

## STANISLAVSKI TODAY

The year 2008 marks the seventieth anniversary of Stanislavski's death. Like his near contemporaries, Freud and Einstein, he has become a household name. It is common to talk about 'subtext', a term which he invented, and yet his fundamental ideas are still, for historical reasons that are discussed elsewhere, badly understood. Serious study of the 'system' has only taken place within the last thirty to forty years and is closely related to the development of the study of theatre, as opposed to dramatic literature, in secondary education, universities, colleges and drama schools.

Konstantin Sergeevich Alekseev (Stanislavski) was born in 1863 into a family of rich textile manufacturers. The Alekseev factories had the monopoly on the manufacture of all gold and silver thread throughout the Russian empire. The family's wealth was enormous. There was an expression in Moscow, 'rich as Alekseev'. Stanislavski's mother was the daughter of a French actress, who had made her name in Petersburg.

Stanislavski was born in the midst of an outburst of artistic activity in music, ballet and literature that created what we today call Russian culture. The Alekseev household was a centre for the arts. There was a constant flow of writers, painters, sculptors, dancers, musicians and singers.

The family passion was the theatre, everything from the circus to the Bolshoi opera. Serious drama meant the Maly Theatre, the cradle of the Russian school of acting and 'my university' as Stanislavski called it. Founded in 1823, the Maly's approach to acting was defined by two authors, Pushkin and Gogol, and the actor/director Mikhaïl Shchepkin, who ran the

theatre for thirty years. For Pushkin it was essential that what took place on stage should be credible and probable within the dramatic action the author had created. It was not the sets and costumes that mattered but the authenticity of the relationships between the characters. Gogol insisted that the actor in the first instance should concentrate on the psychology of the character; what drives him. Only then should he consider the externals of behaviour and appearance. In his *Memoirs and Letters* Shchepkin charts his progress from conventional acting to the kind of simplicity and naturalness that Gogol required. Stanislavski's heavily annotated copy of his *Memoirs* still exists.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, under the Tsars, literature and the theatre acquired a social and political significance far greater than that which they enjoyed elsewhere. All books on philosophy or politics were banned. The novel, the short story and the play became, therefore, the media in which social issues were discussed. Russian readers and theatre-goers became adept at discerning the political subtext.

Stanislavski's father read widely and was a subscriber to what were known as the 'thick magazines', weighty publications in which critics discussed the content and significance of contemporary literature and the ideas of the intelligentsia. The notion of the 'intelligentsia' is specifically Russian and denotes a coming together of like-minded people irrespective of class and profession. Stanislavski grew up as a member of that intelligentsia without knowing it.

The theatre had always been seen as having an educational purpose. Peter the Great built theatres as part of his programme to

westernise Russia. Catherine the Great wrote anonymously homiletic plays for the moral improvement of her people. This idea was taken up by Gogol who described the theatre as 'a platform from which to address an entire nation'. This 'platform' now had a new function: to affirm Russian national and cultural identity. The repertoire had been dominated by plays modelled on the French: neo-classical tragedies and light comedies along with melodrama. Gogol demanded that the Russian theatre should show Russian people living Russian lives. This he did in his own plays, thus paving the way for Ostrovski, Turgeniev, Tolstoi and Chekhov. Such a repertoire demanded a realistic style of acting, the creation of recognisable human beings, not stereotypes. In his notes on how to perform *The Inspector General* that the actors should at all costs avoid conventional 'comedy' acting. It was for the audience to decide who was a fool and who was not.

The regular theatre-going that Stanislavski had known ever since childhood - the circus, the ballet, the opera, the Maly – inevitably led him to want to want to create his own companies at home. Thus he created in turn a circus and a puppet theatre. In 1877 Stanislavski's father, in response to his children's passion for the theatre transformed a barn at his country estate near Moscow into a small theatre, and it was here that the origins of the 'system' can be found.

