

The Russian theatre after Stalin

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1 The Thaw (1953–1968)

The mythology of socialist realism

Before introducing the main heroes of this book, I shall attempt to sketch the historical background preceding the death of Stalin. This is necessary in order to understand the minds of the first theatrical generation that grew out of the scorched earth Stalin left behind him.

In 1953 Nikolay Akimov staged Saltykov-Shchedrin's play *Shadows* in Leningrad. It had been written almost a hundred years earlier, on the eve of the abolition of serfdom in Russia. As a prologue to the action, a silhouette of the famous equestrian statue of Nicholas I was projected onto a drape on-stage. Occasionally the drape rippled and the 'shadow' of the autocrat seemed to come to life. It was clamouring for new sacrifices. It suggested to the critic Naum Berkovsky that the late Boss was still 'tending his sheep' even from another world.¹

Josef Stalin died on 5 March 1953, but his shadow continued to strike fear into the country for many years to come. The Stalinist cancer was not just a political phenomenon, it was an aesthetic one. It is crucial to understand the deeper intentions behind Stalinist painting, theatre, literature and architecture. Why, for instance, was it so important to erect the seven famous skyscrapers above Moscow after the Second World War? Seen from the ground, they suggested the watch-towers of the Gulag. But from the Boss's vantage point they were supposed to suggest that there was 'one above you all' who saw everything and knew everything that 'you at ground level' could not. From the street, one cannot see that the Theatre of the Soviet Army has been built as a five-pointed star; but from above one can. The idea, then, was that life should not be viewed in such a pedestrian manner, as it might appear to the man in the street or at his trough in a prison camp, but

from a 'higher' position. This belief, which was reflected in the phallic architecture of the one Father, Son and Soviet Holy Ghost, found its expression in all the arts, and was called 'socialist realism'.²

In Russia today it is fashionable among liberals to claim that socialist realism never existed, any more than 'Soviet literature' did.³ This is a serious mistake. Socialist realism, which was proclaimed as the heir to world culture, must be studied like any other style that evolved and burned itself out over several decades in the USSR. In the theatre, it was the result of setting in concrete the tradition of Russian realism; its declared enemy was 'formalism', which was to be exterminated at all costs. Gradually a style developed whose main features were rationalism, didacticism, clarity and simplicity. It was everywhere: in the typology of the heroes, the voices of the actors, the sets, and the choreography of the major scenes, which were staged diagonally or front-on depending on the position of the special box in which He might appear at any moment.

Socialist 'royalism', as the sixties dissident Arkady Belinkov called it, used the techniques of naturalism without the nature. Artists went to extraordinary lengths to depict situations, characters and conflicts that never existed. The method was therefore more akin to black magic: things that never were had to be conjured into being by artists meticulously reproducing the void. Aleksandr Laktionov, for instance, one of the most popular socialist realist painters, could paint with extreme fidelity to detail a group portrait entitled *Happy Old Age*, in a country where people were dying of starvation, and the photographic perfection of these well-groomed old people, of a neatly cut lemon and some pretzels, seemed to assure you that the whole of Soviet life was as good as these irresistible details.

Neither the revolution nor life under Soviet power could be mythologized with a cold heart. Very often the leading artists agreed with one part of the great Utopia and attempted to dress it up in biblical clothes. Drawing such exalted parallels was a way of surviving aesthetically, of coming to terms with a blood-soaked reality in which one had to find a hidden purpose. In the 1930s, however, both the 'positive' and the 'negative' use of a Christian gloss on Soviet subjects became dangerous. The new ideology no longer needed biblical sanction. A symbolic break with the past was the blowing up of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour

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in Moscow in 1931 (it has now been rebuilt). Its destruction was not only an act of barbarism, it was meant to symbolize the triumph of the new culture.⁴ The same thing happened in the other arts. Meyerhold's attempt in 1937, shortly before his own destruction, to dramatize Nikolay Ostrovsky's memoir *How the Steel Was Tempered* as a biblical parable about a 'Red' martyr in the Civil War was firmly rejected by the authorities. Sergey Eisenstein's film *Bezhin Meadow*, which was to deal with the popular theme of Pavlik Morozov, a boy who denounced his 'kulak' family to the new masters and paid for it with his life, also came unstuck. The Soviet propaganda subject was seen through biblical eyes. The boy's murder by bearded, beast-like kulaks was presented by Eisenstein as a tale of sacrifice. The new world was an Isaac-figure that had to be sacrificed to the old. The fact that the film was banned shows what a huge difference there was between the twenties and the thirties. Complex or merely rented biblical imagery that had been commonplace in post-revolutionary art became in the 1930s politically suspect: it obscured and distorted the issue of 'class struggle'.

Some Russian theatre directors attempted to take another course, by adapting their previous techniques to the new political imperatives. Aleksandr Tairov's favourite bas-relief techniques were applied to Soviet plays in order to give the new reality some aesthetic legitimacy. Kulaks and fifth columnists moved along the footlights like figures on Egyptian wall paintings. MKhAT used all its incomparable powers of psychological portrayal to breath life into the class message of Gorky's *Enemies*, to make it humanly convincing. The 75-year-old Nemirovich-Danchenko ensured that this was done with supreme technical skill.

