



“YOU WILL NEVER GET TO MOSCOW” AN INTERVIEW WITH ANATOLY SMELIANSKY

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The following is an edited and shortened transcript of an interview with Moscow Art Theatre Associate Artistic Director Anatoly Smeliansky conducted shortly after his lecture at Hunter College.

MB: What are the biggest misconceptions about Stanislavsky's teachings in both the U.S. and Russia?

AS: There are several misconceptions, many of which remain very powerful today. Stanislavsky had a premonition about what would happen to his ideas. In 1906, just about the time he started teaching his system or “method,” if you want to use that word, he had a nightmare which he recorded in his diary. A nightmare about a group of students who approach their clean-shaven teacher and ask him if he can explain to them the elements of his system. The teacher begins hemming and hawing, and, in the nightmare, Stanislavsky begins screaming, “Stop! Stop! I've committed a crime! And I've been punished enough! Don't allow mediocre teachers to take advantage of my mistakes!”

What are the mistakes to which Stanislavsky refers? First of all, we've dogmatized many of Stanislavsky's ideas. This is a real, living system. He did not finish it, and he would not have finished it if he had lived another hundred years. Because this is a system about searching; searching for the creative nature. It is temporary, ever-changing. And Stanislavsky would change his mind. He changed his mind a hundred times. It is like searching for the truth of life. Some people will say, “I got it!” But you can't get it. The same thing is true in Art. The important thing is the search. Just like you will never get to Moscow in *Three Sisters*. It is the same metaphor. You are trying, you are wandering, you are looking, you are searching for Moscow but you will never get there. It is the same thing in art.

When you try to dogmatize Stanislavsky like Lee Strasberg did in many ways—look, “affective memory” is great but it was a very temporary experiment for Stanislavsky. He spent the last ten years of his life completely occupied with the so-called “method of physical action” which is the exact opposite of “affective memory.” The whole point was to find a conscious way into the subconscious. “Affective memory” works well in

some places, with some actors. But in other places it does not work well, it is even dangerous, it causes damage. It can be horrible for an actor. Just like if you only accented the “method of physical action.” In the last few years of his life Stanislavsky was absolutely sure that this was a great discovery, but believe me, if he had lived another few years he would have changed his mind.

All his life he was preoccupied with finding a stable way to activate the unstable world of the subconscious. This is why I say that the search is everything and the result is nothing. In America, you have the dogma of “affective memory,” but in Russia, even today, the most dangerous dogma we have to overcome is the idea of so-called “lifelike theatre.” This is exactly the opposite of what Stanislavsky was searching for. Lifelike theatre, it's a nightmare, a nightmare. It's just a beginning. The strides he made with Chekhov were just a beginning. When he started to formulate his method after 1906, which he continued to develop all his life, he did not base his techniques on any realistic plays, not on Chekhov, but on the plays of the symbolists, Maeterlinck, Shakespeare. So that misconception of his affinity for lifelike theatre is still very powerful. Lifelike theatre, I would say is his enemy, his enemy. He started with naturalism, but you must remember that at the time naturalism was very political—but then it became a cliché. But his reputation as an artist who championed naturalism haunted him until his death. We dogmatized many of his achievements, and then we killed him. When we canonized him in the Soviet Union, we killed him. It was his second death. And it was done consciously, I would say. Stalin did it consciously. It was his way of killing the great artist. By canonization. They killed so many great artists that way. Including Gorky.

MB: How have Gorky's political positions affected the reception of his plays in Eastern Europe in general, and Russia in particular?

AS: Gorky's personality was very complicated, and it is a childish desire now to ruin his reputation, just because he wrote something positive about Stalin. Everybody makes mistakes in life, it's human nature. Sometimes we do horrible things, but we should all have redemption, and Gorky has to have a redemption. Up until the last few years of his life he was one of the great Russian writers and one of the great Russian men. Chekhov once said, all of Gorky's works might one day be forgotten, but never the man. And his personal investment in Russian spiritual life in the twentieth century is absolutely incredible. Why did he choose at one point to glorify the Soviet regime? It's a difficult story. The answers are very complicated. In the case

of Stanislavsky we can also ask, "What kind of choice did they have in the thirties?" We should be historians and not liberal journalists. And as historians, we should understand that in the thirties, the choice for many intellectuals in Europe and Russia was the choice between Hitler and Stalin. We should understand. It was the choice between two bandits. Not a good choice, by the way. Also remember that Stalin was promising a new world, a new art, a new civilization, a Utopia—a new, liberal constitution. The Soviet Constitution of 1936 is probably the greatest in human civilization. And both Stanislavsky and Gorky, like millions of people all over the world, were attracted, seduced by this ideal. They were attracted by the idea of creating a new world. But unlike Gorky, Stanislavsky did not participate. He had a lifelong hatred of politics and politicians, unlike Gorky who was a politician, who was a member of the Communist Party—Stanislavsky, never. They both received, from the government, eighteenth-century mansions in downtown Moscow. But they were both isolated. I would say they were both in comfortable prisons. You cannot kill an artist because he made a mistake.

