CHAPTER 1

Context I

The Road to the Moscow Art Theatre

Born in 1863 in Moscow as Konstantin Alekseyev to a wealthy manufacturer of gold and silver thread, he took the name 'Stanislavsky' after a ballerina whom he had admired as a boy. He experimented with this name when he joined his father's factory at the age of eighteen, adopting it permanently in 1885 as he increasingly played in amateur theatres other than the Alekseyev Circle in which, since childhood, he had developed his imagination with his siblings and family friends. Custom obliged him, as others of comparable or superior social standing, to take a pseudonym for the stage, largely because many Russian actors had been serfs. They included the renowned Mikhaïl Shchepkin and Glikeria Fedotova, whose truthful characterization was to inspire Stanislavsky, Shchepkin by reputation (he died the year Stanislavsky was born) and Fedotova through personal contact. In addition, he was aware of the significance of his father's upward social mobility, which separated Stanislavsky by four generations from his peasant ancestry. Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, co-founder with him of the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) in 1897, would ungraciously evoke Stanislavsky's origins when referring to him, throughout their forty-year collaboration, as 'our merchant' and to his allegedly deficient literary culture.

The immediate prompt, however, for Konstantin Alekseyev's capitulation to social pressure was his parents catching him red-handed performing in a risqué French vaudeville. His was an indulgent father who had responded to the family's enthusiasm for making theatre by building a theatre in their Moscow home as well as at Lyubimovka, their country estate. Sergey Alekseyev had also nurtured his children's love for going to the theatre – ballet, opera, plays, the circus – whether Russian or presented by touring companies from abroad. Nevertheless, he was a paterfamilias in

the patriarchal mould of tsarist Russia, and he was now going to exercise his authority. He firmly pointed out to his son that material of finer quality, co-actors less inclined to drink, swearing and blasphemy, and improved working conditions would better serve his artistic dreams. This was all very well from a sternly moral point of view, but Stanislavsky learned much from the fun, vivacity, timing and speed of lightweight and saucy material, invariably from France.

Stanislavsky was to remember his father's lesson when, on the demise of the Alekseyev Circle in 1888, he formed the Society of Art and Literature, replacing operettas, melodramas and lover-in-closet farces with reputable plays (Ostrovsky, Tolstoy, Shakespeare) and contemporary ones from the foreign repertoire (Gerhart Hauptmann). He exchanged, as well, the doubtful venues of his freelance activities for clean, ventilated spaces, while his day job helping to run the family factory paid for them. Societies, like the modest, often domestic Circles on which the Alekseyev Circle had been patented were common enough urban occurrences, also in Russia's far-flung regions. Together with the serf theatres of noble estates before them (serfdom was abolished in 1861, soon leading to the end of serf theatres), they offered small-scale alternatives to the monopoly of the five Imperial Theatres in existence until the 1917 October Revolution, three in St Petersburg and two in Moscow. In the latter city, the Bolshoy was reserved for opera and ballet and, in the adjoining square, the Maly for drama.

The Maly Theatre became a state theatre in 1824 and was enlisted under the 1756 charter of Empress Elizabeth I, the daughter and eventual successor of Peter the Great who had 'westernized' Russia while introducing monarchic absolutism to the country. Her edict had declared theatre to be a state institution tasked with providing high artistic quality, although the subsidies for Russian theatre were significantly below those for the French and Italian theatres resident in Russia at that time: Russian theatre, in the eyes of the Europeanized court, was simply inferior.[1] The Maly, hailed as the 'Second Moscow University' (the University was founded in 1755 with the support of Elizabeth I), proved to be a cultural hub for Russian talent, and it was here that Shchepkin and Fedotova garnered their fame.[2] Stanislavsky was to say in his 1926 *My Life in Art*

[1] Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky (eds.), *A History of Russian Theatre*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 54.
[2] Ibid., 223.

that 'the Maly Theatre, more than any school . . . was the key factor in directing the spiritual and intellectual sides of our life'.[3]