After the Second World War, however, it became impossible to deceive oneself either with mythology or technique. The theatrical 'churches' were turned into bazaars. Yet actually strangling the theatre was not easy. It had experienced all the repressions and aesthetic pogroms of the twenties and thirties – and survived. *Othello* with Ostuzhev at the Maly, or *King Lear* with Mikhoels at the Jewish Theatre, *Romeo and Juliet* with Mariya Babanova, *The Queen of Spades* in Meyerhold's original staging, Nemirovich-Danchenko's *Three Sisters*, or Aleksandr Tairov's *Madame Bovary* at the Kamerny, were pre-war productions which, despite all their links with the new ideology, were major achievements of theatrical art. The methods and techniques they used retained

some autonomy – the theatrical language itself held out against the vulgarization and mediocritization going on all around it. But after the war a devastating blow was dealt to culture generally, to the very methods and language of the theatre, to its very roots. Party decrees such as ‘On Theatre Repertoire’ and ‘On the Magazines *Zvezda* and *Leningrad*’; the campaign in the late forties against ‘cosmopolitanism’, which led to the persecution and murder of Jewish theatre people; and the notorious theory of ‘conflictlessness’, according to which the only conflict there could be in a Soviet play was between good and better – all these meant that the theatre ceased to exist as an art that fulfilled an inner need and felt a responsibility towards its audiences.

The wave of repression that hit the Soviet theatre after the Second World War was deliberate. Stalin’s ideologues set out to destroy any possible spin-off from the victory over Nazism. The proud, independent spirit of the liberators of Europe, their ability to think, and even the ability to enjoy themselves, had to be eradicated immediately. The victor was not allowed for one second to relax, return to his family, or become absorbed in his private life. Consequently, not only major writers like Akhmatova, Zoschenko and Platonov were roughed up in the press, even works of light entertainment came under fire. The operetta *Mam’zelle Nitouche* had opened at the Vakhtangov Theatre in 1944 and been a source of innocent delight, but after the war it was classified as a harmful insect that had to be exterminated.

The sanity of artists was severely tested. My older friends at the Moscow Arts tell me that at rehearsals of Aleksandr Surov’s *Green Street*, one of the most untalented pieces of counterfeit staged by MKhAT in 1948, Boris Livanov (a fine actor and a friend of Pasternak) had hardly started rehearsing in the morning before he was showing the director, Mikhail Kedrov, a clock-face drawn on his hand with the hands set at noon, and pronouncing the hallowed words: ‘It’s time, Misha!’ This meant that the café opposite MKhAT was open and they should go straight over there for their alcoholic ‘dose’.

The whole of Soviet theatre was drug-dependent. In many of the major houses, especially MKhAT, the drinking reached heroic proportions. It became a way of life. It was not just a social phenomenon, it was an aesthetic one. To take up a life in the theatre and survive in it one had to be in a state of permanent optimism.

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It was in just such a state that Mikhail Romanov, a major Russian actor at the Lesya Ukrainka Theatre in Kiev, occasionally took his curtain calls after 'conflictless' performances. He accompanied each bow to the audience with the fairly audible words 'I'm sorry.' This was the only way left for a Russian artist to resist the throttling of his theatre.

Genuine humour that penetrated forbidden areas was as ruthlessly purged as sentimentality. Any sign of life was pounced upon. Inna Solovyova, now an eminent theatre historian, worked at that time in the censorship. She attacked Viktor Rozov because she found his play *Her Friends*, about a blind girl whom everyone tries to help, 'impossibly sentimental'. According to the criteria of 1949, the play should have been banned, but Rozov, who had been a front-line soldier, had suffered shellshock and been wounded, returned her fire with: 'Yes, I am terribly sentimental, and I'm going to carrying on being.'

The oases of theatrical culture that had survived from the twenties and thirties were now virtually swallowed up by the desert of officially approved plays. It was insidious, for instance, to have Chekhov and Surov next to each other in MKhAT's repertoire. The fungus got to everyone; it penetrated to their creative marrow. In 1949 Yuri Zavadsky, who had been an unforgettable Prince Calaf in Vakhtangov's *Turandot*, staged Konstantin Simonov's anti-American Cold War pot-boiler *The Russian Question*. Aleksey Popov, who had once shone in Shakespeare productions, perfected the bombastic style of the 'battle drama' on the enormous firing range of a stage at the Theatre of the Red Army. Nikolay Okhlopkov, a disciple of Meyerhold, poured all his mastery into banner-waving shows like *The Young Guard*, which were held up as an example to others.

The outward appearance of productions – their use of space – changed beyond recognition. Whereas in the 1920s there were genuinely original designers who led the world, now there were dreary copyists of an imaginary reality who could only turn out dusty pseudo-realistic box-sets.

