Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre

Process to performance

Maria Shevtsova

LONDON AND NEW YORK

Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details

Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre

This is the first ever full-length study of internationally acclaimed theatre company, the Maly Drama Theatre of St Petersburg, and its director, Lev Dodin.

Maria Shevtsova provides an illuminating insight into Dodin's directorial processes and the company's actor training, devising and rehearsal methods, which she interweaves with detailed analysis of the Maly's main productions. *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre: Process to Performance* demonstrates how the impact of Dodin's work extends far beyond that of his native Russia, and gives the reader unparalleled access to the company's practice.

Including a foreword by Simon Callow, a dedicated admirer of the Maly, *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre* provides both a valuable methodological model for actor training and a unique insight into the journeys taken from studio to stage.

Maria Shevtsova is Professor of Drama and Theatre Arts and Director of Postgraduate Studies at Goldsmiths College, University of London. She is co-editor of *New Theatre Quarterly* and of the forthcoming *Fifty Key Directors* (Routledge, 2005).

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
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First published 2004 by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada by Taylor & Francis Inc
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Shevtsova, Maria, 1945–
Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre process to performance / Maria Shevtsova.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Akademicheskiæi maliæi dramaticheiæi teatr (Saint Petersburg, Russia)–History. 2. Theater–Russia–Saint Petersburg–History–20th century. 3. Dodin, Lev, 1944–Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.
PN2726.S252M3 2004
792.02'33'092–dc22 20030181

ISBN 0-203-48695-1 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-57477-X (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0–415–33461–6 (hbk)
ISBN 0–415–33462–4 (pbk)

To the memory of my parents Lyudmila and Semyon, and for my daughter Sasha

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Foreword

Simon Callow

In the summer of 1988, I was rehearsing the part of Faust in David Freeman's version of Goethe's play. We were doing it more or less in its entirety, an epic undertaking, with a suitably lengthy rehearsal period (three months). Freeman, noted for his innovatory opera productions, was exploring the work with great freedom. It was hard work, but we were definitely getting somewhere with it. One evening, shortly before we opened, I thought it would be useful to take the night off and see someone else's work. The play I chose was *Stars in the Morning Sky*, performed by the Maly company at the Riverside Studios. I had heard rumours of their excellence, but I had read nothing about them; this was the first preview, before any notices had appeared.

It is scarcely possible for me to exaggerate the impact that evening had on me. It's an interesting play, and the physical production was striking. What lifted it into another realm altogether, however, was the acting. Each performance was audacious, powerfully expressive, rhythmically exhilarating. One seemed to be taken through layer after layer to the heart of the characters, and beyond that, to their very essences. This group of riff-raff, tarts and nutcases was transfigured into a vision of the human condition as piercing as the greatest painting, the most searing music, could offer. But the achievement was a collective one, like the playing of a great orchestra. What was exceptional was the *melos*, the underlying sense of the whole. More extraordinary, even, than the individual performances or the interplay between the characters, was the corporate life manifested on the stage. The connectivity of the actors was almost tangible, an organic tissue which made them breathe as one and move with a profound awareness of everything that was going on within the group.

I was overwhelmed. I had never seen a group like it and never had a comparable experience in a theatre. Everyone in the theatre that night felt the same, unmistakably. There was a very specific reason that I was so particularly shaken by it, however. It was everything for which my training (at the Drama Centre in London) had been a preparation, namely, the ideal of the true ensemble, but which I had never seen. It had been a central tenet of our work as students that the highest form of theatrical endeavour was to belong to such a group, committed to each other for many years, in perpetual evolution, who would grow by working together closely over a long period of time, creating levels of confidence

and courage which would enable them to take on the greatest challenges of the repertory with an unprecedented level of depth across the board: every player a star, one day carrying the play, the next day a spear. The actors would be in perpetual training, spurred on by voice and movement teachers; by exploratory workshop sessions requiring a degree of openness and commitment only available to people who have learned to trust each other and risk making fools of themselves without embarrassment, by directors who monitored the actors closely, noting their strengths and weaknesses, shaping the repertory and the distribution of roles according to a graph of personal development.