The monopoly of the Imperial Theatres was abolished in 1882, thereby opening the way for private theatres, and so, eventually, for the MAT. As models of cultural influence, the Imperial Theatres guided Stanislavsky's ambitions for the amateur Society of Art and Literature, which had opera and drama sections, the former headed by Fyodor Komissarzhevsky, a lauded opera tenor who had taught Stanislavsky singing; his son, a successful theatre director in St Petersburg, would emigrate to England in 1919 and, known as Theodore Komisarjevsky, would attempt to consolidate his career there. The importance of Stanislavsky's singing training cannot be stressed enough, for, apart from its technical benefits for acting such as placing the voice and encouraging clear diction, it enabled him to phrase the tones, intonations, tempi, breathing and rhythmic patterns, and cadences of speech not only for the musicality of his and fellow actors' performances, but also to improve the overall arc of the productions he directed for the Society. These gains would be of great use to his work in the future. So too would his skills in drawing and watercolours for the visual composition of his productions.

The Society venture was attractive to the intelligentsia, that distinctively nineteenth-century Russian conglomerate of individuals whose education and culture, according to Geoffrey Hosking, 'plucked [them] out of one social category without necessarily placing them in another'.[4] However, it must be noted, the same education and culture were indispensable for their aspirations to some kind of social status and esteem. Set outside Russia's strict social hierarchy, they thus belonged to the *raznochintsy*, the people of disparate ranks thrown back on their own resources to forge a place for themselves; Anton Chekhov, who was one generation removed from serfdom, was representative of this mixed intelligentsia. It was from them, and especially from the liberal professions among them – doctors, lawyers, writers, teachers – that, in its early years, the MAT would generally draw its audiences. In the meantime, during the ten or so years it took to build up the Society's credentials, Stanislavsky honed his acting and directing

[3] *Moya zhizn v iskusstvye*, *SS* 8, 1. All translations from this book are mine. Note my 'spiritual and intellectual sides of our life', which accurately translates Stanislavsky's words and corrects Jean Benedetti's 'mental and intellectual development', since 'mental' does not have the same meaning as 'spiritual'. Moreover, 'mental' weakens Stanislavsky's point that the Maly profoundly affected people's moral constitution and their emotional capacities to deal with life. See *My Life in Art*, trans. and ed. Jean Benedetti, London and New York: Routledge, 2008, 29.

[4] *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917*, London: Fontana Press, 1998, 263.

skills to equal the best that the Maly had offered in its heyday. So impressive had Stanislavsky's achievements become that the well-established playwright, critic and acting teacher Nemirovich-Danchenko sought him out to start a 'new theatre' intended to shake up the professional Russian theatre which, in his as well as Stanislavsky's view, was mired in 'simple, workable technical tricks'.[5] Further, in Stanislavsky's words: 'the theatrical profession was, on the one side, in the hands of barmen and those of bureaucrats on the other. How could the theatre flourish in such conditions?'[6] His answer, throughout his lifetime, was that it could not.

Stanislavsky's summary in *My Life in Art* of their eighteen-hour meeting contains his impassioned account of the 'inhuman conditions' in which actors, 'these servants of beauty . . . spend three-quarters of their lives'[7]: filthy, airless and unheated quarters, more like stables than dressing-rooms with planks for wardrobes and cracked, unlockable doors; ice-cold wind blowing from the street onto the stage where rehearsals took place; damp prompters' boxes causing tuberculosis, and many more vividly observed details based on Stanislavsky's own experiences. The fervour of his account suggests that priority would be given to 'surroundings that would be fit for educated human beings', for only then could 'proper, decent behaviour from actors' be expected and become an integral part of company ethics.[8] Ethical behaviour was a point on which he and Nemirovich-Danchenko were to insist to the end of their days. Both men also agreed that beauty was not the prerogative of a select few and, for this very reason, the MAT would be open and accessible (*obshchedostupnoye*) to all.

