

Interview with Maria Shevtsova

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Shevtsova has founded and developed the sociology of the theatre as an integrated discipline and is the founding director of the Sociology of Theatre and Performance Research Group at Goldsmiths. Shevtsova also founded and leads the annual *Conversations* series, where her invited guests for public interview and discussion have included Eugenio Barba, Lev Dodin, Declan Donnellan, and Jaroslaw Fret and performers of Teatr ZAR.

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PC: How would you describe Stanislavski's work?

MS: I take issue with the whole notion of Stanislavski, the naturalist. 'Psychological realism' is how I would describe his most famous work, but it is not the only thing that Stanislavski did. He experimented with symbolism; he experimented even with what might be called abstract forms of theatre – not always successfully, and that is not how he is remembered. He was a great experimenter. This must not be underestimated. He created the first laboratory theatre we know of in modern times: the Theatre Studio on Povarskaya Street in 1905 with Meyerhold. I would claim that Stanislavski is the linchpin of modern world theatre.

PC: How did Stanislavski's upbringing influence his work?

MS: I would recommend anyone reading this to find a copy of *My Life in Art* by Stanislavski. It is one of the greatest books on theatre ever written. It gives the best account I have yet read of Stanislavski in context. *My Childhood* and then *My Adolescence* are the first parts of the book. He was a privileged child who grew up as the son of a very big industrialist. He wasn't from the wealthiest families of Moscow but he was from a very wealthy family, and a very respected family. His father's factory was renovated about ten years ago and made into a beautiful and prominent theatre in Moscow, and it's a fantastic place to visit. How it looks today and how it must have been in his time as a factory are of course two different things. Stanislavski constructed a theatre for the workers in that factory. It wasn't just that the workers were brought

out to sit there and watch theatre; they made it themselves. Now, how revolutionary is that? It's phenomenal. He was tremendously generous, which came from his loving childhood. It came from an education that very much taught him to give back to the world.

PC: What was his education?

MS: Stanislavski was exposed to all the performing arts – theatre, opera, ballet, and the circus. The ideal of a cultivated human being was very much part of Stanislavski's education within his family. It was a believing family, a Christian Orthodox family that had a strong sense of social responsibility. It was wealthy enough to build a theatre in the house in Moscow. It was part of the cultural habitat of affluent and/or educated families to have intimate circles in which they entertained each other, learned from each other, and invited some of the great artists of their time to come to their homes. Stanislavski's family was wealthy enough also to have an estate outside Moscow, near a place close to the city called Pushkino. It's where Chekhov's *The Seagull* was rehearsed before premiering at the Moscow Art Theatre during the company's 1898-99 season, its first season. In *My Life in Art*, Stanislavski shows very clearly that he had access to the great theatre works and great artists of his time, Russian and European. He saw Tommaso Salvini, who came to perform in Russia, and the famous Eleanora Duse, also from Italy. This was part of his artistic education and it was tied up with a moral education. Education, it was believed, actually made you a better person. I wish we had some of that belief today. Hence, this attitude of giving to others; he didn't keep things to himself. He would never have achieved as much as he did had he held it all for himself.

PC: Did Stanislavski always have a fascination with acting?

MS: Acting was not considered to be a suitable profession for respectable middle-class boys. But he was a child actor at home and, in order to act publicly as he grew up, he had to do it in a clandestine way, hiding away from his family, until he was caught red-handed by his father, doing a 'naughty' vaudeville. His father said: "Listen, if you want to do serious work, get yourself decent working conditions. Stop wasting your time with people of no talent who drink and swear and blaspheme." He followed his father's advice and set up the Society of Art and Literature in 1888. This is the point at which he became known as Stanislavski: the family name was Alekseyev. He chose 'Stanislavski' because it was the name of his favourite ballerina.

PC: What kind of work was done at the Society of Art and Literature?

