

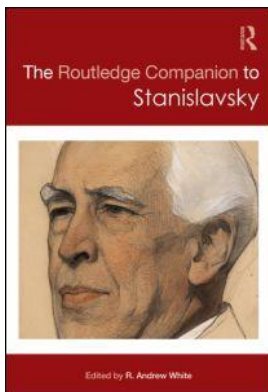
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## **The Routledge Companion to Stanislavsky**

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### **The Organic and the Political**

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### 3

# THE ORGANIC AND THE POLITICAL

Stanislavsky's dilemma (Ibsen, Tolstoy, Gorky)

*Anna Muza*

In October 1902, the Moscow Art Theatre opened the season in its own new building, elegant and intimate, designed to make both the viewers and the performers comfortable and aesthetically inspired. The attractive space with its aura of freshness and promise was inaugurated by three productions, each bleaker than the last: Maxim Gorky's *Philistines* (October 25),<sup>1</sup> Leo Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness* (November 5), and Gorky's *The Lower Depths* (December 18). A suffocating, lower-middle class home, a vile peasant *izba*, and a crowded lodging for society's outcasts – all reeked of dejection, despair, violence. In the outdoor scenes of *The Power of Darkness*, the stage was covered with squelching mud. The ingenuity and labor invested in the fake mud all but travestied the effort expended on the Theatre's interior. The irony was duly noted by Stanislavsky himself: "Are you coming to Moscow any time soon? Aren't you going to see the [new] theatre, descend to the lower depths, give yourself up to the power of darkness?" he wrote to a friend in Petersburg on Christmas of 1902 (SS VII 1988–99: 476).<sup>2</sup>

The paradox of foul as fair was on Stanislavsky's mind in a deeper sense as well. He observed in his notes that "mud and a dirty peasant coat [*tulup*]" were more appealing to contemporary audiences than sensual pleasures of the "age of powder" (SS V: 110). Could the Art Theatre's new repertoire, so apparently preoccupied with the base and ugly aspect of humanity, remain satisfying aesthetically? *The Power of Darkness* concerned a peasant household ruined by female lust, depravity, and murder. *Philistines* presented a futile war of equally pathetic generations in a family bearing the transparent surname of Bessemenov, "without seed." The plot of *The Lower Depths* revolved around romantic jealousy between two sisters, murder and suicide, and the agony of human survival on the very "bottom of life" (the latter being the play's initial, straightforward title). A frank treatment of human instincts, revolting moral failures, and disguised social ills of modernity made Tolstoy's and Gorky's plays extremely attractive to independent theatres of Naturalist persuasion elsewhere in Europe. André Antoine and the Théâtre Libre in Paris, and Otto

Brahm and the Freie Bühne in Berlin had staged Tolstoy's drama even prior to its appearance in Russia (1888, 1890, and 1895 respectively). Max Reinhardt seized on *The Lower Depths* immediately following its premiere in Moscow. (Oliver Saylor, who saw the play in 1918, found that the "degradation of French naturalists [was] roseate and romantic" by comparison with "Gorky's masterpiece" (Saylor 1922: 66–7)). At the same time, the Art Theatre followed its Western counterparts in cultivating Ibsen; *The Wild Duck* (staged 1901) and *Ghosts* (staged 1905), in particular, contributed to the dramatic exploration of unhappy and dying families, lies and sins of the fathers, and the children's demise.

Despite the thematic and stylistic appearance of this repertoire, however, Naturalism, whether in its original or diluted sense, was alien to the Art Theatre and its authors. Neither the "scientific," analytical dissection of human species that Émile Zola demanded of modern art nor the photographic objectivity in displaying the vulgar and sick side of life appealed to the Moscow artists. Stanislavsky, who believed in looking for the good in a bad character, and who in 1899 had attempted to soften and humanize even Ivan the Terrible, was more concerned with the regeneration of the soul than the degeneration of the flesh. Tolstoy used his fallen characters to point a way to redemption and spiritual rebirth, and even *The Lower Depths* carried an uplifting humanistic theme. Still, the Russian accent on moral salvation notwithstanding, the overall setting was coarse and violent. *The Power of Darkness* contained a scene of infanticide which, in its invisible yet audible and tangible brutality, was more shocking than the conventional, behind-the-scenes murder in such a model Naturalist oeuvre as Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*.<sup>3</sup> Stanislavsky was not unable to relish a moment of staged horror: he sought Tolstoy's permission to make the episode more explicit than it already was in the script, and envisioned it as an ominous play of shadows, cries and whispers, and flickering light (Stroeva 1973: 101).

Twenty years later in *My Life in Art*, Stanislavsky revealed his inner discord with this dramatic material and mapped it in a somewhat unexpected way. He dismissed the staging of *The Power of Darkness* as "bare naturalism" because he and his partners had failed to feel and convey the passion of Tolstoy's characters, and he branded the production with an untranslatable Russian word *bytovoi*, denoting material forms and customs of everyday existence. Owing to that ethnographic or "archeological" ethos, *The Power of Darkness* belonged, for its director, with the Art Theatre's historical spectacles, such as *Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich* and *Julius Caesar*. Yet although Gorky's plays contained a similar ethnographic element, evident in their very titles, Stanislavsky identified them with the "social and political line," or political "tendency," in the Art Theatre's repertoire, which he traced back to Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* staged as *Doctor Stockmann* in 1900. Stanislavsky favorably opposed *Stockmann* to *The Lower Depths* and its overbearing message, yet other plays by Ibsen hardly got any mention at all. In a very short chapter on "Symbolism and Impressionism," Stanislavsky cited Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko's superior authority in the Ibsen quarter and observed that he and other actors did not know how to be "natural" in "all the sophisticated isms" (SS I: 287).