The artistic flame, the flame of the old techniques and living speech, was kept alive in various theatrical 'catacombs'. After being sacked from MKhAT, Mariya Knebel went to ground in the Central Children's Theatre. This is actually where, immediately after the death

of Stalin, the revival of the Russian stage would begin. Knebel's and Aleksey Popov's pupil Anatoly Efros would come to this theatre, as would the playwright Viktor Rozov and the young actor Oleg Yefremov – the future creator of the *Sovremennik Theatre*.

At the relatively safe Vakhtangov Theatre, among a handful of first-class actors and actresses got together by Ruben Simonov, Yury Lyubimov's talent was coming to maturity. He played everything from Oleg Koshevoy in Fadeyev's *The Young Guard* to Mozart in Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri*. But the *jeune premier* of the Vakhtangov stage was destined for a different historical role: a few years later he gave Moscow Brecht's *The Good Person of Setzuan*, and with it the Taganka Theatre, of which more below.

Even the older generation of directors, which appeared to have been completely discredited and squeezed dry in the Stalin years, came to life. They suddenly spoke again with their own voices and revealed their carefully concealed theatrical pasts. In the early fifties Nikolay Akimov staged brilliant productions of Russian classics such as Shchedrin's *Shadows* and Sukhovo-Kobylin's *The Case*, in which the Stalinist state could be seen as a metamorphosis of Russia's primeval bureaucratic system bent on crushing the individual. In 1954 Mariya Knebel turned to Chekhov's *Ivanov* in an attempt to understand what had happened to the Russian intellectual in the twentieth century. Valentin Pluchek, who had begun his theatrical career in 1926 by jumping out of a large hatbox in Meyerhold's *The Government Inspector*, now directed *The Bathhouse* (1953) and *The Bedbug* (1955) and brought back to life not only Mayakovsky's satire, but the spirit of Meyerhold's own poetics secreted in these plays. Thus, although Meyerhold himself had not been rehabilitated, he already existed in the air of the new stage.⁵

In 1954 Nikolay Okhlopkov directed the first post-war production of *Hamlet* (Stalin, for obvious reasons, intensely disliked the play and banned it at MKhAT after it had been in rehearsal for a long time in Pasternak's translation). The production was in an overblown style, as the times still demanded, but it struck a completely new, unnerving chord. Hamlet's discovery of the truth had a quite special effect on Soviet audiences. He was very reminiscent of the young men in Rozov's plays at the Central Children's Theatre. Hamlet was tackling the problems of Soviet young men, or rather Soviet youths were beginning to

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tackle Hamletesque problems. In both cases a blood-soaked world built on lies was being thrown open, a young man discovering that there was 'something rotten in the state of Denmark'. The massive wrought-iron gates of the Castle/Prison and the youth in black who appeared from them and began to question a world that was 'out of joint', remained in one's memory as the simplest and clearest indication that the wheel of history had turned and something was about to happen in our lives.⁶

Quite soon after the death of Stalin the first western visitors began to trickle through. The Comédie Française came, followed by the Théâtre National Populaire with Gérard Philipe and Maria Casarès. The Berliner Ensemble was invited over for the first time, shortly after the death of Bertolt Brecht. Italian neo-realistic films progressed triumphantly across our screens and had a seminal influence on the new theatrical generation. In December 1955 the 30-year-old Peter Brook and the 33-year-old Paul Scofield stunned Moscow's theatre world with their *Hamlet*. This was one of those productions that made an indelible impression on all who were to decide the course of Russian theatre for decades to come.

What amazed the critic Iosif Yuzovsky about Brook's *Hamlet* was its relaxed approach to the tradition, its new, utterly unrealistic use of space, the director's and actors' sense of freedom, and their complete contempt for stage clichés: 'instead of a singing Ophelia with pale blue eyes and hair down to her ankles, there is this frightening little fury with spiky, close-cropped hair, in a crumpled black dress and with a harsh voice designed, it seems, to set the nerves on edge of anyone who was hoping at this point to wallow in emotion.'⁷ However, the critic stopped at the line separating the Soviet consciousness from the European consciousness, as it were. He took exception to Brook's statement that Hamlet's tragedy was that it was impossible for him to do what he was being asked to do ('Hamlet is tragically mistaken in thinking that you can commit a murder without yourself being changed by it; the true Hamlet knows that he will not be able to go on living once he has been stained' was how Yuzovsky paraphrased Brook's programme note). In response to this, the brilliant, 'stained' critic, who had been a victim of the 'anti-cosmopolitan' campaign of the late forties and could have thought of plenty of examples of what Brook was saying from his own moral experience, forced himself to write: 'Er . . . How to put

it tactfully? A bit wet, isn't it?!' He then quoted chapter and verse to prove that 'if a foe doesn't surrender, you destroy him'. To the Soviet consciousness, brought up on this famous saying of Gorky's, and in a country where millions of lives had been destroyed in the name of a Utopian idea, Yuzovsky's arguments seemed irrefutable.