It was here that Stanislavski confronted an audience other than his own relatives for the first time. The experience of appearing on a public stage raised many questions in Stanislavski's mind. He was struck by the contrast between the ease and relaxation of the great actors, both Russian and

foreign, that he saw at the imperial Maly theatre and his own clumsy efforts. He could not understand why he could not judge the quality of his own acting, or know when he was acting well. At fourteen, he began to keep a notebook in which he analyzed his problems and maintained throughout his life until his death at the age of 75 in 1938. In addition he kept a diary in which he noted down his rehearsal methods. Even in his teens Stanislavski took his theatre-going very seriously. He and his friends would read and discuss the play before going to see it and would meet again after the performance to compare what they had seen with what they had read.

One of the larger rooms of the Alekseev town house was now turned into a theatre. Here, Stanislavski and his brothers and sisters created the Alekseev Circle, which staged, among other things, the Russian première of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado*. The productions often evoked favourable critical comment in the press.

Stanislavski made great efforts to improve his technique as an actor. Like his brothers and sisters he had been taught dance by members of the Bolshoi theatre, gymnastics and singing. He could ride and fence. He trained himself as far as he could and took further singing lessons from Fyodor Komissarzhevski of the Bolshoi opera. One summer he stayed alone in Moscow instead of going to the country and spent several hours a day in front of a mirror developing his physical skills and correcting his posture. He enrolled at a drama school when he was 21 but only stayed two weeks because all he was being taught was how to imitate older actors' tricks. What no one seemed able to define for him was the nature of the acting process.

He felt that there had to be, as he wrote in his diary for April 1885, a 'grammar' of acting.

In 1887, thanks to an unexpected legacy, Stanislavski founded the Society of Art and Literature, a company composed of semi-professionals and talented amateurs. This provided him with the opportunity to work with directors and actors, who had been trained in the realistic school of the Maly, notably Glikeria Fedotova who had been trained by Shchepkin himself and her husband Fedotov. He was systematically stripped of all his clichés, his false theatrical tricks, and made to base his acting on the observation of real life, on actual, not theatrical, behaviour. It was from Fedotov, also, that Stanislavski learned the concept of a popular theatre, one which brought the best of the repertoire to the masses at affordable prices. This became one of the fundamental objectives of the future Art Theatre.

At the same time he was developing his skills as a director. He was highly impressed by the company of the Duke of Meiningen which came on tour for the second time to Moscow. He was struck by the iron discipline that the director, Chronegk, imposed and his skilful use of sound and lighting effects. The acting, however, was at best competent. However, the notion of an ensemble with a unified concept for each production chimed in with his own developing ideas.

By 1897 the Society of Art and Literature had achieved a high reputation for its freshness of approach and the realism of its productions. It was compared favourably with the Maly. Stanislavski decided the time had come to create a professional company. Others were springing up and he was, by this time, one of the leading actors and directors of his generation

And well equipped to take on such a task. While he was making plans for his new company, he was contacted by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, a leading dramatist and critic, who shared many of his ideals. Together, after a marathon discussion of eighteen hours in June 1887, they created the Moscow Art Theatre.

During the period in which the new company was preparing for the opening of the theatre, Stanislavski formed a bond with the young Vsevolod Meyerhold, which was to last, despite serious artistic disagreements, until his death. In 1938, Stanislavski declared Meyerhold to be his heir 'in everything'.

Stanislavski had now achieved a technical mastery that enabled him to play a wide range of roles. His skill as a director and his ability to find imaginative solutions to problems of staging was unequalled. With Nemirovich-Danchenko he opened up a totally new, modern repertoire to Russian audiences: Gorki, Hauptmann, Ibsen and Symbolist dramatists, Hamsum, Andreev and Maeterlinck.