Their views, in this, were liberal, although even liberal attitudes had been touched by the populism of the *narodniki* ('advocates of the people' – *narod* means 'people' or 'folk') who, in preceding decades, had 'gone out' to teach the illiterate peasantry but who, by the turn of the twentieth century, had become socialist revolutionaries, ready to bring down tsarist autocracy. The fact that the censors had definite ideas as to what was suitable for the people, urban as well as rural, meant that any lingering hopes Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko may have had about showcasing their envisaged theatre as something of a *people's* art theatre had to be dropped, along with the adjective *obshchedostupnoye*, which they had originally attached to the word 'art' in their chosen name. For the censors, as for the remaining tsarist bureaucracy, the very notion of 'open accessibility' was potentially seditious. Yet, later, nothing in the reigning

[5] *My Life in Art*, 159. [6] Ibid. [7] Ibid., 162. [8] Ibid., 161.

system of control could prevent Stanislavsky from giving a lecture in the fateful year of 1905 about the 'high artistic mission' of the theatre, which 'more than any of the other arts' could 'withstand the oppression of censorship and of religious and police restrictions'.[9]

The issue of how the MAT could be socially inclusive did not really become a pressing one until the revolution of February 1905, when the persistent struggles between the authorities and the champions of social reform, among them factory women demonstrating against their working conditions in St Petersburg, came to a head on 'Bloody Sunday' in that capital city. This critical landmark in increasingly deteriorating relations – a peaceful mass petition to the tsar had turned into a massacre – was followed by a series of strikes. Strikes in Moscow encouraged several members of the MAT, which on Stanislavsky's insistence had always counted the stage technicians and all support staff, not least the doormen and cleaners, to vote to close down the theatre for six days in solidarity with the city's workers.[10] Further strikes in November cut electricity supplies, which closed down all theatres for a considerably longer period.

Fear stalked the streets. The political turbulence aggravated the artistic crisis within the MAT – by no means the last crisis in its history – which foregrounded its uncertainty as to whom, and for whom, the theatre was performing in an unstable country, riddled with injustices. The MAT had already wound down artistically in 1904, at around the time of Chekhov's death. Chekhov had become the house playwright, and his loss was all the more keenly felt because the company had enjoyed close ties with him, while Olga Knipper, one of its founding members, was his widow. The issue of social inclusivity was not to become urgent, however, until the MAT was forced by circumstances way beyond its control to encounter the completely new audiences thrown up by the October Revolution.

A decree signed in December 1919 by Lenin and Anatoly Lunacharsky, a literary and theatre critic who had recently been appointed Commissar of Enlightenment, nationalized all theatres which, the MAT not excepted, gave out free tickets to factory workers, other proletarian groups, and soldiers on leave from the battlefronts of the Civil War (1918–21) in order to 'educate' and 'enlighten' – in the current thinking – an emerging

[9] Quoted in I. Vinogradskaya, *Zhizn i tvorchestvo K. S. Stanislavskogo. Letopis* (*Life and Work of K. S. Stanislavsky. Chronicle*), Vol. 1, Moscow: Moscow Art Theatre Press, 2003, 488. All translations throughout this book from Vinogradskaya's compilation are mine.
[10] Ibid., 520.

participant public;[11] and this public was beginning to be engaged not only with the theatre, but also in every area of civic life, having been deprived of civil liberties and responsibilities by centuries of repressive monarchies. Nationalization meant renaming the MAT an 'academic theatre', hence changing its acronym to MKhAT (Moscow Art Academic Theatre – MAAT). Lunacharsky's rather pompous label was part of his strategy to protect the Art Theatre from left-wing accusations that it was 'bourgeois' and thus noxious as well as obsolete. Stanislavsky, although well aware of Lunacharsky's benevolent ploy, soon discovered that a title he had found galling to begin with had made no substantial difference. By 1925, he was able to vent his frustration, writing to his son Igor that the most 'insulting' term going was '"academic theatre"', amid many abuses and obstructions fomented by the Art Theatre's antagonists.[12]

