

REDISCOVERING STANISLAVSKY

Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863–1938) was one of the most innovative and influential directors of modern theatre and his System and related practices continue to be studied and used by actors, directors and students. Maria Shevtsova sheds new light on the extraordinary life of Stanislavsky, uncovering and translating Russian archival sources, rehearsal transcripts, scores and plans. This comprehensive study rediscovers little-known areas of Stanislavsky's new type of theatre and its immersion in the visual arts, dance and opera. It demonstrates the fundamental importance of his Russian Orthodoxy to the worldview that underpinned his integrated System and his goals for the six laboratory research studios that he established or mentored. Stanislavsky's massive achievements are explored in the intricate and historically intertwined political, cultural and theatre contexts of tsarist Russia, the 1917 Revolution, the unstable 1920s, and Stalin's 1930s. *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* provides a completely fresh perspective on his work and legacy.

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For Sasha, always

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Preface

On hearing that my new book was about Stanislavsky, a friend remarked in the quiet inflections of Russian irony that of course we knew everything about Stanislavsky. I smiled, understanding perfectly what he was telling me and replied that, yes, we did not know enough about the Stanislavsky whom we knew so well and so we needed to rediscover him – or discover him for the first time, if such was the case.

I had understood as well my scholar friend's implicit reference to my lifelong study of contemporary theatre and related theoretical and interdisciplinary principles, and his curiosity as to why I was now concentrating on Stanislavsky whom history had already placed. My study as a whole was pivoted on the work of European directors and especially of those whose theatre companies and productions I had faithfully followed – some for four decades and more. Having taken this approach during my student days, I pursued their ongoing work despite the considerable difficulties posed to research by the constraints of time, space, organization, travel and cost. In other words, I practised what I preached, reminding my many students over the years that continual research on a living director was research on a living archive as well as the creation of an archive for the future. In the case of a historical figure like Stanislavsky, museum archives as well as archives of other kinds were fortunately available, providing a glimpse of what our own eyes, ears, remaining senses and intelligence might have perceived in the past.

After the brief discussion with my friend, I found myself thinking on more than one occasion that there was something to be said for having contemporary theatre as a reference point for Stanislavsky, all the more so because I had direct contact with my material. I have been privileged to observe the rehearsals of some of 'my' directors at varying degrees of proximity and to engage in various, often sequential, conversations with them. As my research on Stanislavsky progressed, it became quite clear that observing in the flesh directors as different as Giorgio Strehler and Robert

Wilson were from each other and from Stanislavsky – each working in very different socioeconomic and cultural circumstances – gave me lenses through which to see Stanislavsky anew, not solely artistically as an ensemble actor, stage director and lighting designer (bound to be a discovery for some readers) but as a managing director of the Moscow Art Theatre, publicist, fundraiser from private and public sources and more besides. What, then, could be said of such practitioners in the Russian context as close to him as Lev Dodin and Anatoly Vasilyev, each in his respective way in a direct line from Stanislavsky? Looking backwards from them to Stanislavsky also gave me invaluable insights into his manifold achievements and just how colossal a figure he really was in his time and still for ours. What Dodin and Vasilyev can show about Stanislavsky as well as themselves and the transmutations of the theatre as a range of specific practices comes through my last pages titled ‘Legacy’, as occurs with the other internationally renowned theatre practitioners who appear in that panorama.

The vistas of Stanislavsky’s future into the twenty-first century are far from exhaustive in these closing pages, as I point out. But a comprehensive study of Stanislavsky such as the one offered in this book must situate him first and foremost in the multiple contexts of his ‘split’ life: those that define it before the 1917 October Revolution and the rapidly changing, identifiable shifts of the years that follow this Revolution and segue into Stalin’s no less volatile 1930s.

The first half of his life involved him in activities almost entirely neglected by Stanislavsky scholarship, although they nurtured his aspirations for the theatre. These were the extraordinary cross-arts explorations – painting, sculpture, ceramics, architecture – generated in the rural Abramtsevo commune founded by the railway magnate and family friend Savva Mamontov not far from Stanislavsky’s family estate. And it was near enough to Moscow to facilitate interconnection with Mamontov’s Private Opera Theatre, making both of them significant precursors of Sergey Diaghilev’s World of Art and the Ballets Russes. The way major visual artists, composers and opera singers, most notably Fyodor Chaliapin, shared and combined their talents and skills inspired Stanislavsky to realize the collaborative, harmoniously integrated stage productions that became the signature of the Art Theatre. His opera productions, when he eventually turned to them in the 1920s and 1930s, followed suit.