In 1906 Stanislavski experienced a personal crisis. Eight years of unremitting creative effort, the death of Chekhov and the suicide of his close friend, Savva Morozov, the patron of the Art Theatre, after the failure of the 1905 revolution had taken their toll. He had stopped feeling creative as an actor. He felt he had become mechanical, an empty shell, relying on external technique but with no real inner feeling, and without feeling an actor had nothing essential to communicate to an audience. Where once he could not wait to get to the theatre, now it had become a job. It was out of this crisis that

the 'system' was born. Over the years he had collected, as he put it, a rag-bag of ideas. The time had come to put those ideas in order. Going on holiday to Finland in the summer of 1906, he took all of his Notebooks with him and used them to write a *Draft Manual* of acting. The *Manual* and, later, the 'system' was neither a theory nor an abstraction but an analysis of practice, of what Stanislavski had observed in great actors and his own performances, most importantly his failures.

Stanislavski had always been a master of outer action and had used actions both in his own performances and in the staging that he provided to stimulate the emotions for other actors in his early production plans. He could control the externals, the moves, the spatial relationships. He could use lighting and sound to establish a mood that would help his cast find the right feelings. But how could he control inner action? How could he evoke, shape and organise feelings? How could he take the chance out of the process of acting?

He returned to Moscow a changed man, but his new ideas and methods did not gain immediate acceptance at the Art Theatre or in the acting profession in general, particularly from those who believed that acting was a matter of 'nature'. Despite the fact that Stanislavski proved the efficacy of the 'system' in two major productions, *A Month in the Country* (1909) and *Hamlet* (1911), he remained very much an isolated figure.

The 'system', however, was declared the official working method of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1911, but this was no more than a sop to prevent Stanislavski leaving the theatre. Nemirovich was, in fact, privately hostile to Stanislavski's new ideas. As a result, between 1912 and 1924, Stanislavski

created a series of studios where he could teach a younger and more receptive generation. The 'system' was first taught at the First Studio, substantially in the form in which we know it today. Stanislavski's pupils included Yevgeny Vakhtangov, Michael Chekhov and Richard Boleslavsky, who were to exercise a considerable influence on the theatre outside Russia, notably in the United States, for the next forty years.

After the Revolution, the Moscow Art Theatre came under attack from the far Left as a relic of a bygone era. From 1922 to 1924 the theatre was sent on tour to Paris and the United States where Stanislavski's productions made a considerable impact. It was at this time that Boleslavsky gave, with Stanislavski's permission, a series of lectures on the 'system'. Thereafter, for America, Boleslavsky became the 'system', and among his pupils was Lee Strasberg.

On his return, Stanislavski found himself in sole charge of the Moscow Art Theatre from 1925-1927 and under his direction the theatre was relaunched with a series of brilliant productions, ranging from Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro* to *The Armoured Train 14-69*, which became the model for the new Soviet play, as well as the much more controversial *The Days of the Turbins* adapted from a novel by Bulgakov. The 'system' now genuinely became the working method of the Art Theatre and Stanislavski taught a new generation of actors and directors.

In 1928 Stanislavski suffered a major heart attack on stage during the thirtieth anniversary celebrations of the Moscow Art Theatre, which effectively put an end to his career as an actor. It was during his subsequent convalescence in Germany and France that he began seriously drafting *An*



*Actor's Work*. Since the summer of 1906 he had made innumerable drafts of potential books, trying out various forms, including the novel, and had abandoned them all. Although he had given a series of talks on the 'system' for singers at the Bolshoi Opera Studio between 1919 and 1922, he was convinced that straight exposition of theory did not appeal to actors and that he must find a more entertaining form to engage their interest. He finally settled on the form of a diary kept by a student in training, recording his day to day experiences.

It was during this period abroad that he again met Elizabeth Hapgood who had served him as an interpreter in Washington during the American tour. She, with her husband, Norman, translated and arranged the publication in the U.S. of his books.

On his return to Russia in 1933, with the book still incomplete, Stanislavski worked almost exclusively at home, rehearsing actors for new productions, drafting his books and from 1935 working with young actors and directors at the Opera-Dramatic Studio where his most recent ideas were taught.

He died in August 1938 having only taught three years of the four-year course that he had planned. The work was completed by his assistants, following the guidelines he had laid down.

His literary legacy is chaotic: endless drafts and revisions with which scholars still struggle. And yet, this 'chaos' is testimony to a man who never stopped looking.