Lunacharsky was an unconditional Bolshevik who believed, within the frames of reference of the Communist Party, that the proletariat had become active in history instead of remaining its faceless victim. But he was also an old-style humanist who valued the cultural legacy of the privileged classes, which, being a means for enriching lives, necessarily had to be shared with this recently empowered proletariat. The October Revolution had finally made it possible to open the doors to the dramatic, musical and performance treasures of the Art Theatre, the Maly and the Bolshoy. Lenin, while prepared to tolerate the Art Theatre, had serious doubts about the validity of the 'bourgeois' Bolshoy, which he thought should be razed to the ground. Lunacharsky countered by arguing vigorously that, with the overthrow of the old regime, all the institutions protected by his policy had passed to the 'masses', their rightful heirs. The Bolshoy building survived, while its repertoires were slowly acclimatized to the changing society.

Theatres, whether seen as keepers of tradition or companions of revolution, were expected to supplement the ideological tutoring of the population carried out variously, not least by straight-out propaganda. Russia and the territories of the former Russian Empire became the USSR in 1922. Just how the Art Theatre could artistically serve ('these servants of beauty') an altogether different people, the newly evolving Soviet people, without being enslaved by the Soviet state, art and beauty intact, ineluctably

[11] Lunacharsky headed the *Narodny Komissariat po Prosveshcheniyu* (the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment), usually known by its acronym Narkompros. *Prosveshcheniya* is frequently translated as 'education', since the Russian word encompasses this idea.

[12] Laurence Senelick (selected, trans. and ed.), *Stanislavsky – A Life in Letters*, Routledge: London and New York, 2014, 464, letter of 3 June.

preoccupied Stanislavsky. He dealt with the problem and its practicalities, including the negotiations required to survive Stalin's multiple versions of the 'oppression' he had spoken against in 1905, as intelligently and shrewdly as he could until his death in 1938.

Stanislavsky's is a story of riches to rags. The prosperous Alekseyev factories, which had traded internationally and had enjoyed international prestige, were confiscated after the October Revolution, leaving the entire Alekseyev family destitute. Stanislavsky took responsibility for his extended family both economically and in terms of its moral well-being. But, above all else, his is also a story of attainable ideals and indomitable spirit. Regardless of personal upheaval, serious illness, fear, political interference, cumulative state domination, pervading social turmoil and the volatility of theatre practice across the board, Stanislavsky unfailingly kept in sight the 'high' mission of his life in art.

Ensemble Theatre

Among the numerous innovations bequeathed by Stanislavsky and the MAT to the world is his radical idea of ensemble theatre. This was not, for Stanislavsky, merely a case of getting a group of people together to form a company along the lines of a 'corporate' team. Nor was it an ad hoc arrangement to stage this or that piece of work – what today is called project-based theatre. Still less was it a vehicle for the star system fostered in the later nineteenth century by the hierarchical structures of the Imperial Theatres in Russia and the actor-managers and entertainment-commercial theatres of Europe and the United States. Ensemble theatre was a matter of like-minded people with a 'common goal', who *wanted* to be together and were fully dedicated to making theatre permanently together according to this goal;[13] they also shared the same expectations and values, which Stanislavsky often spoke of as common 'foundations' and 'ideas'.

The 'many creativities' of the writer, actor, director, designer, musician and other collaborators were to be merged harmoniously in a piece of work whose various 'creative elements' – word, music, light and so on – would come together in a unified and structured 'whole' (Stanislavsky's *tselost*).[14] Such a collective input of individual talents required a balance between individual interests and those that took hold integrally in the work being

[13] The quotation is from *My Life in Art*, 74.
[14] *SS* 8, 5, 428, and *SS* 8, 6, 75, 280; *SS* 8, 6, 367, especially, for 'creative elements'.

made. It is helpful to seize Stanislavsky's meaning by thinking of the work being made as a transcendent entity to which everyone involved had to 'submit'.[15] Stanislavsky's 'submit' is telling, since it suggests that he was well aware of the push-and-pull and drive for prominence and brilliance of powerful 'creativities'. His envisaged harmonized 'whole' was in sharp contrast with the piecemeal results of competing competencies, as well as rivalries between actors predominant in the nineteenth century.