A few months after Brook's *Hamlet*, the subversive almanack *Literaturnaya Moskva* published Boris Pasternak's 'Notes on some translations of Shakespeare'. The poet had worked on these translations for several decades. They were not only a source of income for him, they were a way of surviving spiritually. In these notes he offered a completely new level of thought about Shakespeare and ourselves. What he said would be absorbed by all who were beginning to revive the Russian stage. He wrote of Hamlet as an 'odd man out', a dissident chosen by chance to judge his time and be the servant of a more remote one. 'When it is discovered that appearances do not match reality, that there is a chasm between them, it does not matter that this has been revealed supernaturally and that the ghost demands vengeance from Hamlet.'⁸ In *Othello*, Pasternak examines the colour symbolism and shows that the black Othello is a man living in history, a Christian, whereas the white Iago is an 'unconverted animal still'. And having come through Stalinism, the poet can see that in *King Lear* 'duty' and 'honour' are merely concepts juggled by criminals and everything decent is either strangely silent or expresses itself in nonsense. 'The positive heroes in the tragedy are fools and madmen, people who are defeated or heading for disaster. The work is written in the language of the Old Testament prophets and set in a legendary age of pre-Christian barbarism.'⁹

A few years later, when Pasternak was already dead, a stocky young man in a black jumper would detach himself from a wall on the stage of the Taganka Theatre, amble down to the footlights with a guitar in his hand, and in a hoarse, fearless voice – as though his throat were gripped by an invisible hand – hurl at the audience words from Doctor Zhivago's poem about Hamlet:

The buzz subsides. I come out on the boards.
 Leaning against the door-frame,
 I try to get an inkling from afar
 Of what will happen in my time.

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The actor was Vladimir Vysotsky, whose underground songs were then all the rage.

The gap between the boy Hamlet before whom the earth has just opened up, and Hamlet the grown man and soldier, who knows everything in advance, was actually the distance that this generation had to travel spiritually. It was a bitter and relentless process of growing up.

The Russian theatre had experienced its own period of pre-Christian barbarism. Yet its spirit had not been consumed entirely. Somehow the 'flight paths' of human thought, as Pasternak called them, had survived and been passed on. New life had begun to sprout through the ashes. People were queuing to see Italian films about bicycle thieves, everyone was listening to the songs of Aleksandr Vertinsky, a pre-revolutionary cabaret artist who had returned to the USSR after years in emigration, and the young generation was acquiring its own poetic voice in the verse of Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Andrey Voznesensky. In autumn 1957 the first sputnik was launched and people thronged the streets and rooftops to get a glimpse of it and of 'other worlds'. In the same year, Eldar Ryazanov made *Carnival Night*, a film in which the famous Meyerhold actor Igor Ilinsky created a stupendous image of the Soviet Fool – a bureaucrat in a tightly buttoned field jacket who attempts to deliver an ideological speech at a New Year's party and is made fun of like Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*.

The death of the 'Father of Nations' became a massive, unexpected turning-point in Russian history. Viktor Rozov, the principal dramatist of the period, was to say later that in March 1953 he believed only death could solve the problem of Stalin; so he was prepared to pray for it.¹⁰ 'Death came to him along the Kremlin's corridors without showing any pass',¹¹ and the steel fist of the regime slightly relaxed its grip on the strangled throat. The sight and smell of this new life were summed up in the word *Thaw*, which tripped from the pen of writer Ilya Ehrenburg.¹² The Soviet theatre and its 'high priests' did not miss the opportunity that history was offering them.

Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky initiate a new Soviet theatre

As always, the first on the scene were the opportunists. Plays like Aleksandr Korneychuk's *Wings* and Aleksandr Shteyn's *Personal File* were hastily thrown together and flooded the stage in the mid-fifties. In

them a strictly controlled amount of debunking of Stalin's 'cult of personality' was combined with a glorification of the basic tenets of Soviet ideology. The latter was not subjected to any doubt: it was portrayed as the immortal truth that no cult of personality could ever shake. A more profound approach to reality was discovered through the classics. The Soviet Renaissance called 'the Thaw' was begun by Lev Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

In 1956 Boris Ravenskikh staged at the Maly 'court theatre' Tolstoy's peasant tragedy *The Power of Darkness*. Ravenskikh had trained as a director under Meyerhold – a fact that was not advertised after the Master's death. For the main role of Akim he chose Igor Ilinsky, another Meyerholdian. The play had hardly been performed since the Revolution. The reason was not so much its unrelieved gloom as its inherent 'Tolstoyism', which had to be exposed as deeply fallacious. According to Tolstoy, the 'power of darkness', or plain evil, is born in the soul of the individual and resolved there and nowhere else. The peasant world and way of life are presented in the play as things that are absolutely fixed and unchanging; it is only the souls of people that ebb and flow. For Tolstoy, the most important thing in life was for the individual to act according to his conscience, thus retaining the image of God within him. Clearly, Ravenskikh and Ilinsky were playing with dynamite.

