Active Analysis

Maria Knebel

Compiled and edited by Anatoli Vassiliev

Translated by Irina Brown

Active Analysis

Active Analysis combines two of Maria Knebel's most important books, *On Active Analysis of the Play and the Role* and *The Word in the Actor's Creative Work*, in a single edition conceived and edited by one of Knebel's most famous students, the renowned theatre and film director, Anatoli Vassiliev.

This is the first English translation of an important and authoritative fragment of the great Stanislavski jigsaw. A landmark publication.

This book is an indispensable resource for professional directors, student directors, actors and researchers interested in Stanislavski, directing, rehearsal methods and theatre studies more generally.

Maria Knebel was an actor, director, teacher, author of five books and pioneer of 'active analysis'. She is, arguably, one of the most influential theatre pedagogues in 20th-century Russian theatre. Knebel was a student of Michael Chekhov, Nemirovich-Danchenko, and Stanislavski with whom she collaborated closely during his final years at the Opera-Dramatic Studio. She was instrumental in promoting and disseminating their acting and directing methodologies through her own teaching and directing practice.

Anatoli Vassiliev is one of Europe's leading theatre directors, theatre innovators and pedagogues. He trained at GITIS (the Russian State Academy of Theatre Arts) under Maria Knebel and Andrei Popov. In 1987 Vassiliev founded his own theatre company School of Dramatic Art in Moscow, a creative experimental laboratory, which he ran until 2006. He has directed many internationally acclaimed productions both with his own company and with others, including the Comédie Française and L'Odéon in Paris, TNS in Strasbourg, and the Hellenic Festival in Epidaurus. He has taught all over the world, including at GITIS and VGIK in Moscow, the Grotowski Institute in Wroclaw, ENSATT in Lyon, Isola della Pedagogia in Venice, and the Royal National Theatre and the Stanislavski Centre for Contemporary Practice at Rose Bruford College in London.

Irina Brown, originally from St Petersburg, has lived and worked in Britain since 1978. She is a theatre and opera director, dramaturge, translator and theatre pedagogue. A former Artistic Director of the Tron Theatre, Glasgow, she has directed for the Royal National Theatre, the Royal Opera House in London's West End and internationally. She is Programme Director of the MA/MFA in Contemporary Directing Practice and Curator of the Stanislavski Centre at Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance, London.

"Maria Knebel's contribution to contemporary actor training is invaluable and to date, somewhat under-estimated. This much anticipated book – thoughtfully edited by Vassiliev and sensitively translated by Irina Brown – brings crystal-clear understanding of Stanislavsky's innovative 'active analysis' into sharp focus and easy implementation."

Bella Merlin, actor and professor at the University of California, Riverside, USA

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With the support of
Anatoli Vassiliev's Foundation for the Development of Dramatic Arts

Фонд развития искусства драматического театра Анатолия Васильева

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Maria Knebel

Maria Knebel was born in Moscow in 1898. She joined Michael Chekhov's Studio at the age of 19. From 1921 she continued her training at the Second Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre, where she remained a member of the acting company until 1949. She made the transition from acting to directing in 1935, at a time when women were rarely entrusted with such a job. While continuing to act at Moscow Art Theatre, she began directing at the newly formed theatre studio named after Yermolova. In 1936 Stanislavski invited her to join him as an Assistant Pedagogue in his research into theatre training at the Opera-Dramatic Studio. There Knebel taught the Mastery of the Word ('stage speech'), experimenting together with Stanislavski with etudes and improvisations, as he perfected his method of 'physical actions' and 'active analysis'. It was a formative pedagogical experience for Knebel. In 1940 she went on to teach acting at the Shchepkin Theatre Institute. In 1948 she joined the GITIS Directing Department, where she taught directing, later becoming the Chair of the Department until her death in 1985. In the 1950s she was Artistic Director of the Central Children's Theatre in Moscow, opening doors into the profession to a whole new generation of actors, directors and playwrights.