The framework he conceived for ensemble activity enabled Stanislavsky to reconsider the role of the stage designer who, by past practice, had become accustomed to arranging the scenic 'picture' (Stanislavsky's word) independently of the actors' and the director's wants and needs.[16] When he found in Viktor Simov a like-minded scenographic partner rather than an artist merely hired temporarily for the job – and Simov was to design in close consultation with Stanislavsky and the MAT for most of his life – Stanislavsky gave the very role of designer its full range and significance, probably for the first time in theatre history. The role was one of constructing space rather than illustrating it and, in addition, of providing not decorative backgrounds for situations but a visual insight into, and an interpretation or even synthesis of, the core aspects of a production. This role, a liberating one in so far as the designer was not a subordinate but an equal partner in the process of making a production, was to be a shaping force of twentieth-century theatre, extending to the present in the twenty-first century. Here, indeed, in the designer's place at the *centre* of theatre work along with all other collaborators can be seen a long-lasting consequence of Stanislavsky's advocacy of ensemble practice. The piece of work fashioned collectively, that 'transcendent entity', as described above, was neither a 'thing' nor a 'product', but an *embodiment* of the collective effort invested in its making.

Despite his eighteen-hour deliberations with Nemirovich-Danchenko in 1897, Stanislavsky did not draw up a fully detailed blueprint for ensemble theatre. He was not a theorist as such. It took him a lifetime to contour his thoughts and to test and revise them in different ways in different periods, as much through his stage practice – rehearsals included – as his teaching. His observations regarding ensemble theatre are scattered

[15] *Moya zhizn*, 86. Benedetti in *My Life*, 74, erroneously translates the Russian verb for 'to submit' (*podchinyatsya*, thus Stanislavsky's 'submit to a common goal') with the English verb 'to work' (Benedetti's 'work towards a common goal'). However, as is clear from my text above, Stanislavsky's reference to submission is vital for his idea that collaborators need to respect the goal and the artistic 'whole' (*tseloye*) above their personal interests.

[16] *SS* 8, 5, 428.

over a wide range of sources, going from his private notebooks, diaries and letters, quotations and commentaries among students and friends, public speeches on designated occasions, and of course *My Life in Art* and *An Actor's Work on Himself, Part One* (1938) and *Part Two* (1948), as well as *An Actor's Work on a Role* (1957), which Stanislavsky had planned as a sequel (never completed) to the preceding book. The main points from across these sources have been extracted for these pages and are treated in clusters of ideas rather than in chronological sequence. Clarity of exposition must rely on some interpretation, and this includes my analogy with music below, which is appropriate for Stanislavsky's practical knowledge of singing and his musically endowed approach to the theatre, but is not to be found in precisely these words in Stanislavsky's writings.

The MAT was to be a platform for actors of a *new* type. Such actors were to agree with the principles of artistic and personal unity on which the MAT was based. Consequently, they were to be prepared to reject the star system that had indulged egos excessively, fostering the individualism, narcissism and exhibitionism of actors whom Stanislavsky identified, according to his well-known aphorism, as loving themselves in the theatre instead of loving the theatre in themselves.[17] If the ensemble blueprint took years to be fleshed out, this feature of ego-abnegation for love of the theatre was defined right from the start. Yet let there be no misunderstanding. The 'individualism' denied by the MAT cannot be confused with 'individuality', which Stanislavsky prized and encouraged in actors without fail.[18] Time and again he referred to the necessity of nurturing individuality both for the sake of the actors' own abilities and for the highest potential of the ensemble which, in his view, could not be

[17] The exact aphorism is 'love the art in yourself, not yourself in art' in *An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary*, trans. and ed. Jean Benedetti, Routledge: London and New York, 2008, 558.