What are we to make, a century later, of this entanglement of the natural and naturalistic, political and spontaneous, tendentious and artistic, and is it worth our

scrutiny? Did Stanislavsky's treatment of stark modern plays, socially provocative and theatrically daunting, rise to the level of the Art Theatre's, and his own, true discoveries, such as finding a performative match for Chekhov's dramatic idiom? By his own account, both as director and actor, Stanislavsky often felt out of his element with Ibsen and Gorky, too explicit, too cerebral for his sensibility. Nevertheless, it was in this kind of drama that Stanislavsky played two of the most significant and celebrated roles of his career: Ibsen's Stockmann and Gorky's Satine. Despite Stanislavsky's dissatisfaction with *The Lower Depths*, the play went on to become one of the Art Theatre's vital productions – alive, relevant, and making a strong impression on its audiences years after its initial appearance.<sup>4</sup> And in a deeply personal yet also larger artistic sense, the plot of a suppressed and ultimately exposed truth central to these dramatic texts resonated with, and enabled, Stanislavsky's relentless self-questioning and search for the meaning of "truth" in the illusory world of cardboard and glue.

Stanislavsky's work on the plays discussed in this chapter has been thoroughly analyzed by theatre and cultural historians; Russian scholarship in particular has pursued a close reading of Stanislavsky's production plans and illuminated his realized and unrealized goals, practical choices, and persistent concerns. Without replicating that comprehensive effort, I have tried to select and examine those aspects of Stanislavsky's pursuit that engage us by their foresight and relevance to our own aesthetic theory, art, and performance.

### The inanimate and the animate

A meticulous recreation of times and spaces, the historical and national *Geist* remains the best-known feature of the Art Theatre's early aesthetic. Both Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko were enamored with the "unmediated transparency to the offstage reality," which distinguished late nineteenth-century realism and the theatre of the fourth wall (Worthen 1992: 15). The sophistication and unprecedented material culture of the Art Theatre's sets was a result not only of the founders' fascination with the Real, but also of their unwavering – and costly – rejection of the generic in favor of the specific and individual. Stanislavsky in particular despised ready-made drawing rooms and gardens as much as the stock devices and clichés of the acting trade. His well-known epiphany – that he hated "theatre in the theatre" – presupposed that untheatrical uniqueness of each stage property which overturned the recycling principle inherent in the dramatic industry.<sup>5</sup> When sets and costumes made for *Ghosts* reminded Stanislavsky of the décor already used in *The Pillars of Society* and *When We Dead Awaken*, he demanded changes from his "lazy" designers: "On the whole, it does resemble *The Pillars of Society*. Therefore we've decided to turn it all around" (SS V: 246–8).

Tolstoy's and Gorky's plays required no less, if not more, background research than Shakespeare's Rome or Ibsen's Norway. Introducing a new social group into the sphere of representation is in general a cultural problem of many dimensions; in particular, pariahs, ruffians, and *les misérables* of all kinds have often been admitted into the cultural mainstream under mitigating circumstances. The lower classes were

aesthetically justified by means of the exotic, melodramatic, sentimental, and other such generic compensations. The peculiar paradox of the Russian situation was that, while the cast of drunks, thieves, and prostitutes in *The Lower Depths* was indeed made up of marginal, socially invisible elements, the peasant heroes of *The Power of Darkness* belonged to the largest class of the Russian society – and yet the life of the peasant majority remained very remote from the Westernized culture of the intelligentsia. Owing in part to political pressures, the Russian stage held on to safe, stale, and patently false stereotypes of nationalistic drama and vaudeville entertainment. Pretty maidens and patriotic bearded *muzhiks* persisted in the theatre even after Russian literature had achieved an altogether different level of social analysis and psychological complexity in representing the Russian people. Tolstoy's and Gorky's plays gave Stanislavsky and his collaborators an opportunity not merely to reach (as they always did) for a new standard of veracity but to invent and master a new expressive language for their respective subjects. The Art Theatre organized expeditions to the Tula province, where *The Power of Darkness* takes place, and to a notorious out-of-bounds neighborhood in Moscow to observe the downtrodden for *The Lower Depths*. Both field trips are described in *My Life in Art*; the latter is especially well-known for putting its participants in real danger. Actually, the incident was not devoid of a Stanislavskian implication: the artists' genuine experience validated the dramatic pretense.