MS: Before he founded this Society his amateur work was fairly stock-in-trade, routine stuff: it certainly wasn't challenging art. But, once he had the Society of Art and Literature, he began to follow contemporary trends of European theatre and to stage established, classical drama. He went to visit Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, who did eurhythmic work, in Hellerau in Germany. I think he first went in 1907, to see first hand himself what Dalcroze's eurhythmics was about and how it was done. Stanislavski used his privileges for the benefit of others. We need to be open to people who, like Stanislavski, were generous. He and the people close to him were not

generous in a condescending “I’m-giving-to-the-poor” way. The generosity was done with a tremendous sense of “together with”.

PC: Did he travel beyond Europe much? Did he travel to Asia?

MS: He didn’t travel to Asia, but when Mei Lanfang, the great Chinese actor, came to Russia in the early 1930s, Stanislavski was right there, along with Meyerhold, who is known for having promoted Mei Lanfang’s work. Meyerhold has a wonderful passage in his writings about how Mei Lanfang weeps. He did not pretend, nor did he shed real tears. He lightly touched his face with a handkerchief to the face so that the actual event of weeping was suggested rather than literally stated. This is something that Stanislavski also enormously respected in Mei Lanfang’s work.

PC: Did Stanislavski have any acting training himself?

MS: He had no training as we think of it today. However, he did have very distinguished people working with him at the Society of Art and Literature, and he was taught by these experiences. He started out as an amateur actor and had to create his own actor training. That is precisely why he invented his so-called ‘system’. He was very conscious of his shortcomings and, out of this modesty, grew a strong desire to learn and improve; and he kept learning and exploring in an especially marked way after 1905, despite the fact that, by then, he was already an internationally acclaimed actor.

PC: What was the dominant Russian tradition of theatre for the young Stanislavski?

MS: The Maly Theatre in Moscow, which performed numerous plays by the well-known (even then) playwright Aleksandr Ostrovsky, was hugely influential and featured the great actors of the day including the iconic Mikhaïl Shchepkin. Shchepkin was a great serf actor and the Russian theatre produced remarkable serf artists, who were from the peasant class; and this goes some way to explaining why acting was not considered appropriate for middle-class sons and daughters. It is really important to remember that there was a home-grown Russian tradition of acting. It did not have to rely on foreign models. Beyond Russia, the desired model was the western European theatre, predominantly the lighter material that came from France: the farces, and vaudevilles. Examples of fine tragedy came from Italy with Salvini and Duse.

PC: Did those comic styles inform his thinking on characterisation later?

MS: Yes, as you do when you start out: you work with what is there until you work with what you create yourself. Stanislavski was a very good comic actor, a good lover-in-the-closet actor and very adept at vaudeville, of which he had had first-hand experience from his visits to France. But Stanislavski was very well aware of the new trends that were emerging and going away from the comic genres – away from the farces and the jokes about lovers hidden in closets and moving towards compositions that were serious. What was emerging was an examination of the social conditions in which people lived. There were the dramatists Ibsen and Hauptmann, and the

theatre director Andre Antoine, who pioneered naturalism on the stage and created the Theatre Libre in Paris.

PC: What was naturalism?

MS: Naturalism grew out of Emile Zola's novels and plays, which attempted to create photographic realism: life as it was – not constructed, nor necessarily imagined, but how it actually was. Zola is the one who inspired Antoine to have real water on the stage and fires burning on it. When we see this today, we think it is really so radical, but, in fact, it's an old naturalistic trick. Stanislavski learnt from Zola's insistence that the theatre should make the poor, the working classes, the French peasantry, the uneducated, the dispossessed and the socially disempowered central to theatre's preoccupations. These subject matters had largely been excluded from the theatre until Zola and Antoine. Stanislavski was very well aware of the massive changes taking place from the mid 1880s onwards not only in the theatre field, but in the arts, in general. Even so, what he had acquired in his travels was not what he was aspiring to. Acquisition of a theatre culture is one thing, but creating a new acting culture was another.

PC: Was that early naturalism a kind of exhibition of poverty for the wealthy?

