"THE IDEA OF ART THEATRE: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE" ANATOLY SMELIANSKY AT HUNTER COLLEGE

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In 1898, while directing the Moscow Art Theatre's seminal production of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, a frustrated Konstantin Stanislavsky found himself at an impasse. A crippling stagnancy had settled over the rehearsal process. His cast had atrophied. He found himself unable to cultivate fresh ideas. His interpretive skills seemed to have abandoned him. Then one night, while contemplating his dilemma in the empty, darkened theatre, Stanislavsky experienced a moment of stark realization. Underneath the floorboards, he heard the desperate cries of a screeching, scurrying mouse, frantically searching for an escape from his black, tomblike crevice. Suddenly, Stanislavsky understood the play. *Three Sisters* was not about drudgery, boredom, or dissatisfaction, but, rather, "the desire to get life."

On February 11, 1998, Anatoly Smeliansky, Associate Artistic Director of the Moscow Art Theatre, spoke before a capacity crowd at the Lang Recital Hall at Hunter College, City University of New York. He recounted the above-quoted story as a part of his lecture, "The Idea of Art Theatre: Past, Present, and Future." Citing the Moscow Art Theatre as an exemplary model, Smeliansky traced its origins, investigated its history, and elucidated the sweeping changes which have marked its one hundred year reign as one of the world's most influential theatre companies. While attempting to define the essence of "Art Theatre" as a concept, Smeliansky wrestled with the larger, philosophical implications of a theatrical institution's ability to survive its own success.

Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko established the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898. According to Smeliansky, their idea of an "Art Theatre" was one that would last, perhaps, two seasons—a living theatre that, like all living things, is born and then dies. This sense of mortality injected a certain vitality into the company; an urgency, a palpable energy which permeated the early productions. Only later would the company feel the pressure, not to achieve greatness, but to sustain it.

Smeliansky argues that "Art Theatre" lives under the sign of death, while "National Theatre" lives under the sign of immortality. Like the mouse, the "Art Theatre" struggles to survive, energetically searching for new ways to exist and prosper. A "National Theatre," on the other hand,

has, by necessity, become staid, because its continuing survival is assured. It need only meet pre-established expectations, which, according to Smeliansky, feeds its lethargy, predictability, and, in many cases, mediocrity.

For the first twenty-one years of its existence, The Moscow Art Theatre was a commercial venture, complete with investors and dividends. This enabled the company to maintain its financial and creative independence. In 1919, just after the Revolution, The Moscow Art Theatre received substantial government subsidies. "That was the death of the Art Theatre," says Smeliansky. It became, in essence, a National Theatre—an "Art Theatre" in name only. To insure its survival, it had to subordinate its own artistic ideals to the political ideals of its sponsoring government. This oppressive yoke was only recently removed.

For Smeliansky, the question becomes, "How do we inject new blood into our institution? It is a matter of necessity if we are to survive. To this day, the Moscow Art Theatre's biggest battle is fighting the cliches associated with our company. If we fail, we die. But how to die? An 'Art Theatre' knows how to begin—it does not know how to die." Smeliansky believes that the sign of death has reemerged over the Moscow Art Theatre, bringing with it, ironically, a new hope. For now its struggle to survive might possibly revitalize, with a new urgency and focus, the still formidable, but staid institution.

Not long before his death, a group of students paid Stanislavsky a visit at his home. They entered his bedroom, but the grand old man was nowhere to be found. After several moments, a sick, dying, pajama-clad Stanislavsky emerged from under his bed. When one of the students boldly asked, "What were you doing under the bed," Stanislavsky promptly replied, "I wanted to see what it felt like to be a mouse."