The second half of Stanislavsky’s life was fraught with difficulties on every front that also engulfed the Art Theatre as he harnessed moral imperatives and political subterfuges to protect his life’s work.

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Stanislavsky's correspondence with Stalin is but one of many channels through which he navigated to avert numerous dangers, frequently unsuccessfully, and not always in accord with Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko with whom he had co-founded the MAT. Among the company's opponents in the field of the theatre were the Proletkult, the Blue Blouse groups, Agitprop and TRAM whose main features are detailed in my book to throw into relief both the MAT's rejection of politics and Meyerhold's embrace of them together with his vital contribution to the revolutionary theatre. Meyerhold's and Stanislavsky's lifelong friendship has, in my view, been underestimated and misrepresented, even during this turbulent period when political engagement, just as much as political misalignment, was the target of terror and death.

Much has been written in English about Stanislavsky's System and here is to be found another perspective – that of the worldview which underpins the System's practical purpose and is rooted in Russian Orthodoxy. Stanislavsky's religious outlook shapes the worldview that envelops his search for the organic actor-creator for whose benefit he elaborated the System until his dying day. Many of Stanislavsky's early influences, which included Old Believer Orthodoxy and the 'heretical' beliefs of Lev Tolstoy, not to mention Isadora Duncan's unaffected, natural dancer, find their niches across my book.

Much less is known about Leopold Sulerzhitsky's fundamental contribution to the First Studio (1912) and its working particularities, but I have consulted as many disparate sources as possible – in the paucity of available information – in order to draw his working biography and give some substance to his name. Sulerzhitsky has been invariably linked to Mikhail Chekhov, Yevgeny Vakhtangov and Nikolay Demidov (when the latter is remembered at all), but, once mentioned, is invariably passed over. He taught First Studio actresses Serafima Birman – also a director – Lidiya Deykun and Sofya Giatsintova (when women are remembered in the Art Theatre Pantheon), but his link to them has had a similar fate.

One of my most daunting tasks was to chart the time, duration, character and achievements of the six studios that were affiliated with the MAT or were directly Stanislavsky's responsibility. Such was the case of his first opera studio and its various avatars as well as the second, the Opera-Dramatic Studio (1935), in which Maria Knebel, who had been a member of the Second Studio, learned and taught. It is my firm conviction, arrived at only after assiduous research, that the two opera studios cannot be separated from the other four – nor, indeed, from the unofficial 'first', the Povarskaya Studio, run by Meyerhold at Stanislavsky's request and funded

from his purse; and this inclusive coverage *within* a comprehensive study of Stanislavsky is, to my knowledge, the first of its kind in any language. Only when these studio-laboratories and their intensive work are set side by side does it finally become clear just how central they were to Stanislavsky's artistic endeavours. Their importance as models – even when unacknowledged models – for laboratory and workshop theatre research throughout the twentieth century and still today in the twenty-first cannot, in my view, be overestimated.

All things considered, Anglophone research, by contrast with Russian research, knows little about Stanislavsky's work as a director, with the exception of his early productions, most notably of Chekhov and Gorky plays. Yet his directing, including the team directing of not uncommonly three directors of one work, where Stanislavsky was often an overseer, covered a relatively wide span in which he was no less an innovator than he was in the domain of acting. Mine was an exciting journey through Russian archival sources, transcripts of his rehearsals and scores and plans of his early and 1920s productions, as well as rehearsal-lessons from his Opera-Dramatic Studio and details of several of his opera productions. The latter is the least examined and yet one of the most fruitful areas not only of his directing work but of his work as a whole, shedding a great deal of light both on the actor and the newly developed actor-singer who helped him to expand his sights. I would hope that my readers travel with me on this journey, together with the other journeys of my book, with a similar joy of discovery.