MS: Hmmm.... there certainly were 'exotic' elements in it, which were evident when the Saxe-Meiningen theatre company visited Moscow from Germany. This company specialised in staging big crowd scenes – 'the people'. It took Stanislavski a while to get beyond such 'exotic' elements and actually understand the main dramas of social life that unfolded behind 'naturalist' productions. He saw full well that the peasantry and the working classes were not objects in a zoo to be inspected; they were real flesh and blood, not curiosities but people who suffered pain and genuine deprivation. Deprivation was a very complex socio-political issue in the 1880s and also in the 1890s, when the Moscow Art Theatre was founded (1898). A major movement developed in Russia made up of 'narodniki' – an educated group who went out into the countryside to teach people to read and write, without which they were completely disempowered. It was an attempt, in a small way, to bring about social change.

PC: Is there a strong link between Stanislavski and Antoine's Theatre Libre?

MS: No, they are falsely connected through naturalism. The idea that Stanislavski was a naturalist started out as a naturalist, became a naturalist, and continued to be one is not true. I think it is just another one of those myths attached to him. One grasps what is familiar, and naturalism was familiar. I do not wish to denigrate Antoine's importance in the history of the theatre, and, expressly, in the history of directing, but it's not really Stanislavski's story. There were so-called naturalistic aspects in his 'psychological realism', but he was interested in psychological theatre, in plumbing the depths of human feelings. Naturalism was not interested in psychological theatre. Antoine was interested in environments that determined behaviours, and in class differences. He was interested in the depiction of real 'reality', but it consisted of surface effects, and the later Stanislavski hated surface effects. If Antoine was to make his theatre comprehensible, with its pictures of poverty and the conditions of peasant life, he had to

pile on the details. These visual details needed to be heightened to communicate brutalities to a middle class that had never seen them close up in their own lives. What interested Stanislavski in the new writing of Chekhov was its subtle psychological depth – not naturalistic surface, not what hit the eye and the ear immediately, but what was going on beneath appearances.

PC: How did the Saxe-Meiningen influence Stanislavski?

MS: Stanislavski saw the Saxe-Meiningen in Moscow, on their second tour to Russia in 1890. He was very impressed by the director of the Saxe-Meiningen, Ludwig Chronegk, and especially by his crowd scenes. Perfecting crowd scenes was very important to Stanislavski as a young director. He was also interested in answering technical questions about how a director achieved effects such as gondolas passing by in Chronegk's production of *The Merchant of Venice*, for example.

PC: I believe the Saxe-Meiningen pioneered the role of the director. Was this something that Stanislavski took on?

MS: Stanislavski had already been developing his work as a director at the Society of Art and Literature. I don't think he learned anything about what it was to be a director from Chronegk. Like Chronegk, Stanislavski knew he could push people around like figures on a chess board and tell them what to do. In his youth, he was, as he described himself, a 'despotic' director. This idea of directing is still widespread in Britain. The actor-manager who directed by command was very much a product of the nineteenth century. But Stanislavski established a new kind of understanding of the actor as the co-worker and the collaborator of the director. He established this quintessentially modern figure of a collaborative director in the twentieth century.

PC: Why did collaboration become so important to Stanislavski?

MS: **Stanislavski absorbed the major social and political changes going on around him and they informed his famous eighteen-hour discussion with Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko in 1897 about what kind of new theatre the Moscow Art Theatre was to be. It was to be, above all else, an ensemble theatre in which everyone worked together for common goals. One of them was artistic coherence – productions whose various elements (light, costume, sound, décor) formed a unified whole. In these respects, Stanislavski was against the prevailing theatre, dominated by 'star' actors, while the rest, the remaining cast and stage co-ordination, were of little significance. The goal of high artistic standards for theatre understood as an art form and not merely as entertainment was core to the changes taking place on a large scale. The same kind of social and political ideas shaped the writers of the period. Theatre does not simply reflect society, as a mirror might. It is part and parcel of the processes of social change. The theatre is a form of freedom: it's where things can be said and shown that might not be seen, said, or heard in an individual's daily life.**

PC: What were the plays and playwrights of this time and how were they engaged with social change?