In a brilliant parody of contemporary trends in the theatre, the author and director Nikolai Evreinov described the Stanislavskian setting as a “room which represents an almost entirely cluttered space” – as opposed to the “boundless space bound with screens” in Gordon Craig's staging (Evreinov 1923: 18, 27). Stanislavsky's proverbial passion for the material richness and realness of the stage event could be hard on his actors, who had to compete with their environment for the viewer's attention. For many critics – including Stanislavsky himself – material objects and physical activities put on display in *The Power of Darkness* overshadowed the inner movement of the tragedy of conscience and did not help the cast's faltering performance. Nevertheless, despite Stanislavsky's subsequent self-flagellation, the production's material excess was not a goal in itself. In the Soviet period, Marianna Stroeve argued that the director exaggerated the “revolting realism” of the scenery to cast doubt on Tolstoy's religious preaching. The stage emphasis on the coarse and oppressive matter of life undermined the author's faith in the ultimate triumph of good in the Christian soul of the Russian people (Stroeve 1973: 97–104). Whether Stanislavsky doubted Tolstoy's belief or not, the material density of his staging was also directed against the flimsy and spurious stage tokens of peasant life. His notes for *The Power of Darkness* are remarkable in combining an ethnographer's meticulous observation with a director's selective and purposeful gaze: “The cradle is fastened to the ceiling by a rope, not a pole, and rocked by means of another rope, with a noose for the foot” (SS V: 176); “Women's shoes: black and white ornament is stitched through, small silver buttons on the sides, large heels, metal heel plates” (SS V: 177); “Peasant women do not rest their cheek on their hand as they habitually do in the theatre: they place the hand on the chin and stroke it with the inner side of their fingers as if stroking a beard” (SS V: 180). The concrete and novel images of material and physical life unmediated by cultural habit served

to assert the social and human validity of the peasant characters, and not only within the confines of the stage.

The writer Leonid Andreev made a discerning and poetic comment about the Art Theatre's unique sensitivity to the "pan-psychological" aura of Chekhov's plays in which things performed like people (Andreev 1996: 525–6).<sup>6</sup> The interaction between actors and things, the animate and the inanimate, engaged Stanislavsky in different, often unprecedented and provocative ways. Famous for his art of creating an integral stage mood or atmosphere, Stanislavsky also experimented with contrasting, dissonant arrangements prompted, in particular, by the heavy and stuffy spaces of the lower social plane. The critics noticed and balked at his treatment of the suicide scene in the third act of *Philistines*, which seemed callous and self-indulging. In Gorky's script, a young woman, Tatiana, who has poisoned herself, remains invisible in her room, while other members of the household are running around trying to save her and keep a crowd of onlookers at bay. To this bedlam, somewhat vertiginous already in reading, Stanislavsky added people moving furniture out of Tatiana's room – and not just some minor items, but a dressing table and a trunk (Stanislavsky 1986: 217). The odd episode did not fit into any conventional semantic scheme: the table and trunk, devoid of sentimental or symbolic value, looked almost like a parody of such cherished dramatic properties as Hedda Gabler's pistols or the three sisters' clock.<sup>7</sup> The novelty of Stanislavsky's thought and *mise-en-scène* was precisely in associating an intense, "dramatic" moment of human crisis with life's material extensions lacking any personal meaning. In *Philistines*, the material world of the play – cupboards, cushions, cheap knickknacks, plates, and more plates called for in Gorky's quite specific stage directions – was distinctly un-Chekhovian, spiritless, narrow, and typical of the social class it served. But at the same time, things possessed an indifferent independence of their owners, and the silence of things must have been, at least occasionally, preferable to the characters' interminable verbal clashes. Taking the furniture out of the suicide's room suggested a futile attempt to lift the burden of being – as if, freed from her belongings, the heroine could start living from scratch.

To an extent, getting rid of the furniture can also be read as a self-referential gesture. A deep frustration with the material rigidity of the theatre, and with the demands and limitations of things and bodies, would soon drive Stanislavsky to abstract and minimalist forms, to Vsevolod Meyerhold and Gordon Craig. Along that trajectory, *The Lower Depths* offered him a significant challenge. The dispossessed characters of Gorky's drama were deprived of that personal, meaningful connection with their habitat, which distinguished every interior on the Art Theatre's stage and made Doctor Stockmann's home different from Uncle Vanya's. The austere communal lodging made up of bunk beds and a few faceless properties, such as a broom or a kettle, required a new aesthetic and a new performative technique – one that, instead of associating dramatic personae with their familial and intimate possessions, would estrange and detach them from nearly all materiality. Despite his many difficulties with *The Lower Depths*, Stanislavsky grasped that aspect of Gorky's dramatic imagination. According to the Art Theatre authority Inna Solovyeva, the lack of material properties in the play enabled Stanislavsky's metaphoric concept of it as a tragedy about the naked truth of

humanity (Solovyeva 1986: 46). However, having removed from the stage, and from the performers' hands, the trappings of habit and heritage, Stanislavsky filled the void with human figures, which he added liberally to Gorky's script. The opening scene of *The Lower Depths* included a dozen such presences – a puppeteer, a woman with a baby, a scribe, among others – who went about their morning routines, and who would be glimpsed occasionally later on (Stanislavsky 1986: 310–11). The dumb show, of course, enriched the spectators' sense of the unusual place of action, but it also compensated for the absence of things by creating a live, human environment for the play's main characters, even though the latter were numerous enough to represent a community on their own.