Soon after the triumphant first night, Ilinsky explained what had happened in an article in *Literaturnaya gazeta* significantly entitled 'Believe Tolstoy!' Here, and in his memoirs, he described how a split occurred in the consciousness of an artist who had been a prisoner of ideological orthodoxy: 'To be honest, I was afraid that Tolstoy's ideas in this play might be regarded as not quite modern. I couldn't betray Lev Tolstoy, nor could I betray contemporary Soviet ideology. At one point I was so torn between the two that I turned the part down.'¹³

Ilinsky's personal drama produced a shift in the public consciousness. People began to look inside themselves, to discover themselves, and to judge themselves. Ravenskikh had refused to curry favour by showing how awful life was before the Revolution. Paradoxically, he revealed a festive, luminous side to this atrabilious play. Into its claustrophobic world of murder, jealousy, and the terror in an old woman's dark soul, he brought the white light of tragedy. The power of darkness was transmogrified into the 'power of light'. The moral unease, boredom and

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heartache of Nikita, the play's hero, culminated in a biblical scene of repentance before the people, repentance in the bright light of day merging with a powerful, triumphant musical dimension.

Innokenty Annensky, a turn of the century Russian poet and critic, once compared Tolstoy's play with Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, which was written at the same time. He insisted that there were no two more opposite works in world culture; that if ever there was anything contrary to the 'spirit of music' it was Tolstoy's play. The latter, he wrote, contained 'reality, but an impossible reality, because it is merely reality, reality *tout court*, and not the mixture that we accept every day under this name'.¹⁴

In fact, Ravenskikh seemed to have musically orchestrated the whole text. It was not straightforward musical accompaniment; rather, a certain 'spirit of music' informed the whole production. This music expressed the theme of reckless abandon, the rhythm of work, and the resurrection of the soul, but also the dark, ironic, hostile force contending with these. The murder of the baby was planned to the sounds of a drunken orgy and the howling voices of the marriage brokers from behind the door to the peasant hut, which kept being opened and closed. As Boris Zingerman commented at the time: 'The people singing drunken songs and dancing wildly behind the door or outside the gates, and those front of stage planning to bury the child, could easily change places. In this production the very concept of *narodnost* (peasant virtue) is fragmented. It is shown in all its contradictoriness: in its true form and in its distorted, sordid, tavern aspect.'¹⁵

The critic added cautiously that the director did not always draw a clear line between these two versions of *narodnost*. This was prophetic: shortly afterwards Ravenskikh was to become one of the mainstays of post-Stalin official theatre, with its saccharin idealization of 'the people'. However, in 1956 Ravenskikh was still able to produce a powerful, integrated effect and with it a sense of what people called then 'the fresh wind of change'.

As I have said, the play was achieved by director and actor together. Akim, a miserable cesspool cleaner, is presented by the playwright as the secret bearer of Tolstoy's own ideas. In this role, Ilinsky, who was an actor of the eccentric school, discovered himself as an actor of tragic proportions. A rare fusion occurred: the painfully inarticulate

t-yeh . . . t-yeh sounds that Akim made as he tried to start a sentence, and his dumb gestures, somehow conveyed the music of a pure soul. Ilinsky may have been ideologically sterile, but he had put his trust in what Tolstoy himself trusted – his instinct and his sense of truth. Akim did not embody an argument about whether it was right or wrong to believe in God's judgement and resist or not resist evil. He was not a philosopher. He was a Russian peasant for whom God was his conscience and the absence of God was darkness. And for this specific peasant brushing the snow off his bast shoes in front of his hut, rather than for mankind in the abstract, it was vitally important that this God exist. It was an unforgettable personal experience, therefore, to see this illiterate peasant hand back the 10-rouble note, folded into a tiny square, that he had been given by his murderer-son. He walked out of the hut unable to bear the drunken revelry, into the freezing darkness; only to return a moment later, open the door, and shout at his son something that had been forgotten in Russia for five decades: 'Wake up, Nikita. You must have soul!'

Where soul was concerned, of course, Tolstoyism and the new ideology did not see eye to eye. But all the power of which theatre is capable was used to show how impossible and terrible the actual 'power of darkness' was, that is to say a life unsanctified by any moral beliefs, in which 'everything was permitted'. Akim's peasant God could save people from the mire – including the bloody mire that was revealed to society in the mid-1950s. The ethical idea of repentance and resurrection imbued the whole production. Yet again, the theatre was replacing the Church in a bid to cleanse and revive people's souls.

In their attempt to get to the heart of Tolstoy, the director and his actors had moved into an area of difficult choices. Ravenskikh understood the religious basis of the play, the sublimity of the wandering pilgrim's way of life, and Tolstoy's hatred of property and all forms of outward struggle, and he tried to convey this somehow in his production. To believe Tolstoy in this way was to take an enormous step. Tolstoyism was not a kind of ideological varnish that could be stripped off the way our directors had for decades when 'bringing an author closer to the present day'. Tolstoyism was a definite way of thinking about the world and people. It was the dark language of another culture that was beginning to emerge from oblivion.