MB: Robert Brustein, your host at the American Repertory Theatre, has been actively involved in the creative and academic debate over the role and status of ideology in the arts. Are there similar debates occurring in Russia?

AS: Nobody can deny the incredible role of ideology in Art. It has affected art everywhere, in every country, especially in the Soviet Union. All of the arts were under a great pressure from ideology. I would say that the history of Russian theatre is rooted in a great inner struggle against the pressure of ideology. And Stanislavsky was perhaps the first victim. And that is probably why, now that Russia is free and Russian artists are free, political theatre has no more credentials. Russian audiences and Russian artists are fed up with politics and politicians. That is why Brecht is so unpopular in Russia now. It is very rare that you see Brecht staged. But Dostoyevsky, like Chekhov who is still number one, is completely removed from ideology. He is a human writer writing about human lives. He is a doctor more than a teacher. We're fed up with teachers, with teaching, with preaching.

MB: In your lecture, you stressed the fact that prior to 1919 the Moscow Art Theatre was not subsidized by the government, enabling it to maintain both its creative and financial freedom. Could a comparable theatre company be established today, and if so, under what circumstances?

AS: I cannot imagine the Moscow Art Theatre being founded today. How to find a space? How to rent a space? How to pay for it? There are many new theatrical institutions in Russia, but they are all commercial ventures, because they have exorbitant rents to pay. And they are paying rents to state-subsidized theatres. Do you see the paradox? The only way to operate in Russia today is through a state subsidy. A theatre building is associated with a theatre company. And new theatre companies cannot get subsidies because they have neither buildings nor reputations. So the subsidies are given only to the established institutions.

MB: Do critical and popular responses to current Moscow Art Theatre productions vary markedly from country to country?

AS: I would say that the attitude of the critics, especially young critics, is similar to their view of the Comédie Française. Old theatres, with old traditions, established institutions. The critics laugh sometimes, as if we were Grandma and Grandpa, saying, "They're okay, but a little old-fashioned. They can't dance to Rock and Roll. They are still doing Chekhov, what's the point in that?" But sometimes even the young critics appreciate what we do. Because we do keep our eye on all the best directors in Russia and often invite them to work for us. So the response is very mixed. Oleg Efremov, Artistic Director of the Moscow Art Theatre, in a panel discussion with Robert Brustein at BAM, said that the three greatest changes in the Moscow Art Theatre coincided with its visits to the United States. Its first tour in 1923 marked the end of the pre-Revolutionary Moscow Art Theatre. Soon after their 1965 tour, Oleg, founder of the Sovremennik Theatre Company, the most free, liberal and democratic company in post-Stalinist Russia, was invited to become its Artistic Director. And Oleg said, half-jokingly, that after this year's tour of the U.S., another drastic change should occur—the Moscow Art Theatre should probably be closed. Unless, of course, it can find a way to inject new lifeblood into itself. If it can't, it should be closed. Because he probably feels that his period, his thirty-year reign, is over. And he is looking, with great courage, into the future.

MB: With regard to both Chekhov and the Moscow Art Theatre, which expectations will be fulfilled and which will be violated by your current production of *Three Sisters*?

AS: Well, New York has a very big Russian population—hundreds of

thousands of Russians. And they all know Oleg Efremov and the Company and the actors. And to play to Russians, the expectations are very specific because we know them and they know us. But, ninety-percent of our audience were Americans. So, because of the headset simulcast, their responses were delayed by a few seconds. I should really ask the actors what they felt about the audiences' reaction. But for Oleg, I would say that he has never exaggerated the influence of foreign culture and foreign response on the Moscow Art Theatre. Oleg did not expect any decisive changes to come about as the result of the response from either the American audiences or the American critics. He attaches little importance to critical reactions. The popular reaction is much more valuable to Oleg. Because there are very few critics in the world who can really help you or contribute to your creative understanding. And, by the way, you should know that the Russian standard of criticism is very high. Because the greatest Russian critics are the greatest Russian scholars and theoreticians. And believe me, the reviews found in American papers do not meet the standards of Russian criticism. A real critic must not simply be a good reviewer, but a real writer—a Man of Letters. And his response is the response of another art—literature, to your art. If the critic can philosophize, if the critic can accumulate and articulate ideas, and bring them to the table so that we might discuss them, this is a real encounter. The theatre's first encounter is with the audience, but then there follows the encounter with the critics. And it should be a real encounter, not “I liked it” or “I didn't like it.” What's the point in that?

MB: What do you predict the future holds for the Moscow Art Theatre?

AS: I don't know. All the exciting young directors in Russia have their own companies. I regard the future with fear and trembling. But we don't know what the future holds. Probably some young genius will come along and say, “I can lead the Moscow Art Theatre!”

MB: You said in your lecture that sometimes it's healthy to exist under the sign of death.

AS: Yes. And this is probably the most fruitful situation now because everybody understands that Oleg feels that the Moscow Art Theatre is on the edge of death.