In 1954, in her book *The Word in the Actor's Creative Work*, Maria Knebel set out to summarise the entirety of Stanislavski's work, including his latter-day discoveries. That book was quickly followed by another, *On Active Analysis of the Play and the Role*, which instantly became the indispensable textbook for generations of Russian theatre practitioners, a key reference point that illuminated the Stanislavski system. Aided by her many recollections of the classes and conversations with the founding father of the Moscow Art Theatre, she endeavoured to provide a theoretical perspective on acting itself, in which a continuous creative search leads to an organic unity of mind and body.

Book One was published under its original title *On Active Analysis of the Play and the Role* by Iskusstvo Publishing House, Moscow in 1959. A second edition came out in 1961, which added several new chapters. This book is based on the second edition.

Book Two was published in Moscow in 1970 by Iskusstvo/VTO (the All-Russia Theatre Society) under its original title of *The Word in the Actor's Creative Work*, edited by Nikolai Gorchakov. It was based on Maria Knebel's notes from her third-year Directing course of lectures on 'Verbal Action in the Stanislavski System', GITIS, 1954.

The Russian text, compiled, edited and verified by Anatoli Vassiliev, is based on these original editions.

Cover image: From the personal archive of Natalia Alekseievna Zvereva, theatre pedagogue and director, and Maria Knebel's close collaborator. Photographed from the original by theatre photographer Aleksander Ivanishin.

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Contents

Translator's note

In translating this book I drew inspiration from Jean Benedetti's approach to his translation of Stanislavski. Maria Knebel often quotes from Stanislavski's books published in English under the title *An Actor's Work*. Jean Benedetti's learned and vivid translation of *An Actor's Work* became an indispensable source and training ground for me. However, in a number of places small sections of his translation had to be adapted so that Knebel's comments would relate directly to the original text.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Anatoli Vassiliev for entrusting me with the translation of this volume, and for his time, patience and generosity in sharing with me his knowledge, insight and experience regarding the issues discussed in the book.

I would also like to acknowledge the unstinting support of Inna Schorr and Stone Nest, as well as the indispensable contribution made by my colleagues and friends Robert Price and Kristin Corbet-Milward, who kindly reviewed my translation and offered invaluable feedback both in terms of language and subject matter.

Notes on the text

Stanislavski, Konstantin Sergeievich (17 January 1863–7 August 1938): as Knebel points out in her foreword, some material used in her books is based on her own private notes as an eyewitness and participant in the process of Stanislavski's discoveries. In the original Russian, she mostly uses Stanislavski's surname when she quotes from the official sources, but when she recalls her own personal experience, she uses his first name and patronymic, 'Konstantin Sergeievich'. This gives it a warm and 'distinctive' sense of their relationship, and conjures up the immediacy both of the encounter and the text that follows. However, to make it easier for the English-speaking reader, I have mostly referred to him as 'Stanislavski', keeping his first name and patronymic in just a few particular instances.

Michael Chekhov: I have used the Anglicised version of Michael Chekhov's name throughout the book because of its familiarity to English-speaking readers. However, in the chapter 'I am Mikhail Chekhov's Student', I have reverted to his Russian name and patronymic 'Mikhail Aleksandrovich' or just 'Mikhail' since the story in that chapter takes place long before his emigration in 1928 first to Germany, then to Britain and later to the USA where he made his name as 'Michael Chekhov'.

Square brackets: used throughout the book to indicate those passages and dialogues based on Knebel's personal record of Stanislavski's classes or their private meetings.

Pronouns: although in the original Russian text 'an actor' or 'a director' always uses a masculine pronoun, I have made a decision to use 'they' wherever possible in acknowledgement of present-day sensibilities.

Footnotes: can be found at the bottom of the page to assist the reader in their understanding of specific Russian references or particulars of terminology.

Endnotes: have been used for bibliographical references.

Appendices: Knebel uses examples from a number of popular Soviet plays that were part of the repertoire at the time. Although the reader may not be familiar with these, Knebel always provides clear context to support the reader's understanding of the material.