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A year later, this culture sprang another revelation on us. Georgy Tovstonogov directed a stage adaptation of Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot*. It opened on 31 December 1957 and soon became a legend. Untheatrical words like 'miracle', 'pilgrimage', 'revelation' appeared in the reviews. Since this production introduces one of the main heroes of the book, Georgy Tovstonogov, a few biographical details are in order. Like Nemirovich-Danchenko, he came from Tiflis, the capital of Georgia, where he was born in 1915. He trained at GITIS (the State Institute of Theatre Art) in pre-war Moscow under Aleksey Popov and Andrey Lobanov, returned to Georgia, then moved back to Moscow in 1946 and up to the death of Stalin directed in various theatres what everyone else directed in those years. He had to wait two decades for his moment.

Tovstonogov had learned the lessons of Meyerhold and Tairov well, but those of MKhAT even better. He was attracted to staging on a large scale, took what he wanted from all over the place, but still managed to achieve a rich artistic unity. He was excellent at analyzing a play and had a nose for the good actor. He created what was virtually the strongest Russian company of the post-Stalin period. This company was united by a common cause, which Tovstonogov promoted with rare skill, steering brilliantly between the reefs in the Soviet theatrical sea (another thing he had in common with Nemirovich-Danchenko). He was *persona grata* with the Party establishment, had been awarded every prize imaginable, yet (most unusually) his authority among the theatrical profession was unshakable. Several productions that he staged in the mid-fifties, for example Vsevolod Vishnevsky's *An Optimistic Tragedy* and Aleksandr Volodin's *Five Evenings*, immediately defined the salient features of his art. I shall return to these productions later. First we must look at *The Idiot*, which stands at the source of the most interesting line in his evolution, namely his work with the Russian classics.

He had dreamt of putting on Dostoyevsky immediately after the war, which would certainly have been appropriate amidst the unprecedented suffering and degradation of the times. But after the war Dostoyevsky had fallen into disfavour. Following Gorky's lead, the hacks had begun to present him as a 'medieval inquisitor' (Gorky's phrase at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934). *The Devils* was seen as

merely a vicious anti-revolutionary pamphlet, and *The Idiot*, which is an apologia for the 'absolutely beautiful person' Prince Myshkin, was strongly suspected of preaching proscribed Christian ideas. Initially Tovstonogov decided to follow the long tradition of staging not so much a production about Myshkin as a hysterical melodrama about the humiliated *femme fatale* Nastasya Fillipovna. He had previously put on plays about 'strong people' such as Lenin, Stalin and Pavel Korchagin, the hero of one of the key works of Soviet literary mythology *How the Steel Was Tempered*. But the times had changed radically, there were now new opportunities, and the director's attention swung to Lev Myshkin, the 'idiot' who had come from a mental hospital in Switzerland to save Russia.

Theatrical sensations are often the result of luck. So it was in this case. Rehearsals began with a good actor as Myshkin, but Tovstonogov felt in his bones that someone else was needed, someone quite different, whom the Soviet stage did not yet know. A performer and person with a different mentality was needed. In the 1920s this actor could have been Michael Chekhov. In the 1950s Tovstonogov found Innokenty Smoktunovsky (who is probably best known in the West for his performance of Hamlet in Kozintsev's famous film).

The appearance of the word *miracle* among the usual hieroglyphics of our theatre criticism signified that Tovstonogov and Smoktunovsky had succeeded in revealing on the Soviet stage an image of the 'absolutely beautiful person', Jesus Christ, who had been spat upon by the new bosses. The theatrical revelation of Christ to the people was not announced in so many words, but that is what was being acted, that is exactly what one experienced, as a kind of revelation overflowing the bounds of theatre. As confirmation of my hypothesis, let me quote Naum Berkovsky at the time:

Smoktunovsky's voice completes the impression conveyed by his appearance: it is a voice that is not being steered, it has no stresses or italics, it is not imperious or didactic: its intonations jump out of their own accord, 'from the heart', free of any premeditation . . . Every dialogue is a contest. Prince Myshkin's dialogues as performed by Smoktunovsky are paradoxical: there is no contest in them. They are not dialogues, they are

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the desire to echo, to find within oneself the person to whom speech is being directed, to respond to him, to be drawn into his inner world.¹⁶

There is only one person who could be described in this way – the Son of Man.

Many years later, I asked Innokenty Smoktunovsky what sources, so to speak, his Myshkin had drawn on, for it to have had such an effect on recent theatre history. Smoktunovsky recalled his rehearsals with Tovstonogov and various old scores he had to settle with him (he did not look kindly on directors and disliked sharing his fame with them, in which regard he remained a true provincial). He recalled that Tovstonogov had wanted to take him off the part, that the people he was acting with did not like him, that he had hated himself, because he felt he did not understand the ‘absolutely beautiful person’ and had no experience to help him act him. The turning-point came quite by chance. One day, amidst the usual bustle and muddle of a film set, he suddenly saw something unusual, spellbinding even: a man with a very expressive face and cropped hair was standing by a pillar in the thick of the crowd reading a book. It was a case of unique public solitude: the crowd was flowing round him on all sides, but the man existed entirely on his own. He was so absorbed in his book and his thoughts that he noticed no one. The next day at rehearsals for *The Idiot* Smoktunovsky’s fellow-actors and the director were astonished by a kind of sea change in Prince Myshkin. Stanislavsky would have said that the actor had found the ‘seed’ of his part, its soul and shape. Later Smoktunovsky discovered that the silent man at the film studios had just returned from many years in a prison camp.