MS: Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness* was one such example, and Stanislavski had first staged it with the Society of Art and Literature, to follow with a second version in 1902 with the Moscow Art Theatre. The playwrights of this period were three: Tolstoy, Chekhov, Gorky. Tolstoy wrote about the peasantry who lived on his own property in Yasnaya Polyana and for whom he fought the most. Tolstoy was an activist, a political anarchist, and he was excommunicated from the Orthodox Church. The existing dynamics of society took form in the theatre in the new writing. Not only was the subject now different, but the way of writing was different. Stanislavski was sensitive to the fact that this was happening. What he wasn't sure of was how he could treat it and what he could do with it. With time, practice and ensemble, collaborative principles, he built up confidence both as an actor and a director in dealing with the new writing.

PC: What was Tolstoy's influence on Stanislavski?

MS: What was Tolstoy for Chekhov? What was he for Stanislavski? What was he for Russia? The answer for all three questions is the same. He was a moral beacon. He was the moral light to which one had to aspire to do good on this earth, to help solve the problems of inequality and injustice, and poverty and deprivation. Politically, Lenin would have seen them all as merely reformist and non-revolutionary. Tolstoy believed that the wealth of society was unevenly distributed. Alexander II freed the serfs in 1861. The landowners no longer owned them, but the newly freed serfs were not given the land on which they had worked all their life. One of Tolstoy's main battles was to get the land to the peasantry. For the intelligentsia, and the enlightened aristocrats, this man, this Count Tolstoy, was an example to the whole nation. Chekhov admired him for his fearless vision and fortitude. It needs to be noted that Chekhov was of peasant stock and he was the first in his family to be university educated – in medicine, and became a doctor. This is the kind of thing we see in Britain today – the massive influx of first-generation students in universities whose parents have little formal education. Chekhov worked towards the same moral goal as Tolstoy. Not in a 'Bible-in-hand' moral way, but 'moral' in the sense of respecting the dignity of others; 'moral' in the sense of striving for equality and justice; 'moral' in the sense of being against all forms of oppression – political oppression, police oppression, family oppression, state oppression.

PC: In this context of powerhouses, how did Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavski work together?

MS: Nemirovich-Danchenko's relationship with Stanislavski was a very chequered and difficult relationship that lasted until Stanislavski died in 1938. **One of the great difficulties between the two men arose from the fact that they had fundamentally two different views of the theatre. Nemirovich-Danchenko was a playwright and the word on the page was, ultimately, of uppermost importance for him. Nemirovich-Danchenko made disparaging remarks concerning Stanislavski's merchant background. Nemirovich-Danchenko fancied himself as a minor aristocrat with a strong literary culture. He was a playwright**

committed to the dramatic world of the text. Stanislavski was an actor working with his body on the stage. Stanislavski was busy trying to discover new ways of acting, unaffected acting, which frequently bothered Nemirovich-Danchenko; and he made disparaging remarks about Stanislavski's burgeoning 'system'.

PC: What questions was Stanislavski asking that proved to be particularly challenging?

MS: How did you become a new kind of actor, an actor of truthfully felt rather than imitated feelings? How did you deal with the new dramaturgy of Chekhov? Stanislavski certainly valued texts, as is clear in all his production notes, and he discussed points at issue with writers not from a literary but a theatre point of view: 'The tempo doesn't work with that bit of text, could you change or cut it? Could you move some dialogue around?' None of this prevented him from being respectful of these living playwrights. It was his passion for the theatre that overcame each obstacle. The newness of Stanislavski's theatre was that he was making it an art form in its own right; an autonomous entity, and not, as I call it, 'illustrated literature'.

PC: What distinguished Stanislavski's theatre as a new art form?

MS: It was literary-based, but it was more. He did not illustrate the text. Stanislavski's great modern achievement was the living ensemble performance. The theatre was not entertainment. It had to have moral substance, it had to provide enlightenment, consciousness, transformation. This was possible because of Stanislavski's emphasis on shaping and refining forms to be embodied in performance. It went hand in hand with his development of a new kind of actor with new acting skills, abilities and capacities. Even so, Stanislavski was not about art for art's sake, about closing off theatre into a kind of cocoon of its own. He asked 'What is this new theatre's role in society?' He wanted it to be a different but honourable form, as literature was considered to be honourable – then, in Russia, and today, in Britain.

PC: It still isn't considered to be as honourable or as serious as literature. You can see similar struggles for legitimacy in schools today.