[18] The theme of the actor's individuality runs right through Stanislavsky's classes, as recorded in shorthand and transcribed and compiled by Konkordiya Antarova in *Besedy K. S. Stanislavskogo v Studiya Bolshogo teatra v 1918–1922* (*K. S. Stanislavsky's Conversations in the Bolshoy Studio Theatre 1918–1922*), general ed. and introduction by L. Ya. Gurevich, Moscow and Leningrad: All-Russian Theatre Association, 1939, especially 54 and also on the teacher's obligation to bring out the student's individuality so that it flourishes thereafter in his/her professional work. See 80–2 for the 'best human strengths' (Stanislavsky) 'in concert' (my gloss). A wayward version of Antarova's book in English is titled *Stanislavsky: On the Art of the Stage*, trans. David Magarshack, London: Faber and Faber, 1950. This being unreliable, I refer only to Antarova's transcription in the chapters that follow.

For Stanislavsky's view of the actor, in which many of the points cited are summarized, see his 1928 'Iskusstvo aktyora i rezhissyora' ('The Art of the Actor and the Director') in *SS* 8, 6, 232–42, commissioned by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and published as 'Direction and Acting' in Vol. 22, 1929–32, 35–8.

realized without the development of individualities in concert, as equals among peers.

An ensemble was absolutely necessary for the 'collective creativity' and 'collective creation' – recurrent phrases in Stanislavsky's vocabulary – that defined the 'new theatre' he and Nemirovich-Danchenko had founded.[19] The actors of this kind of theatre could be nothing but united by a common purpose, and they were to be deeply connected to each other by how they acted: acutely listening to and hearing each other and co-ordinating each nuance of sound, glance, gesture and action so that the overarching movement developing from moment to moment was like the music played by an orchestra. It did not matter whether the music was on a grand symphonic scale or intimate like a chamber orchestra. The point was that the playing – acting – was inseparably together, constructing the line, texture and density of the piece so that nothing was outside it, going it alone, so to speak. This finely tuned and tuned-in ensemble playing was indispensable for any group identified as 'ensemble theatre'. How Stanislavsky attempted to realize such playing, and how it led his productions at the MAT and activated his laboratory-studios are discussed in subsequent chapters of this book.

As Stanislavsky saw it, ensemble playing worked best when it worked consistently, and this was reason enough to believe that ensemble theatre should be a *permanent* group and endure over the long term. He spared no effort to have the Art Theatre survive, which it did for decades, irrespective of outside political and other pressures, its own vicissitudes, shortcomings and failures, and the disappointments experienced, as well as caused by, its various members – founding members, too, not excluding Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, and younger recruits. Stanislavsky well knew that duration allowed actors to grow and change as everyday human beings as well as artists, since their body, spirit and successive emotional inner states, in short, everything that they were becoming in the flow of life, were integral to the very process of acting. The ensemble both facilitated and protected this motility, while channelling its energy so that nothing went randomly into the ether, away from the work undertaken.

The ensemble was equipped to capture and focus energy because actors were not obliged to waste it by getting to know each other, as do strangers

[19] To be found, for example, in *SS* 8, 3, 254. Benedetti in *An Actor's Work* omits this section, which refers specifically to collective and united creativity. For other strong references, see *SS* 8, 3, 416, *SS* 8, 5, 428–9 (reflections of 1908) and *SS* 8, 6, 369 (1938); the dates in parenthesis suggest Stanislavsky's consistency of thought on 'collective creativity' from the pre-Soviet to the Soviet period. See also Senelick, *Stanislavsky*, 593, letter of circa 29 September 1935 to his sister Zinaïda.