Such fluid reciprocity of things and people in the Stanislavskian theatre reveals a contradiction at its core. For all his commitment to the genuine and real, Stanislavsky was acutely aware of the insufficiency of "plain truth" for the representation of the truth. The Stanislavskian object, just like the Stanislavskian actor, had to be authentic but also expressive of its authenticity. Planning *Ghosts* in 1905, Stanislavsky was concerned about making the home of Fru Alving "too Russian": he kept summoning from memory, sketching, seeking out Norwegian things, "rugs, mats, tables," "foreign windows," a Norwegian stove; he remembered the ornaments and colors used for ceilings and floors in Norwegian homes, and so on. Yet the real Norwegian things obtained from someone who had lived in Norway disappointed him by their lack of stage appeal, and he dismissed them as "not interesting, not theatrical" (SS V: 247). Stanislavsky's wife, the actress Maria Lilina, confessed in a letter from Switzerland in August of 1902, just when Stanislavsky's mind was focused on the "naturalist" plays of the coming season, that during their walks under the moon in the Alps, where everything was "beautiful and majestic," Konstantin looked at the scenery "from the point of view of the theatre and liked only that which could be used on the stage" (Vinogradskaia 1971: 391). But at the same time, the performance of both things and people was used to transcend itself and point to reality beyond the stage. As the windows in the Art Theatre sets opened onto the scenes and landscapes of the "outside world," the silent extras, never fully nested in the dramatic illusion, walked in and out of the set as if going out into real life and then coming back. All that remained was to use a real person as a quotation from that real world, an enterprise threatening representation itself.

### The cat and the horse

The first live messengers of the Real on the Art Theatre stage were animals. In 1900, Nemirovich-Danchenko proposed to bring several dogs into a scene in *When We Dead Awaken*. Stanislavsky responded with enthusiasm. He imagined a cat walking around the home of the philistines; in *The Power of Darkness*, he used a horse: "Knocking its hooves on the floor boards, [the horse] walked indifferently in the background: this 'artistic' detail could hardly have induced any pleasure in the spectator" (Radishcheva 2005: 300). It was the small cat, unpredictable and spontaneous, that remained part of the untamable and unattainable reality, and could not be allowed on stage, while the big horse succumbed to the yoke of training

and representation. (A cat duly appeared in the 1966 film version of *Philistines* staged by the acclaimed Soviet director Georgii Tovstonogov.) Perhaps Charlotta's appearance with a dog in *The Cherry Orchard* in 1904 was Chekhov's teasing contribution to the Art Theatre's circus.

The pursuit of the implants of the Real logically led to people: non-actors whose presence was meant to set the right tone for their professional imitators. It is hardly accidental that the engagement of outsiders occurred in the plays or episodes showing the lower strata of society. Allegedly, Stanislavsky used a real tramp in a mass scene in *The Lower Depths*; he brought two peasants to Moscow to naturalize *The Power of Darkness*. In a similar way, he employed a former church chorister in the role of a church chorister in *Philistines*. Although at that moment the singer was a student in the Art Theatre's school, he was chosen not for his ability to play the part (he had none) but because he *was* the part. In Stanislavsky's own words, the actor identified with his role with a kind of *naïveté* and sincerity that could not be achieved by any professional skills. Stanislavsky did not seem to hold himself or Nemirovich responsible for exploiting the "charming vagabond with a child's mind and heart," but the singer's sad story told in *My Life in Art* makes it clear that one of the main reasons of his downfall after the initial great success (including success with society ladies) was precisely his inability to distinguish between his stage and real selves. Apparently, Stanislavsky sought in his recruits spontaneity and lack of self-awareness, on the one hand, and submission to external control, on the other: his ideal would be a mix between a cat and a horse.

In modern theatre, the Real on the stage has been used and discussed as a counterpoint to dramatic artifice and, more recently, as a means of questioning the mediating mechanisms of performance and the very idea of authenticity. This inquiry has a distinct Stanislavskian origin, although Stanislavsky himself was far from conceptualizing the aesthetic and social tensions embedded in the non-actor's stage presence. For him, if someone was to blame for the lack of cohesion between life and art, it was the professional artist unable to embody or inhabit the truth emanating from the original source. An extreme instance of such discrepancy occurred during the company's work on *The Power of Darkness*. Its real peasant participant obviously had dramatic talent and was trusted with one of the main female parts – but refused to learn the text. Tolstoy, too, failed the test of reality. The peasant tended to replace the words of the part with her own genuine and extremely foul language. The episode warrants a quotation from *My Life in Art*:

With heavy heart I had to take the peasant woman out of the cast as her swearing kept getting worse. Then I put her in the crowd that gathered outside the hut of the deceased Petr, Anisya's husband whom she had poisoned. I placed her in the back but one note of her wailing drowned everyone else's cries. Then, unable to part with her, I created a special pause for her in which she crossed the stage humming a song and calling to someone in the distance. The call of this old feeble voice conveyed the whole expanse of the genuine Russian countryside and got so imprinted in memory that no one could possibly appear on the stage after her. We made one last attempt: not let her on stage but make her sing in



the wings. But even that proved to be dangerous for the actors. Then we recorded her singing in the gramophone, and that song could be used in the background without disrupting the ensemble.

