and idealizing socialism.

What was possible in art was to become increasingly restricted. Meanwhile, Stanislavski continued to find ways to develop a repertoire that would conform with the current ethos, without betraying his ideal of art. He wrote from Nice to congratulate Nemirovich-Danchenko on a production of Gorky’s *Egor Bulychev* and says: “We are lagging behind the Third Studio and other theatres! We have got to correct this shortcoming of ours and approach some of the more talented writers and egg them on to write and help them more.” He said that he could say nothing about *The Lie* and Afinogenov.<sup>110</sup> This play had been withdrawn after rehearsals had begun because Stalin found fault with it. Stanislavski agreed with Nemirovich that they would not be allowed to mount Bulgakov’s *Flight*, “just as we didn’t succeed in putting on the magnificent play *The Suicide* by Erdman.”

In 1935, the All-Union Committee for Artistic Affairs was established with all theatres put under its supervision in 1936. Over half the new plays and productions of the main theatres of the Soviet Union in the 1936–37 season were forbidden, seen as being insufficiently socialist-realist or too formalist.<sup>111</sup> In 1936, a campaign against formalism – any idea of art for art’s sake, independent of moral, social and political values – was launched. The Committee for Artistic Affairs recognized the value of Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko’s work.<sup>112</sup> It was decided that Stanislavski’s System was confirmed by the discoveries of I.P. Pavlov, the scientist whose work on reflex responses was now espoused as being fundamental to the science of the revolution. This led to much misinterpretation of the System, and the idea that Stanislavski had moved away from his earlier teaching where the actor’s experiencing is based in affective memory, in order to emphasize reflex action.<sup>113</sup> He worked as far as he was able, rehearsing with the Opera Theatre, with a new Opera-Dramatic Studio

opening in 1936. He attempted to involve Meyerhold in the work of MAT but to no avail, and Meyerhold was executed in 1940. Nemirovich-Danchenko lived until 1943. When Stanislavski died, on 7 August 1938, his directing work was legendary.

## Conclusion

Consistent in Stanislavski's work as a director throughout his life was the belief that art had a higher purpose in social, humanist terms of inspiring understanding and compassion in others. In order to do so, it had to be informed by the truth-of-life experience of the artist. The actor was central to this in theatre, as important as the writer. Nemirovich-Danchenko's literary emphases brought about conflict with Stanislavski, and Meyerhold's director-centred theatre also presented an opposing view. Stanislavski investigated different ideas of realism, including how conventionalized and stylized theatre can also, crucially, be based in the "real" experience of the actor. Thus his ideas would enable communication with others, and provoke arguments and experiments which continue to be pertinent today.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Julia Listengarten, 'Stanislavsky and the Avant-Garde', in *The Routledge Companion to Stanislavsky*, ed. R. Andrew White (London: Routledge, 2014).
- <sup>2</sup> Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 72.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 69–70.
- <sup>4</sup> Otto Brahm established the Freie Bühne, a theatre with similar aims, in Germany in 1889.
- <sup>5</sup> I.N. Vinogradskaya, *Zhizn' i tvorchestvo K.S. Stanislavskogo*, 1 (Moscow: Moskovskii Khudozhestvennyi Teatr, 2003), 494.
- <sup>6</sup> Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism, Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 69, 319.
- <sup>7</sup> Tatyana Konstantinovna Shakh-Azizova, *Chekhov i Zapadno-Evropeiskaya Drama ego Vremeni* (Moskva: Nauka, 1966), 30.
- <sup>8</sup> Christopher Innes, ed. *A Sourcebook on Naturalist Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2001), 13.
- <sup>9</sup> For a production in 1877 of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, Stanislavski went to great pains to make the costumes, movement and manners of the Japanese characters as authentic as possible.
- <sup>10</sup> Konstantin Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, trans. and ed. Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2008), 113.
- <sup>11</sup> Moi, *Henrik Ibsen*, 4.
- <sup>12</sup> Alexander Pushkin, 'Notes on Popular Drama and on M.P. Pogodin's *Martha, the Governor's Wife*', in *Pushkin on Literature*, trans. and ed. Tatiana Wolff (London: Methuen, 1971), 264–5 and following quotations.
- <sup>13</sup> Laurence Senelick, *Serf Actor: The Life and Art of Mikhail Shchepkin* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984), xiv, xvi and following quotation.
- <sup>14</sup> See Jim Davis, ed. *European Theatre Performance Practice, 1750–1900* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), Part 1 Acting and Performance.