By the time I saw the Maly, I had come to believe that this was not so much an ideal as a myth. Even the great companies I had seen – the Moscow Art Theatre, the Berliner Ensemble, the Schaubühne – had either ossified or disbanded, and the noble British attempts at it in the 1960s, by Peter Hall at the RSC and Laurence Olivier at the National Theatre, had by the mid-1970s moved towards the model of the repertory theatre with a group of players hired for a season or two to perform specific plays. There were smaller groups like Mike Alfred's Shared Experience and Declan Donnellan's Cheek by Jowl whose actors and directors experimented together over some years with stimulating results, but the concept of the ensemble demands a scale of organisation which was simply not available to what were essentially touring outfits, woefully underfunded and overworked. It must be said, too, that the notion of an unending training is deeply inimical to most British actors who feel that three years at drama school is quite enough of a good thing, thank you very much. The vision began to fade.

Now here I was, suddenly, in the presence of the Holy Grail. My first reaction was one of humility, almost of shame. How shallow, obvious and meretricious an actor I felt myself to be in the face of what every single one of these actors was achieving. In a few days, our production of *Faust* would open. Rehearsing it, I had dimly thought that virtually every scene merited a month's rehearsal, instead of the day we were able to give it. Serious and exploratory though Freeman's work was, and dedicated and hard-working though we actors were, we were attempting to stage two plays which together amounted to seven hours of pulverisingly dense text. Quick decisions had to be made, linear logic identified, effective solutions found. We attempted to tell the story with clarity, to find a physical metaphor for the play, to create credible characters. On the whole we succeeded in all these things, and the lumbering *Meisterwerk* was brought to a public which was for the most part very appreciative. But (and here of course I speak only for myself) we could have done so much better. The work, complex and elusive though it often is, deserved so much better. I was conscious, as Faust, of getting through the role, using my skills to paper over the cracks. It was partly a matter of time, but that was not all. The company, most of whom had never worked together before, were committed and democratic, but came from diverse backgrounds, with different trainings, or no training at all, and despite group warm-ups and sessions of collective music-making, had no shared view of the work and were thus essentially executants rather than

interpreters. The actors of the Maly had somehow fused themselves into a single body without having lost their individuality.

How had they done it? I had to find out. Whenever the Maly came to Britain, I went out of my way to see their work: *The Cherry Orchard*, light and swift, but so emotionally communicative that I never stopped weeping from beginning to end, even – especially – when it was at its funniest. The party scene in Act II was a miracle both of staging and acting: every character, every unnamed guest at the party was a universe unto him- or herself, as they wove across the stage, sweeping up the other characters, cutting through and across scenes, not disrupting but enhancing the movement of the play. This was not a text staged, but a world in which movement, language, character were all part of a stream of human life which passed before us, eddying, flowing, now babbling, now murmuring, sometimes torrential, sometimes placid. *The Devils* started monumentally with the entire ensemble singing Russian Orthodox chants, and proceeded with relentless casuistical energy to lay bare the whole malaise of the nineteenth-century Russian soul; *Gaudeamus*, a wild slapstick performed with reckless physical daring and sudden shafts of surreal pain; *A Play With No Name*, their version of the text generally known in English as *Platonov*, for me perhaps the greatest of their achievements, where the physical realisation of the play and its emotional cross-currents was of such audacity – most of the action was played in a deep pool of water; at regular intervals the company, playing a variety of instruments, would strike up a classical piece or some mad jazz riff – that the stage seemed entirely liberated from its confines, though within all this highly projected life were scenes of the most scrupulous naturalism and exercises of skill (as when a drunken character dances on the table while the servants slowly and imperturbably remove the remains of supper, including the table-cloth), breathtaking in their observed accuracy.

Curiously, though the design of each show is remarkable, and the staging itself is prodigiously brilliant, it is not of the director or the designer that one thinks while watching the show. One doesn't even particularly think of the writer. It is the actors who hold you absolutely, not simply as performers, nor even as individuals, but as some kind of collective conduit for the life-force. A Maly production is contained within the actors' bodies, brains, hearts and souls; it is the sum total of their work, their relationship with each other, their relationship to the world. The experience of the production, no matter how stylised the conception, is always deeply human. There is nothing *out there*, no objective artistic statement, simply the sum total of the artists' contribution, both as people and as players. Dodin is clearly a visionary of the highest order, but in no sense are the actors merely enacting his masterplan: they are its living matter, shaping the production as much as shaped by it.