(SS I: 335)

According to Meyerhold's (not disinterested) testimony, Chekhov once expressed his skepticism about the Art Theatre's cult of authenticity, likening it to a real nose inserted into a painted portrait (Braun 1969: 50). The peasant's story is, of course, the story of the real nose: instead of enhancing the stage illusion, the peasant woman ruined it completely. Stanislavsky seems to miss a deeper meaning of his experiment: the peasant's gradual disembodiment from a leading role to a mechanical sound reads like a parable about the way of all flesh from nature into artifice. In addition, if a member of the peasant class had appeared before the audience in Moscow as a curiosity, this reality show would have destroyed Stanislavsky's entire project. In a twist whose ambivalence has increased manifold in our culture, the coincidence of a personal identity and a part created the effect of realness only to undermine it by calling the viewer's attention to the very act of performance.

Although the peasant woman's revolt against the script ruined Stanislavsky's enterprise, it must have left a deep trace in his creative memory. Her textual insubordination resonated with Stanislavsky's own growing unease about the inevitability of the dramatic text, fixed and unresponsive to the fluctuations of the inner emotional process. Many years later, Stanislavsky observed in his notes for *An Actor Prepares* that, on the stage, actors had to pronounce "a text not of [our] own making given to us by the author. Often not the one that we need or would like to say" (SS III: 76).<sup>8</sup> Given the subsequent prominence of all varieties of memory in Stanislavsky's System, it is striking that he had always had difficulties with memorizing his roles.<sup>9</sup> The conflict between a genuine and spontaneous experience and its predetermined outcome was at the core of Stanislavsky's larger difficulty with the political in art, which he encountered working on Ibsen's and Gorky's plays.

### The organic and the political

Despite his disclaimer, in the first seasons of the Art Theatre, Stanislavsky was involved in much of the Ibsen repertoire: alone or together with Nemirovich, he directed *Hedda Gabler* (1899), *The Wild Duck* (1901), *Ghosts* (1905), and took part, at least in the planning and *mise-en-scène* of *When We Dead Awaken* (1900); he played Løvborg in *Hedda Gabler* (1899) and Bernick in *The Pillars of Society* (1903). Yet the only production that satisfied him artistically was *Doctor Stockmann*, which he directed and in which he played the title role. According to Stanislavsky, his identification with Ibsen's character was as complete as it was intuitive and organic; he kept coming back to this favorite part during his deep crisis of 1905–6, as he probed into the physiological and psychological sources of the actor's creativity.

Stanislavsky's naïve and unselfconscious Stockmann was instantly recognized as a perfect, all-round artistic creation. Stockmann's figure, mannerisms, eyeglasses,

gestures, and peculiar fingers were captured in sketches, drawings, and even a statuette, and remembered many years later. In this role, Stanislavsky found an ideal balance between the individual and eccentric, the typical and universal.<sup>10</sup> Stanislavsky attributed Stockmann's transformation into a politically charged icon to the explosive temperament of the Russian society on the brink of a revolution (which, after several tumultuous years, broke out in full force in early 1905). Stockmann's simple human decency was interpreted by the eager democratic audience as political conviction: "Stockmann protested, Stockmann boldly spoke the truth, and it was enough to turn him into a political hero" (SS I: 321). The heated public reception of the nearly comic character confirmed Stanislavsky's belief that the subtle, intuitive art of performance had no need for overt political engagement. If Diderot's treatise on acting could have embraced Stanislavsky, its central paradox might have been not moving the viewer while staying cold, but exciting political awareness while being politically unconscious.

Petr Gnedich, a prominent man of theatre, contrasted Stanislavsky's less than heroic Stockmann with the *Enemy of the People* played by Aurélien Lugné-Poë in Paris, in the wake of the Dreyfus affair and Zola's trial (Radishcheva 2005: 183). The Russian eye-witness admired Lugné-Poë's titanic figure, as well as the understanding and emotional accord between the actors and the audience, both of whom projected Ibsen's drama onto the current political battles.<sup>11</sup> Stanislavsky did not covet such commonality at all: he insisted in *My Life* that it was up to the viewers to infuse a work of dramatic art with a political meaning if a "creative impulse sent by the actor" prompted them to do so. Even in the 1920s, having devoted decades of his life to translating the actor's creative mysteries into an intelligible discourse, Stanislavsky (with Stockmann's obstinacy) continued to view political intent as contaminating and binding the organic artistic process.

Stockmann's political popularity reached its peak during the Art Theatre's appearance in Petersburg in February of 1901, when one of the performances coincided with the brutal suppression by the government of a student manifestation. The audience and especially its younger, more radical members vehemently applauded Stockmann's – or rather their own – resolve to fight the powers that be. The episode, recounted by both founders of the Art Theatre in their memoirs, and often cited in historical and biographical literature, is peculiar in that the viewers found inspiration not so much in the message of Ibsen's play, but rather in Stanislavsky's acting. Nemirovich-Danchenko recalled a Petersburg student who admitted that the play's inherent "political tendency [was] not at all ours. It would seem that we ought to hiss it" (Nemirovich-Danchenko 1968: 239). Indeed, the play's central and best-known thesis, a Nietzschean exaltation of the individual against the tyranny of the majority, which translated well into Zola's fight with the French establishment, was largely irrelevant or misplaced in tsarist Russia, where the "people" of Ibsen's original title suggested not the smug and self-preoccupied middle class and its institutions, but millions of abused, deprived, and ignorant peasants. The predominant self-sacrificial ideal of the intelligentsia was to come to the suffering "people's" rescue from the power of darkness, not tower over the herd. In the Soviet period, too, the play required an ideological adjustment: critics claimed that in Stanislavsky's "progressive" interpretation of *An Enemy of the People* Stockmann

challenged not the “people,” not the “real majority,” but the narrow-minded provincial philistines (Shaikevich 1968: 34).