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- <sup>15</sup> Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 29.
- <sup>16</sup> Konstantin Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky: A Life in Letters*, trans. and ed. Laurence Senelick (London: Routledge, 2014), 369.
- <sup>17</sup> K.S. Stanislavskii, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, 2 (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1989), 265.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 14.
- <sup>19</sup> Moi, *Henrik Ibsen*, 272.
- <sup>20</sup> Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary*, trans. and ed. Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2014), 114.
- <sup>21</sup> A phrase used by N.G. Chernyshevskii, which Stanislavski used to indicate that good acting must involve experiencing as in life.
- <sup>22</sup> Stanislavskii, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, 2: 33, 154.
- <sup>23</sup> Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 166.
- <sup>24</sup> O.A. Radischeva, *Stanislavskii i Nemirovich-Danchenko – Istoriya teatral'nykh otnoshenii*, 1897–1908, 1 (Moscow: Artist. Rezhisser. Teatr, 1997), 32.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 151-2. He had formed this belief during his work with the Society, after reading a translation of a French article on the subject.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, 41.
- <sup>27</sup> Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 182.
- <sup>28</sup> Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky: A Life in Letters*, 64-5, 67.
- <sup>29</sup> Radischeva, *Stanislavskii i Nemirovich-Danchenko*, 1: 93.
- <sup>30</sup> Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky: A Life in Letters*, 4–5.
- <sup>31</sup> Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 183.
- <sup>32</sup> Radischeva, *Stanislavskii i Nemirovich-Danchenko*, 1: 93 and following quotation.
- <sup>33</sup> Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 197.
- <sup>34</sup> Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky: A Life in Letters*, 123.
- <sup>35</sup> Radischeva, *Stanislavskii i Nemirovich-Danchenko*, 1: 102.
- <sup>36</sup> Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2005), 17.
- <sup>37</sup> Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski: His Life and Art*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1999), 16.
- <sup>38</sup> Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 193.
- <sup>39</sup> Anton Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought; Selected Letters and Commentary*, trans. M. Heim with S. Karlinsky, ed. and intro. S. Karlinsky (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 277.
- <sup>40</sup> Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 194.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.
- <sup>42</sup> See Rose Whyman, *The Stanislavsky System of Acting: Legacy and Influence in Modern Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 86–91.
- <sup>43</sup> Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 152.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 191, italics in original.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 215–18.
- <sup>46</sup> Radischeva, *Stanislavskii i Nemirovich-Danchenko*, 1: 158.
- <sup>47</sup> Benedetti, *Stanislavski: His Life and Art*, 126.
- <sup>48</sup> Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 226.
- <sup>49</sup> Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky: A Life in Letters*, 158.
- <sup>50</sup> Radischeva, *Stanislavskii i Nemirovich-Danchenko*, 1: 162. Stanislavski refers to the emphasis on authenticity in setting, customs and so on as “ethnography” which “crushed the actor and the drama itself.”
- <sup>51</sup> Benedetti, *Stanislavski: His Life and Art*, 127.
- <sup>52</sup> Radischeva, *Stanislavskii i Nemirovich-Danchenko*, 1: 179.
- <sup>53</sup> Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 218.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 231–2 and following quotation.
- <sup>55</sup> See Radischeva, *Stanislavskii i Nemirovich-Danchenko*, 1: 176-9.