How this extraordinary phenomenon has come about is described by Maria Shevtsova in the probing and highly evocative pages that follow. For those, like me, who believe in the supremacy of the ensemble as a means of taking the theatrical arts to the highest level of which they are capable, it is a moving and inspiring account; for those to whom the idea has yet to appeal, it may finally

convince them of its urgent necessity. It will have served its purpose even if it merely records that such a company exists, that such things are possible. It is fervently to be hoped otherwise, but it is possible that economic circumstances may threaten the Maly's existence. Such a company is not, let us be realistic, commercially viable; moreover, it demands absolute commitment over a long period of time from its participants. To exist at all it requires enlightened support from government sources, and necessitates the abandonment by the company of other professional possibilities. It is not for all actors or directors. But surely somewhere, somehow in the English-speaking world it is possible to truly honour the art of the theatre – to which so much lip-service is paid – by investing in an organisation comparable to the Maly; the template, so precisely and so acutely described by Maria Shevtsova, is here for all to behold. I can think of no more important book for the theatre at the beginning of this uncertain century.

Preface

This is a dedicated study of the work of Lev Dodin with the Maly Drama Theatre of St Petersburg. It includes a discussion of his productions of opera on the international stage, without which a sense of his achievements as a director would not be complete. His opera productions, while independent of the Maly, nevertheless sharpen perception of his theatre process with his own company. My book is analytical and informative rather than critical. It is motivated by a desire to show how and why the productions are made, and its detailed analysis of them is an attempt to capture that most ephemeral of arts which is the art of performance. I do not for a moment labour under the illusion that an account of performances can be objective, since a subjective eye is always involved in the act of emotional understanding. This having been said, while spectators' view-points vary, there is something like the basic foundations of a production, or its 'drawing', as Dodin would say, that does not shift altogether. I have seen the productions discussed here numerous times, some over a span of several years. My analysis is a compound of them, and any significant shifts in the production over time are noted, especially because a work of the theatre is, for Dodin, an organism that grows and changes with those who make it.

My book details the Maly's working processes and the various steps its virtual productions take before they are shown to the public and/or subsequently re-edited by Dodin. There is so much talk in theatre studies about 'process', about recording working methods and their articulation in performances, but this area of research is fraught with many difficulties and has remained, as a result, largely unexplored. I am privileged to have been allowed to observe the every-day work, devising and rehearsals of a remarkable group of actors and their no less remarkable director. This opportunity has enabled me to record aspects of the rehearsal process as well as of its results in public performance, some of which I interweave with my study of individual productions. Dodin's direction of *The Queen of Spades*, the subject of my last chapter, condensed the rehearsal time, by contrast with the long rehearsal periods of the Maly, allowing me to receive the full impact of his working process in a singularly immediate way. The company, not least its teachers and administrators, generously shared their professional and personal experiences with me, treating me as one of their own. In my text, I include their voices to create polyphonic discourse. Their remarks,

whether indirectly reported or quoted, are indicated by a date in brackets so as to fix the fleeting word.

Where my narrative permits, I include critical reviews to suggest the impact of the Maly's work in Russia and the many countries where they have built their formidable international reputation; also to suggest from what different cultural perspectives this work is viewed. While I situate Dodin and the Maly in their Russian context, sociopolitical and theatrical, it will be clear to my reader that their outlook is not insular and that Dodin is both a Russian and a European director.

A note on transliteration

I have opted for a user-friendly transliteration from the Cyrillic alphabet, intended for readers with no Russian. Thus I have deleted soft and hard signs. The terminals u and ŭ are given as y, as is ы; я is given as ya; ю as yu. I have retained such familiar spellings as Meyerhold, Dostoevsky, Tchaikovsky and Gergiev, and Charlotta instead of Sharlotta in *The Cherry Orchard*. All translations from Russian, French, Italian and German are my own, except for the one indicated in chapter 4.

Acknowledgements

Every book is written with the support of others and this one is no exception. I am indebted to the British Academy for a Research Leave Grant; to Lancaster University for honouring it in kind and helping with my travel expenses; to the Arts and Humanities Research Board for its generous travel grant and to Goldsmiths College, University of London, for allowing me a sabbatical of two months when I really needed it.