The Idiot became a festival of light for our theatre. Its hero was woven from the air of those times, the dust of the camps, and the Arctic nights around the labour camp town of Norilsk where Smoktunovsky had lived. Myshkin was born of the experience of Smoktunovsky the actor and the experience of millions of nameless human beings whom the silent man in the crowd had proffered to the performer’s imagination. The Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky productions became a kind of tuning-fork for the first decade after the death of Stalin. The short Thaw had come into its own.

The rise and fall of the Sovremennik Theatre

Recalling the production of Rozov's *Alive Forever* with which the Sovremennik studio theatre opened in 1956, Oleg Yefremov has said that some theatregoers and critics expressed their disappointment thus: 'It's excellent, of course, but all you've done is give us a good version of MKhAT. It's what the "old" MKhAT used to be like.'¹⁷

Yefremov still regards this as the highest praise. The young actors, who were all graduates from the MKhAT drama school, had in effect created a new Art Theatre studio to polemicize with the 'main house', which was in a state of deep crisis. The polemics proceeded on every front, starting with MKhAT's repertoire. The old theatre, which had begun life with plays like *The Seagull*, had long since lost any notion of quality where repertoire was concerned. Sometimes the plays were so embarrassing that they were taken off after only a few performances. The actors expected to collect their Stalin Prizes anyway, on the principle of Buggins's turn. Plays were chosen and parts shared out with an eye to these prizes (of course, only those who played the 'positive' heroes got them). The name of MKhAT still carried a cachet, but the theatre's art had evaporated – it had lost all connection with people's real lives. Even the dictator's death did not bring MKhAT back to life. It had been blinded by its own academic splendour. Nor had it any faith in its pupils. It was a case of self-betrayal crowned with official laurels.

In its early years, the Art Theatre had sprouted several studios, because it regarded them as necessary if the theatre was to stay alive. The studios were a guarantee against rot. Young blood, new ideas, experimentation, were part and parcel of MKhAT right through to the end of the twenties, that is, the 'time of the great change'. Its studios produced major actors and directors (whole theatres!), who together helped determine the history of the Russian stage in the twentieth century. The last great MKhAT studio was the First Studio set up by Stanislavsky before the Revolution. In 1924 Michael Chekhov used it as the basis for a theatre which he called MKhAT 2. In 1928 Michael Chekhov emigrated, MKhAT 1 was turned into a model theatre of the Stalin empire, and in 1936 MKhAT 2 was annihilated. Nothing was to be left to remind people of MKhAT's pre-Stalinist past.

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It took another quarter of a century and the death of 'The Best Friend of All Soviet Performers' before the idea of a studio theatre bore fruit again.

The *Sovremennik* (which means 'Contemporary') called itself a studio of MKhAT, but its relations with the main house were very peculiar. From MKhAT's point of view, it was illegitimate and all they expected from it was trouble. This MKhAT did not need a studio, because a studio merely exacerbated its own crisis. The *Sovremennik* was a living reminder of what was wrong in MKhAT itself. As Ibsen, who was so popular with the Art Theatre at the turn of the century, put it: 'youth is retribution'.

In the way it went about things, the *Sovremennik* tried to revive the image of the old MKhAT 'home', its artistic and ethical ideals. Of course, this was an historical hoax, but all theatrical revolutions need mythological clothes. In a different land and culture they were attempting to put into practice the legendary founding principles of the original Moscow Art Theatre. Recalling that Stanislavsky's theatre was a 'partnership of belief', they drew up special articles of association intended to create a new brotherhood of actors. The *Sovremennik* began to operate not according to the regulations governing 'theatrical enterprises for public spectacle', as all state theatres in the USSR were then called, but according to laws devised for themselves by themselves. Decisions about whether to stage a play, or whether a production was ready to show to the public, were taken collectively. The whole company also decided whether an actor could stay in the company. When it was the turn of Yefremov, the artistic director of the theatre, to be assessed, he would come out of his office and they would discuss him without mincing their words. They attempted to clear away the layers of tarnish that had been deposited by the realities of the Soviet theatre on Stanislavsky's crowning idea of a theatrical home. They had no actorial dead wood and were not coerced into artificial groups the way that actors in most companies were at that time. The right to stay or to leave was restored with dignity. It was the first Russian theatre for decades that had been created not from above but from below, by the will of the artists themselves rather than by theatrical bureaucrats.



Plate 1 Mayakovsky Square, Moscow, early 1970s, with the remains of the Sovremennik Theatre in foreground.