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- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., 188 and following quotations.
- <sup>57</sup> Valery Iakovlevich Briusov, 'Nienuzhnaya Pravda', *Mir Iskusstvo*, 4, 1902.
- <sup>58</sup> Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 244.
- <sup>59</sup> Radishcheva, *Stanislavskii i Nemirovich-Danchenko*, 1: 262.
- <sup>60</sup> V. E. Meyerhold, 'The Naturalistic Theatre and the Theatre of Mood', in Edward Braun, trans. and ed. *Meyerhold on Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1991), 23–34.
- <sup>61</sup> Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 264.
- <sup>62</sup> Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky: A Life in Letters*, 228, translator's note.
- <sup>63</sup> Vinogradskaia, *Zhizn' i tvorchestvo K.S. Stanislavskogo*, 2: 86.
- <sup>64</sup> Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 275.
- <sup>65</sup> Vinogradskaia, *Zhizn' i tvorchestvo K.S. Stanislavskogo*, 2: 141.
- <sup>66</sup> Radischeva, *Stanislavskii i Nemirovich-Danchenko*, 1: 414–15.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid., 2: 10.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid., 42.
- <sup>69</sup> Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 297.
- <sup>70</sup> Radischeva, *Stanislavskii i Nemirovich-Danchenko*, 2: 42.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid., 115.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid., 141–2.
- <sup>73</sup> Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky: A Life in Letters*, 321.
- <sup>74</sup> *Commedia dell'arte* was of great importance in avant-garde experiments, particularly those of Meyerhold, in the revolutionary period in Russia, in the attempt to find popular forms that would engage new audiences.
- <sup>75</sup> Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, 313.
- <sup>76</sup> Radischeva, *Stanislavskii i Nemirovich-Danchenko*, 2: 236.
- <sup>77</sup> Nick Worrall, *Modernism to Realism on the Soviet Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 76.
- <sup>78</sup> See Whyman, *The Stanislavski System of Acting*, 164, and following quote.
- <sup>79</sup> Andrei Malaev-Babel, *The Vakhtangov Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2011), 4–5.
- <sup>80</sup> Whyman, *The Stanislavski System*, 158.
- <sup>81</sup> Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre, Tradition and the Avant Garde*, trans. Roxanne Permar (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988), 22.
- <sup>82</sup> Radischeva, *Stanislavskii i Nemirovich-Danchenko*, 2: 256.
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid., 261.
- <sup>84</sup> Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 154.
- <sup>85</sup> Boris Zakhava, *Vospominaniya. Spektakli i Roli. Stat'i* (Moscow: Vserossiiskoe Teatral'noe Obshchestvo, 1982), 51–2 and following quotation.
- <sup>86</sup> Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, 314.
- <sup>87</sup> Kh. Khersonskii, *Vakhtangov* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardia, 1940), 208–9.
- <sup>88</sup> Malaev-Babel, *The Vakhtangov Sourcebook*, 34.
- <sup>89</sup> Michael Chekhov, *Lessons for the Professional Actor*, ed. Deirdre Hurst du Prey (New York: Performing Arts Publications, 1985), 118–19.
- <sup>90</sup> Vinogradskaia, *Zhizn' i tvorchestvo K.S. Stanislavskogo*, 3: 356–7.
- <sup>91</sup> Laurence Senelick, 'Brief Encounters: Michael Chekhov and Shakespeare', in *The Routledge Companion*, ed. Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu and Yana Meerzon (London: Routledge, 2015), 152.
- <sup>92</sup> See Whyman, *The Stanislavski System*, 195–203.
- <sup>93</sup> Radischeva, *Stanislavskii i Nemirovich-Danchenko*, 3: 8.
- <sup>94</sup> Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre*, 41.
- <sup>95</sup> Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky: A Life in Letters*, 398.
- <sup>96</sup> See Benedetti, *Stanislavski: His Life and Art*, 261–7.
- <sup>97</sup> V.E. Meyerhold, 'The Solitude of Stanislavski', in Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 175–80.

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- <sup>98</sup> Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky: A Life in Letters*, 402–3.
- <sup>99</sup> Worrall, *Modernism to Realism on the Soviet Stage*, 10.
- <sup>100</sup> Anatoly Smeliansky, ‘Chekhov at the Moscow Art Theatre’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, ed. Vera Gottlieb and Paul Allain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 31.
- <sup>101</sup> Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky: A Life in Letters*, 453.
- <sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 468.
- <sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 499.
- <sup>104</sup> Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 336.
- <sup>105</sup> Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky: A Life in Letters*, 524–5.
- <sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 538.
- <sup>107</sup> Vinogradskaja, *Zhizn’ i tvorcestvo K.S. Stanislavskogo*, 4: 127.
- <sup>108</sup> Benedetti, *Stanislavski: His Life and Art*, 343.
- <sup>109</sup> Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky: A Life in Letters*, 553 and following quotations.
- <sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 584 and following quotation.
- <sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 569.
- <sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 598.
- <sup>113</sup> See Whyman, *The Stanislavsky System*, 73–6.