My deepest thanks go, above all, to Lev Dodin and the Maly actors, many of whom I quote in my book. All gave me their time, energy and attention, patiently answered my questions and discreetly ignored my presence when it might have been easier not to have me there. I am grateful to the numerous members of this company in their various capacities, but must especially thank Mikhaïl Stronin and Dina Dodina for their consistent attention, as well as Roman Malkin, Natalya Kolotova, Aleksandra Golybina and Yelena Aleksandrova, the Maly's archivist, whose exemplary courtesy and efficiency facilitated my research; the Maly teachers Valery Galendeyev, Mikhaïl Aleksandrov, Yevgeny Davydov, Yelena Lapina, Valery Zvezdochkin, Yury Vasilkov and Yury Khomutyansky; also the designers Eduard Kochergin, Aleksey Poray-Koshits and David Borovsky. I wish also to thank Chloé Obolensky and Declan Donnellan.

My research could not have been completed without the help of several institutions and key people in them: the Academy of Theatre Arts, St Petersburg; La Scala, Milan; Maggio Musicale Teatro Comunale, Florence and especially Susanna Colombo and Lara Colzi; the Opéra National de Paris-Bastille and especially Catherine Heuls; De Nederlandse Opera, Amsterdam, whose staff showed me great kindness, especially Tia Schutrups; the Barbican Centre in London, whose staff always helped, especially Griselda Yorke and David Jays; the Newcastle Playhouse and Alan Lyddiard. To the boundless hospitality of Yelena Levshina in St Petersburg I owe devoted thanks, and to Michelle and Marc Bonet-Maury in Paris. Wendy Cobcroft, who has always been a supportive friend, is the best proof-reader I know; any errors left in this book are entirely my responsibility. My daughter Sasha is glad to see the last of it. Thank you, Lisa Cagnacci, for providing me with hands when I needed them.

The section on *A Play With No Name* in chapter 5 developed from my article

'Drowning in Dixie: The Maly Drama Theatre Plays Chekhov Untitled', *TheatreForum* 13, pp. 46–53. My section on *Mazepa* in chapter 6 derives from an earlier version, 'War and Ash at La Scala: Lev Dodin Rehearses *Mazepa*', *TheatreForum* 16, pp. 95–104.

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Part I

The Maly in context

1 From Leningrad to St Petersburg

Dodin and the Maly: journeys to the future

The uncommon story of the Maly Drama Theatre unfolds in the city built by Peter I as a 'window to Europe' on the swamps of the River Neva. It was St Petersburg from 1703, Petrograd during the First World War and the Revolution, Leningrad after 1924, and St Petersburg, again, in September 1991. St Petersburg's last transformation took place three months before the USSR was dissolved and the Russian Federation became 'Russia' once again, a country faced with the enormous task of reinventing itself as best it could in circumstances far from propitious for renewal and growth. Peter the Great had made St Petersburg a European city in appearance, culture and outlook. The Soviet Union aimed to make it neither European nor Russian. It was to be Soviet, a transnational phenomenon meant to supersede the relativities of time, space and history for the sake not of a particular socialism, but of world Socialism. Today, St Petersburg has returned to its Russian roots and European aspirations in order to reclaim an identity that would not be narrowly national or inward-looking, nor, on the other hand, subordinate to an allegedly globalised world. This is the difficult act which the Maly Drama Theatre also aimed to accomplish at the dawn of the new millennium.

'Maly' means 'small', which describes quite adequately the 35-seat theatre that was founded in May 1944 to 'service' the outlying region of the city of Leningrad; and the term 'service', which was used without any prevarication at the time, indicates the populist intentions behind the enterprise. No one could ever have imagined that this theatre, designated for local communities, would radically alter direction and become, in the last decade of the twentieth century, a star player on the international stage. When the Maly was founded, the Leningrad blockade of 900 days and countless terrors had recently come to an end, as soon would the Second World War. Nearly a million people had died from starvation, disease and cold during the blockade; its survivors were nothing less than monuments to the city's awesome heroism.[1] Most theatres had been evacuated fairly early on, with the notable exception of the theatre named after the actress Vera Komissarzhevskaya, which worked right through those fearsome years. The Maly Drama Theatre was created to help bring life back to normal. This also meant performing for the troops at the battlefront in the region until the war came completely to an end. Like all theatres in the Soviet