What redeemed Ibsen’s drama in the eyes of the young protesters was its defense of the “truth” and Stanislavsky’s “passionate appeal” to be true to oneself. The authenticity of the enactment overcame the suspect ideology of the text: it was at least as much Ibsen’s as Stanislavsky’s hero that inspired the liberal, civic-minded audiences. Stanislavsky’s own inner focus on emotional and psychological truthfulness added a new dimension to what the Ibsen scholar Toril Moi has called Ibsen’s “metaphysics of truth” (2006: 95): metaphysics became meta-theatre.

Modern scholarship has connected Stanislavsky’s ethical imperative with the influence and moral authority of Tolstoy, whose unsparing insight into human motives and actions, including his own, set the standard of ethical rigor both in life and in art (Solovyeva 1988: *passim*; Carnicke 2009: 133–4). Yet despite the spiritual affinity and impact, Stanislavsky’s actual theatrical engagement with Tolstoy concerned the physics more than the meta-physics of the truth. *The Power of Darkness* in the Art Theatre exposed the actuality of the peasant condition rather than the struggles of human conscience, and the part of an old peasant that Stanislavsky attempted to play did not inspire him with a pertinent inner theme and failed to develop beyond the superficialities of make-up and dialect. When the Art Theatre turned to *The Living Corpse* in 1911, Stanislavsky withdrew from the staging because of a disagreement concerning his new “System.”<sup>12</sup> In the theatre it was Ibsen who, more than any other author, offered Stanislavsky a ground for self-scrutiny and reflection on his art of play-acting. Being true to oneself, or recovering one’s true self, a major theme of Ibsen’s drama, was also a common thread in all of Stanislavsky’s Ibsen roles, from Løvborg to Stockmann to Bernick. Even the hypocritical protagonist of *The Pillars of Society* (staged 1903) followed Stockmann’s trajectory in rising to the decision to shatter his life for the sake of the truth. Although Russian intellectuals, used to a more sophisticated, darker Ibsen, largely dismissed his satirical comedy as superficial, some critics appreciated the play’s “austere simplicity,” and praised Stanislavsky for his handling of Bernick’s public confession and purging of self in the play’s demanding finale (Radishcheva 2005: 327). Bernick’s words to his young son, afraid of his “boring” future as a pillar of society, “You shall be yourself, Olaf; the rest may take care of itself,” transcribed one of Stanislavsky’s main creative and ethical concerns. Could the actor striving for a protean flexibility of the body and spirit possess a true self at all?<sup>13</sup>

### The text and its discontents

Staying true to himself proved to be a trying task for Stanislavsky when his theatre turned to Gorky. The courting of Gorky was not a politically innocent choice: a writer from the midst of the people, a colorful literary maverick, and an activist closely associated with the revolutionary circles, Gorky enjoyed immense popularity in the early 1900s. His celebrity was expected to enhance the Art Theatre’s civic image as well as its financial situation. The inevitable problems with censorship only increased the public’s excitement. The lure of the forbidden fruit worked as

well then as it does now: when the National Theatre produced *Philistines* in 2007, its site advertised the production as “Gorky’s darkly comic first play of 1902, banned from public performance under the Czarist regime.”<sup>14</sup> In fact, the preemptive prohibition issued by the insecure Petersburg authorities was promptly removed through the Art Theatre’s high-ranking patrons: as a result of rumors and curiosity, the dress rehearsal was packed with the Imperial *beau monde* as if it were a diplomatic congress (Nemirovich-Danchenko 1968: 240). Stanislavsky described the situation in a letter to his 11-year-old daughter: “They liked the play very much and didn’t find anything harmful in it, yet it is still uncertain whether we’ll be allowed to perform it, as they are afraid that Gorky’s name will bring about a manifestation” (SS VII: 439). Despite the Art Theatre’s conscientious and serious work on *Philistines* and *The Lower Depths*, the true hero of Gorky’s plays was Gorky himself – and for the moment at least, of some other plays as well. On the rare occasion when Chekhov attended a performance of his work, namely, *Uncle Vanya* in the Art Theatre in October 1900, the audience’s overwhelming attention was directed at his companion, Gorky, an incident subsequently much discussed in the Russian press.

For Stanislavsky, such excessive authorial presence in and impact on the dramatic event interfered with the inner integrity of the play. Excited by the striking setting and cast of characters, Stanislavsky quizzed Gorky for background details and human histories, yet his usual approach to the script proved inadequate for Gorky’s deceptively lifelike drama. To an extent, the inertia of reading a text about “former people” as a naturalistic reportage on social pathology prevented contemporaries from grasping the originality of Gorky’s poetics. Alexander Kugel, one of the best contemporary critics, refused to believe that drunks and tramps could express themselves in the kind of language provided for them by Gorky, whom he compared to a lecturer commenting on the pictures cast by a magic lantern (Radishcheva 2005: 333–4). Stanislavsky experienced very similar difficulties with the larger-than-life verbal ability of Gorky’s characters, which eluded both the “customary everyday [*bytovoï*] stage manner and vulgar actorly declamation” (SS I: 329).