Literary texts: a number of literary examples are used in translations referenced in the endnotes. I have translated the rest as literally as possible (including Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit* and Pushkin's *Gypsies*) so that Knebel's analysis and references can be readily understood.

Beginnings

Reader! Don't bother reading this introduction, go straight to *Active Analysis*, turn over these futile couple of pages … No, wait, hear me out. It was so long ago, so very long ago it was: the year 1968 in the Soviet Union, just like in your country, was a turning point. Our country was finished with 'the Thaw', and 'the Stagnation' was coming, a period that we looked back on with nostalgia during Perestroika. So, it was then, in 1968, that I took entrance exams to get into GITIS,[1] but instead of Anatoly Efros's course – he had just been shown the door for his production of *Three Sisters* – I applied to study under Andrei Popov, an actor – playful, gentle, remarkable – just as he was in everyday life. That is when the Chair of the Directing Department, Maria Osipovna Knebel, assessed me, an entrant, in my Directing oral. 'Why do you want to be in theatre?', 'What's theatre to you?'. 'It's my whole life', I showed off, and, shamefaced, noted to myself – a direct hit to her heart.

At the end of this book you will find a chapter on Michael Chekhov from Knebel's book *My Whole Life*. It is a sublime piece of writing about theatre, particularly the pages about his Russian period, a magical piece! I embarked on studying the art of directing under Andrei Popov. Our year was a large group of students, freethinking, hard to manage. So they split us, by then a close-knit fellowship, into two halves – for the sake of keeping us in order, and I, anticipating disaster and mentally protesting, took my place on a school-bench in the little old woman's class.[2] I detested everything about her now, most of all those who surrounded her: my new teachers, her undergraduates and final-year students, the syllabus, pedantry and nothing but. I dreamt of the freedom they stripped me of. I wanted to drop out of GITIS, and I remember how, once, I walked down the stairs past the bust of Lenin and tried to pluck up the courage to open the door into the poplar park outside and return to the sea, the sea I had left behind to become a theatre apprentice! I was always late, dressed to

1 GITIS, an abbreviation for the State Institute of Theatre Arts (now the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts) in Moscow (trans. note).

2 Reference to Knebel (trans. note).

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shock, and at one point even sported a metal chain as a trouser-belt; I walked around in a torn leather jacket, and was outraged by having to do those absurd improvisations: you're a migratory bird, and you – a domestic one. I had no wish to be a goose! Nor did I want to be a crocodile, nor to pick wee flowers in a wee meadow, or impersonate a happy horse, or the torments of a cheated husband – all that after the freewheeling compositions with Andrei Popov, indulged by him …

Having started at the top of the class, I was turning into a pariah, while the grey mediocrity scrambled up to the top – there were some among us with no talent, but I had never thought of myself as one of them. I leap-frogged to the bottom of the class, and by the end of my second year my expulsion from GITIS was on the agenda at the departmental meeting. 'What do you think you're wearing?!', said Maria Knebel, hurting my feelings. I wore a black silk scarf over my torn leather. 'You look like a hairdresser! No dress sense!' So what? I dreamt of love-making on the stage, built a bed, covered it with a dark blue velvet, and my classmates, a boy and a girl, barefoot (which was far too much for the Soviet sensibility!), their heels tightly nestling against each other, cried and laughed, and loved each other with their palms, and parted for ever with their backs. It was a near 'fail', but Maria Knebel fought for me at the departmental meeting against the wrath of the Communist puritans and the spite of the truly salacious prudes. I started my third year.