Many of their productions were banned. This only encouraged them: if they were being banned, they must be doing something worthwhile. Rehearsals at the Sovremennik often ended with a Russian-style party around a table, which might turn into a rehearsal again. However, there was none of the sheer drinking to forget that was associated with MKhAT. Their parties provided space for free, familiar contact, which was in its turn an expression of these young people's new feeling for life. They understood that good theatres are not created from books and cardboard morality, but from the air of freedom, levity, badinage and friendly conviviality, without which no true theatre can live.

A band of young poets, musicians, critics, writers and painters quickly gathered around the Sovremennik, who would subsequently be called the 'sixties generation'. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Vasily Aksyonov, Anatoly Kuznetsov and Aleksandr Galich all brought their plays here. They and many others who started this theatre would later become dissidents and leave the country, voluntarily or otherwise. The fate of this generation was highly dramatic, but its linchpin, its hearth and home, was the little theatre (now a parking space) stuck on the side of the Peking Hotel on Mayakovsky Square.

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This theatre was greatly influenced by the character of its leader, Oleg Yefremov. He was born in Moscow and graduated from the Studio School of MKhAT in 1949, where he was taught by Mikhail Kedrov and Vasily Toporkov, pupils of Stanislavsky himself. After graduating, he became a teacher at the MKhAT school, from whose graduates he formed the *Sovremennik*. Simultaneously, he began his own acting career at the Central Children's Theatre, and soon became the idol of Moscow's youth.

Yefremov's attitude to Stanislavsky bordered on the religious. When he was a student at the MKhAT school, he and some friends swore an oath to remain true to Stanislavsky's teaching, and signed it with their own blood. This may sound grotesque, but it is true, and it explains a lot about this generation. In the summer of 1952, Yefremov and a friend set off on a journey through Russia to study life, just as Stanislavsky and Russian literature said they should. They went down the Volga from Yaroslavl as far as the Volga-Don canal, at the entrance to which stood a 70-metre-high figure of Stalin. This symbolic journey shaped Yefremov's views about the Soviet form of serfdom that the country was suffering from.

The *Sovremennik* acquired a leader who knew what he believed in and what he hated. The theatre's social programme was, in a word, anti-Stalinist. Its aesthetic ideas were much vaguer and for want of a terminology of their own were summed up in Stanislavsky's phrase 'the life of the human spirit'. This formula they attempted to pack with high explosive. They wanted to return to the natural human being on the stage, to the passionate search for truth, to the actor's ability to embody himself. They sought those penetrating methods of reaching an audience that had been practised by the Art Theatre, especially its First Studio, with its 'spiritual realism', its greatly reduced gap between actor and audience, and its ability to draw the latter into its energy field. They were the first to risk acting 'confessionally' (one of the keywords of this generation), meaning that the role should be illumined by the performer's own human 'theme' and his personal fate, if he had one.

The style of delivery at the *Sovremennik* was the diametric opposite of the ululating of the Stalinist pseudo-heroes. The *Sovremennik*'s enemies immediately christened this style 'whispering realism', but it launched a massive theatrical reform. The language of the street, of life

that was really alive, burst on to this stage and produced not only a new type of speech, but a new performer whom people called 'a blender', someone who even in terms of appearance could have walked in off the street. The typical actor of the 1940s as lauded by the critics was something quite unique. One looked up at him from very far below. He was the epitome of a craggy man of the people. A fifties critic quipped that when you saw such a performer coming along the street you could not decide whether he was an actor or a head waiter.¹⁸ The actors at the *Sovremennik* were bringing back to the stage the forgotten taste of truth.

At first the *Sovremennik's* programme was built on contrasts. Basically, the theatre was fond of 'two colours', as one of the studio's first productions was called.¹⁹ It had to look for a long time before it found a play with which to open, and eventually chose Viktor Rozov's *Alive Forever*. This was a play in which the recent war with Nazism was not only the setting for the action, but a time when everyone had to make moral choices. In telling a story about the war, the studio actors succeeded in telling one about the fate of their generation.

Yefremov both directed the production and played the part of Boris Borozdin, a young man who had volunteered for the front line. He had left behind him a girl who did not wait for him, and friends who betrayed him. Each had chosen his own path. The strict moral standards that the theatre was putting forward were applied, of course, not so much to the war as to the whole way of life that the nation had grown used to. Here is a portrait of the young Yefremov as Boris early in the opening run:

Boris/Yefremov appeared in only two short scenes but carried the lyrical theme of the play with him. One felt infinitely sorry for this tall, lanky, boy-like Boris, with his shy perseverance, his elegant hands that would turn themselves to any piece of work . . . his purity and his grown-up sense of responsibility. And one thought how much poorer life was for having lost the best people of this generation . . . They were too young to have fallen beneath the terrible scythe of 1937, but they were too grown-up and 1917, the year of their birth, was too firmly imprinted on their souls, for them to be hypnotized by the universal paranoia and euphoria – to lose their individual conscience and their sense of personal responsibility.²⁰