The part of Satine, entrusted to Stanislavsky, is one of the play’s most prominent and least well-defined. Unwilling to talk about his past, uninvolvement in any important confrontations, Satine is made up of occasional cynical remarks, repartee, and two famous monologues on man’s freedom and dignity. A dramatic figure enabled entirely by language, Satine may resemble a traditional *raisonneur*: Stanislavsky saw him as the author’s somewhat arrogant spokesman preaching to the audience. Now, he seems to anticipate the characters of the absurdist drama, and his very first lines, “Who was it that beat me yesterday?” and “What did they beat me for?” predate Estragon’s in *Waiting for Godot*. In the absence of a tangible, fleshed-out individuality, Stanislavsky found himself performing not so much the part of Satine as “the social tenor of the current moment” (SS I: 329). As earlier with Stockmann, the excited public applauded Satine’s hymn to Man, proud and free and born to be his own master, although its obvious Nietzschean underpinnings were not exactly of a democratic kind. By the same token, Satine’s defiant rejection of the past struck a revolutionary note, yet Stanislavsky’s own faith in the characters’ and performers’ lived experiences and stored memories made such slogans as “One can’t get anywhere in the carriage of the past” deeply alien to his outlook.

Stanislavsky gave credit to Nemirovich-Danchenko for finding the tone suited to Gorky's rhetoric: instead of identifying with the character the actors had to "effortlessly and unpretentiously recite their parts" and "clearly deliver to the audience the best-phrased lines" (SS VII: 474). One of the Petersburg critics sensed and disliked that estranged approach both in acting and in speech: Stanislavsky and others did not "wear but *demonstrated* their rags" and "served" or "recited" their words instead of speaking them (Radishcheva 2005: 337). What looked like a retreat to an outdated stage manner was an intimation of a new aesthetic, a presentiment of Brecht. Yet Nemirovich's attempt to reorient the Art Theatre toward a less "natural" and more stylized mode of expression – in other words, toward "theatre in the theatre" – conflicted with the public habit and Stanislavsky's preference. For the first time, an Art Theatre production came out without the names of its directors on the bill.

Despite his inner resistance to the overall "tendency" of *The Lower Depths*, Stanislavsky heeded Nemirovich's and Gorky's advice and found a stage identity for his elusive hero. Gorky encouraged Stanislavsky to give Satine a lofty touch reminiscent of Romantic rather than Naturalist drama, and Stanislavsky evoked the nobler convention by draping his character in an old coat, which Satine in self-mockery and defiance tossed around his shoulders. The coat baffled some viewers, such as Stanislavsky's sister-in-law, who wondered why Konstantin wore his old coat like a toreador's cloak (Vinogradskaia 1971: 406); several critics complained that Satine looked too "picturesque." Yet the self-fashioned Romantic hero was a brilliant theatrical discovery: the cloak worked, not as a piece of personal property or symbol of identity but as a carrier of generic memory and stage tradition. Mediating between language and action, speech and performance, the business with the coat was a precursor of Brecht's *Gestus* and, to an extent, a device signaling the audience to take the hero and his words in quotation marks.

The new roles that Stanislavsky had to play in 1902–3 had little in common except for making the actor insecure, uncomfortable, and lost. Despite the guidance of the real peasant prototypes, Mitrich in *The Power of Darkness* did not come out right, and Stanislavsky gave up the part after three performances. Brutus in *Julius Caesar* was a torture, one of the worst experiences of Stanislavsky's entire career. It appears in hindsight that Shakespeare's stoic Roman, Tolstoy's grumpy peasant, and Gorky's underground ideologue shared a pattern of verbal behavior: all expressed themselves in an ornate, aphoristic or formulaic manner, be it iambic pentameter, Russian folk sayings, or slogans and exhortations. Perhaps Stanislavsky's creative traumas and the peasant performer's conflict with Tolstoy's text had a common core: Stanislavsky could not absorb the kind of speech that was self-centered and monologic, and that preceded experience rather than proceeding from it. In that sense, a political tendency for Stanislavsky was comparable to a rigid verbal form, as both superimposed the text on the subtext and placed the result before the spontaneous creative process. Tolstoy's religious teleology and Gorky's political "tendentiousness" equally interfered with the actor's emotional immediacy and his very being in time.

Stanislavsky's idea of the dramatic action presupposed an immersion into an uninterrupted flow of time. The understanding of time as a natural process rather

than part of theatrical artifice is conservative in every sense: the history of “time” as one of the conventional unities is an attempt to inscribe natural duration into the dramatic illusion. It is hardly accidental that the anti-illusionistic – as well as highly politicized – theatrical theory and practice of Meyerhold or Brecht relied on a radical cutting and reordering of stage time broken into a series of episodes. The reciprocity of the temporal and political modalities in theatre and performance, which has since been variously explored by contemporary artists, such as Ariane Mnouchkine, Marina Abramović, and Romeo Castellucci, among many others, is one of the far-reaching questions prompted by Stanislavsky’s practice and thought.