period, it was established by governmental decree, and, like them, was supervised by the Ministry of Culture and various committees answerable to the Communist Party. It performed in all sorts of makeshift venues, in factories, halls and clubs, to fulfil its mission of making theatre performances available, as well as culturally accessible, to people unable to see them in the everyday course of their lives. By and large, its purposes were similar to those of its people's-theatre and popular-theatre counterparts endorsed by governments after the war in western Europe and beyond, of which the salient example might well be Jean Vilar's Théâtre National Populaire.[2] When in Leningrad, the Maly Drama Theatre was located in its dedicated space in a building that had been constructed at the end of the nineteenth century as a variety theatre by its owner for his dancer wife. Here, in a corner of this Petersburg folly, it usually performed to some 30 spectators. The term 'drama' is used in Russia to distinguish this type of theatre from lyrical theatre, opera or musical theatre.

The theatre lived on in a hand-to-mouth sort of way until 1973, when Roman Malkin became its managing director and Efim Padve its artistic director. Padve already enjoyed a successful career in Leningrad and had been a pupil of the redoubtable Georgy Tovstonogov, director of Leningrad's Bolshoy Drama Theatre, which was considered to be 'virtually the strongest Russian company of the post-Stalin period' (Smeliansky, 1999: 13). He shared Malkin's ambition to give the Maly Drama Theatre an artistic project, which it had failed in the past to combine with its social plan. Padve demanded more of actors, raised the artistic and technical standard of productions, and focused on contemporary plays, both Russian and foreign, including plays by Edward Albee – a remarkable choice of repertoire for a lack-lustre touring company with no authority whatsoever in Leningrad and modest achievements in the Leningrad province. As a result of its general overhaul, the theatre was able to build up audiences in the city while continuing its work in the region, although now at a higher creative level and still at the gruelling pace of up to 200 performances each season, all of it in extremely difficult working conditions (Malkin, St Petersburg, 30 September 1998).

It is here that Lev Dodin enters the Maly's history. Padve invited this young, gifted director, among several others who had attracted his attention, within a year of taking office, as part of his brief to develop the theatre. Dodin had graduated from the Leningrad Institute of Theatre, Music and Cinematography in 1966 and had acquired something of a reputation from the imaginative and daring productions that he had mounted as an 'apprentice', one might say, of Zinovy Korogodsky at the Leningrad Young People's Theatre (LenTYuZ). The LenTYuZ had flourished under Korogodsky's leadership, and, by the time of Dodin's participation in it, was well known nationally for its experimental work. At the Maly, Dodin staged *The Robber* by Karel Čapek in 1974, *The Rose Tattoo* by Tennessee Williams in 1977 and texts by important Soviet writers of the 1970s such as Aleksandr Volodin and Valentin Rasputin, who disclosed grim realities usually beautified in the official media. Rasputin's *Live and Remember* staged by Dodin in 1979, for example, treated the taboo theme of desertion by

Soviet soldiers during the war. In 1980 came *The House*, which Dodin had adapted from the novel by Fyodor Abramov, a major figure in the newly emergent 'village' literature.[3] This was a rather curious genre which, in one variation, idealised peasant life, thereby echoing Soviet propaganda on the subject, and, in another, exposed the considerable deprivations imposed by the state on the peasantry, especially during the Stalin period. Abramov belonged to the second, critical strand for which Dodin had a deep sympathy. *The House* made a huge impact, and more or less consolidated Dodin's growing fame as a renegade director.

Other productions followed elsewhere, in particular *The Meek One* after Dostoevsky at the Bolshoy Drama Theatre in 1981 (revived at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1985), and *The Golovlyovs*, which Dodin adapted from Saltykov-Shchedrin's novel, at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1984. Innokenty Smoktunovsky, a riveting stage actor best known outside Russia for his Hamlet in Sergey Kozintsev's 1964 film, played the leading role in this epic production in which Dodin attempted to transfer the collaborative working methods that he was developing at the Maly to a house that was anything but open to innovative approaches. Luminary figures like Smoktunovsky, or the MKhAT's director Oleg Yefremov, were the exceptions that confirmed the rule.[4] Saltykov-Shchedrin's book is a denunciation of empty talk, which was taken by Dodin and his audiences to be an extremely relevant theme for the times.