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My requests from the archives were brought with the deft hands of Yelena Sekirova and Yevgeny Konyukhin, while items concerning Leopold Sulerzhitsky came from Yekaterina Shingareva; sincere thanks, too, to Valentina Kuzina, Tatyana Asaylova and, particularly, curator Galina Sukhova, who shared my passions for the painters and sculptors cited in my book, and to Nina Demyanova at the door. The librarians of the MAT Museum, Maria Smoktunovskaya and Lyudmila Medoshina, were always helpful. I am infinitely grateful to Zinaïda Udaltsova, scholar and editor par excellence, who, working near my desk, became curious and struck up a conversation with me that turned into several more to my benefit. All warmly welcomed me, and Maria Polkanova and her team sustained me unforgettably in other ways. Anna Ovchinnikova, in charge of the Stanislavsky House-Museum, also received me with open arms, generously giving her time to answer my questions. I owe great thanks to Yelena Mitrofanova, vice-director of research at the Abramtsevo State Museum, for her tour of the magic world within this rural estate; and to Svetlana Trifonova for her kind invitation to the holy seat of Sergiyev Posad.

For their kind courtesy and efficiency, I thank the librarians at the STD (Union of Theatre Professionals) Library in Moscow and those of the renowned and beautiful St Petersburg State Theatre Library founded in

1756 by Empress Elizabeth Petrovna, who appears in this book. Opposite, founded also by Elizabeth in the same year, is the Aleksandrinsky Theatre. I owe to its artistic director and theatre director Valery Fokin, as to Aleksandr Chepurov, the Aleksandrinsky's head of research and Chair Professor of Russian Theatre at the Russian State Institute of Scenic Arts (RGISI), a great debt of long standing for their hospitality, knowledge and support.

In Riga I am indebted to another generous friend and theatre scholar, Guna Zeltina, for facilitating access to the National Library of Latvia, the library of the National Theatre, whose librarian Rita Malnice I deeply thank, and the Riga Russian Theatre, which was opened in 1883. Both of these theatres are, of course, closely associated with Mikhaïl Chekhov, who is one of my main protagonists, and the second had previously hosted other MAT artists, as noted in my pages. The Russian Theatre was named after Chekhov in 2006.

I owe most of what I know about the theatre to the work of all the living directors whose names I cited as I wrote, even if I did not quote them directly, and others too, who do not appear here at all. And, knowing how busy and hard-working theatre directors are, I cannot thank enough the remarkable directors from whose enriching conversations and more formal interviews over the years I draw in these pages: Eugenio Barba, Yury Butusov, Lev Dodin, Declan Donnellan, Valery Galendeyev, Oskaras Korsunovas, Katie Mitchell, Luk Perceval, Peter Sellars, Anatoly Vasilyev.

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Note on the Text

I have primarily used the Russian eight-volume collected works of Stanislavsky published in 1954–61 (*Sobraniye sochineniy v vosmi tomakh*) because its explanatory notes are more complete than those of the nine-volume edition of 1980–99 (*Sobraniye sochineniy v devyati tomakh*). However, I have cross-checked both, necessarily citing material only available in the second edition. My references appear as SS 8 or SS 9, as the case may be, followed by the volume number and then the page(s) cited, thus: SS 8, 3, 309 or SS 9, 5, 126–7.

To help my readers, my references to and also to my translations of *Moya zhizn v iskusstve* (*My Life in Art*) and *Rabota aktyora nad soboy* (*An Actor's Work on Himself* [*aktyor* grammatically a masculine noun]) are followed by the corresponding references in English translation, when they exist in English (many do not). Citations from several other books in Russian are given their corresponding source in English, albeit not always. Where Stanislavsky's letters are concerned, I cite Laurence Senelick's edition in English for the same reason of reader access to them, while I myself always worked from the two Russian editions and register any discrepancy in our translations.

My friendly transliteration from the Cyrillic alphabet is intended for readers with no Russian. Thus I delete soft and hard signs and write the terminals й and ий as y and the letter ы as y as well; я as ya; ю as yu. However, I have kept the familiar English spelling of names – Scriabin, for instance, instead of Skryabin, or Chaliapin instead of Shalyapin, and so Meyerhold, Tchaikovsky, and other well-established spellings.

I use the word System in upper case to distinguish Stanislavsky's from any other kind of system and, as well, to distinguish it from the comically inflected but disparaging usage of the word in quotation marks of his critics in the early years of the MAT. Stanislavsky wrote 'system' in quotation marks when citing the latter but, most important of all, also when he wished to stress the temporary and provisional nature of the term.

Stanislavsky did not believe that an actor's work could be confined to, or be defined by, sets of exercises and rules. Hence his 'system' in quotation marks drew attention to the inadequacy of the term for the continually developing creative process that is an actor's work. Otherwise, he simply wrote it without quotation marks and in lower case, in accordance with usage in the Russian language.