Among Stanislavsky’s notes for *The Power of Darkness*, one finds a whole registry of gestures characteristic of men, married women, young girls, and a special reference to the peasants’ overworked, crooked fingers, which could be imitated by starching the actors’ hands (SS V: 180). The fingers, visible at best to the first few rows in the orchestra, epitomize Stanislavsky’s credo. Some twenty years later, a film director such as Sergei Eisenstein would show the fingers in a blown-up image imposed on the audience’s physical and political vision. Stanislavsky would not do so, even had the stage afforded him such means of expression. His faith in performance as an imitation of life in its continuity demanded that each element of the stage reality be subjugated to an unviolated, uncut whole.

Stanislavsky had always thought of himself as an apolitical artist whose values and beliefs were of the universally human, spiritual kind. The cultural historian Katerina Clark has recently written about the odd correspondences between the goals and terminology of Stanislavsky’s System and Soviet ideological discourses at the peak of Stalinist terror, in the late 1930s, when the Soviet regime unmasked and eliminated “enemies of the people” in the name of the perverted “truth” (Clark 2011: 224–41). Indeed, the well-known canonization of Stanislavsky’s legacy, which assumed its final form after Stanislavsky’s death in 1938, capitalized on and appropriated the call for the “truth” as a dogma of socialist realist art. Yet it is also worth remembering that in the 1920s, after the change of the political regime had made him leave his country for two years and then live in a state of permanent fear, Stanislavsky did not exhibit any enthusiasm for the politically correct outlook that could have ingratiated him with the communist authorities. In the last chapter of the Russian-language edition of *My Life in Art*, he defended psychological acting and the organic creative process against the tendentiousness and “utilitarian tasks” that “sometimes are considered as the foundation of the new theatre” (SS I: 481). During the time of harsh attacks from the extreme left, which had, in the Soviet context, life-threatening implications, Stanislavsky wrote about the theatre’s “soul,” “spirit,” and “mystery.” At that moment, his very discourse, incompatible with the ideological and cultural agenda of the communist regime, was not devoid of a political meaning, which Stanislavsky had always tried to purge from his life in art.

## Notes

- 1 Gorky’s first play had its premiere in March during the Art Theatre’s spring visit to Petersburg, but the Moscow audiences saw it only in the fall. Among the existing English

- translations of the title, *Philistines* most adequately conveys the class and cultural connotations of the Russian “Meshchane.”
- 2 All quotations from Stanislavsky’s texts, including *My Life in Art*, are from the latest Russian edition of collected works (subsequently SS, followed by volume, year and page). Translations are mine.
  - 3 In the novel (1867), the husband’s murder by his wife and her lover is described in explicit detail, but in the stage adaptation (1873), Zola disposed of the husband, and the murder scene, between the acts.
  - 4 Taking into account the overwhelmed state of a foreign eye-witness during the Russian revolution, it is still worth citing Sayler’s cathartic reaction to a performance he saw in 1918, which made him feel “purged through pity and fear” (Sayler 1922: 68).
  - 5 For an extended discussion of theatrical “recycling” pertinent to Stanislavsky’s revolt against the “theatre,” see Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.
  - 6 Stanislavsky expressed the same idea in *My Life in Art*, speaking about the “dead objects that come to life” in Chekhov’s plays (SS I: 289), evoking, perhaps unconsciously, Andreev’s essay of 1913.
  - 7 The usually astute Nikolai Efros, the Art Theatre’s first historian, was irritated by what he interpreted as a strained attempt to be “credible, realistic, maybe even naturalistic”: in “reality,” anyone would take out of the dark room the sick woman herself (qtd in Radishcheva 2005: 284). This and other contemporary reviews are quoted from Radishcheva’s volume.
  - 8 The problem of the script created by Stanislavsky’s overall approach to the actor’s emotional experience has been discussed in modern scholarship. For an insightful commentary, see, in particular, Carnicke 2009: 141–3.
  - 9 According to Nemirovich-Danchenko, “Many anecdotes were current about his faltering with words in life and on the stage. It is really remarkable that in the course of many years he even thought that this was by no means a defect in an actor” (Nemirovich-Danchenko 1968: 86).
  - 10 More than one critic wrote that every gesture and tone of Stanislavsky’s Stockmann reminded him of one or another of his acquaintances, yet the character was larger than any specific prototype (Radishcheva 2005: 171, 185).
  - 11 A disappointment in Stanislavsky’s lack of heroic stature was not uncommon among the reviewers immediately after the Moscow premiere: one accused Stanislavsky of reducing Stock-Mann to Stock-Kind (Radishcheva 2005: 146).
  - 12 Stanislavsky remained engaged in a minor role, but refused to act as a director (see Radishcheva 1999: 119–26).
  - 13 W.B. Worthen has addressed this and other related paradoxes of Stanislavsky’s “ethos of acting” which seek to overcome the central contradiction between the actor’s “authentic realization” and his “pursuit of the inauthentic mask of his role” (Worthen 1983: 37).
  - 14 See The National Theatre Productions: *Philistines*, available online at <<http://microsites.nationaltheatre.org.uk/23039/productions/philistines.html>> (accessed 30 September 2012).

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