Dodin was obliged to work in a freelance capacity because he did not have a 'theatre-home' of his own – that institution of the Russian theatre dating from the historical meeting in 1897 between Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko when they resolved to create the Moscow Art Theatre. The Art Theatre was founded on the idea of a collectivity that would stay together a long time, bound by common artistic goals and perceptions which would come to be shared by its audiences. It was to be a 'home', too, in the sense that it would require the sustained care and loyalty of its members. The idea persisted right through the Soviet period, and its creative principles survived despite the fact that state bureaucrats decided who would run the theatres. Yefremov worked with a group of students that was to form the Sovremennik Theatre (*sovremennik* means 'contemporary') where, despite the bureaucratic impositions placed upon him, he created a veritable 'home', a tightly-knit organisational and creative unit with a distinctive theatrical style. He was transferred in 1970 to the MKhAT, basically to revive this once-glorious establishment. Yury Lyubimov, who was a highly esteemed actor at the Vakhtangov Theatre, managed to win over officials to give him the run-down Taganka in 1964, where he built a company of world renown. Tovstonogov, after a period in Moscow and his native Tiflis in Georgia, was appointed to the Bolshoy Drama Theatre. Anatoly Efros was the only one of the four major directors of the 1960s and 1970s who did not have a sanctified 'home', although he worked with his own actors at the Malaya Bronnaya and, from there, commanded the love of the Moscow public.

Efros unwittingly demonstrated the power of the theatre-home, not least in symbolic terms, when he was moved, in 1984, from the Malaya Bronnaya to

the Taganka. The transfer occurred shortly after Lyubimov had been dismissed from his position of artistic director and deprived of his citizenship (ostensibly for criticising the Soviet government to the British press, although old scores for his outspoken, quasi-dissident productions were being settled for good measure). That Efros accepted the position and, further, appeared to believe that he could thrive in somebody else's nest was met with incredulity in the theatre community, as well as with hostility from a sizeable number of the Taganka actors. Anatoly Smeliansky, when referring to Efros's ill-starred move, observes that his own 'family' at the Malaya Bronnaya was breaking up and, consequently, the move was 'prompted by a crisis in the very idea of the theatre-home and theatre-family'. He continues:

> In Soviet conditions, this vital Russian idea had turned into a situation where the performers were feudally owned not only by the state, but by their own theatrical 'family'. No one had any freedom, that is to say the natural right to leave – to be 'divorced'. In such conditions the threat of losing one's theatre was for both actor and director tantamount to a death threat. The melancholy fate of so-called 'free' directors and actors (of whom there were only a handful in the whole country!) was plain to everyone.
>
> (Smeliansky, 1999: 111)

However stultifying the situation may have become, the point appreciated by everyone was that the absence of a theatre-home, even in these conditions of servitude, was a terrible fate. This was precisely the fate of Dodin all through the 1970s, right up to one year before the Lyubimov–Efros misfortunes and Dodin's staging of *The Golovlyovs* at the MKhAT.

Into the twenty-first century

The reversal of Dodin's fortunes occurred in 1983, when Padve resigned from the Maly, and Dodin, on Malkin's invitation, accepted the post of artistic director. He was nearly 40 years old with at least 22 productions behind him. The company supported Dodin's appointment, for not only had it worked well with him but, by then, it numbered a few actors with whom Dodin had studied at the Theatre Institute. Dodin may have been 'homeless', but he was certainly not without a roof: his permanent teaching position at the Institute allowed him to develop his own school of acting and directing, and it was towards this source that he was able to look when considering the possibilities for the Maly's future. Yefremov, who had a nose for talent, offered him a niche at the Moscow Art Theatre. Dodin turned it down. Having been deprived of a theatre-home for so long, he was keenly aware of the lessons to be learned from its axioms and knew, therefore, that he would be able to realise his artistic vision only with actors with whom he shared a whole way of seeing and being, which was more likely if he formed them himself. The imperative to create an intimate relationship between his pedagogical practice and his theatre practice, where his pupils