An introduction should be brief, but the story of my student life was a long one, and my teacher and master tested my obedience. We began our third year with etudes based on Chekhov's *Ivanov*. I loved Chekhov at the time, particularly his *Ivanov*, the sufferings of a Moscow Hamlet, his suicide – well suited to my fits of hypochondria. Etudes, as taught by Knebel, demanded artistic concentration as well as some kind of – not yet clear to me – scientific and professional approach, taking me back to happy times at the University and the Chemistry Department, as everything began to form up a precise, legitimate and grammatically correct pattern while being simultaneously liberated for an improvisation. It is hard to remember now whether I succeeded as an actor in my etudes, most likely not, not yet; it took me a year to be able to be organic onstage. For me a real revelation about theatre was the moment when I suddenly discovered that I was onstage doing nothing, and that turned out to be the genuine action.

As a student director I instantly fell in love with etudes in my very first year under Popov, but it was under Maria Knebel that I mastered the science of how to be in command of and apply the technique. All of a sudden the essence of the art of theatre, how that essence manifested itself, and who was its truth-bearer, became clear to me – the director – through my own experience as an actor; the secrets of directing were revealed to me through the art of acting. During the year of my protest I had been full of sarcasm and spite. I had a slim little book by M.O. Knebel entitled *The Word in the Actor's Creative*

Work. I crossed out 'K' and wrote 'M' instead, turning it into M.O. Mebel,[3] and I quipped, 'Knebel – for the people' as in 'Mebel (furniture) – for the people'. On the front page, forging her handwriting, I inscribed: 'Tolya, be a good boy. Your teacher.' Signed: M.O. Mebel. Now, trying to heal my wounded vanity, I became extra diligent in my etudes, but, reader, the best was yet to come! When I objected to and fought against the Department's attacks by using 'the rural theme', setting up a peasant-cart onstage, creating foliage shadows, or imitating the wind and the clatter of hooves, I had been just a little boy of theatre. I was growing up now.

In the February of my third year I was at Knebel's, reading her my adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*, five hours on the trot. Knebel listened, not a sign of boredom or exhaustion on her face. I wanted to do *The Possessed* with my fellow-students, but my personal story took a different turn, away from the gloomy and terrifying account of Russian life. The play chosen for our etudes was *Tales of the Old Arbat* by a Soviet playwright Alexei Arbuzov, whose work I knew well and really loved. For my entrance exam, I developed an explication for his play *My Poor Marat*. Delighted, I started working privately on scenes from *The Tales*, when out of the blue Knebel appointed me the Head Student of our year, entrusting me to direct the comedy with my fellow-students. It was not something anyone could have expected. This was the first time ever that the Course Master-Director had pulled out of directing a production on the Directing Department syllabus, and offered it to a student-director. For almost a year I was virtually in charge of both pedagogy and directing.

Reader, what else, what else? A postcard from Knebel to Oleg Yefremov[4] with a reference for me, my joining the Moscow Art Theatre as a trainee director, the success of *The Solo for a Clock with Chimes*, then, with gratitude, a bouquet of roses for Maria Knebel's birthday on May 19th, dress-runs of *Vassa Zheleznova* and *The Grown-Up Daughter of a Young Man* just for Maria Knebel in an otherwise empty auditorium. No, do not bother to read my introduction, reader, instead go straight to the two fundamental texts of Russian theatre, two manifestos on the art of psychological theatre. On the skill of acting the way you speak, and the skill of speaking the way you act! If my experience has not convinced you, let my mentor convince you herself. Let her teach you to be organic, teach you silence, ethics and action – that's where theatre begins.

With gratitude to my teacher, with gratitude to everyone who has been part of making this book available to the English-speaking reader. I am happy that my mentor's teachings are in your hands now. Read, reader. Study, student.

Anatoli Vassiliev

3 *Mebel* means 'furniture' in Russian: from German *Möbel* (trans. note).

4 Oleg Yefremov was Artistic Director of the Moscow Art Theatre from 1970 to 2000 (trans. note).

About Maria Knebel

It seems that Providence played a hand in her destiny. It is not surprising that when questioned by an inquisitive student whether the Creator existed, Professor Maria Knebel waved her away with an ironic 'Don't you doubt it'.

Her father, a native of a small Galician shtetl, came from a large poverty-stricken Jewish family. Having learnt Russian as a grown man, he became a great connoisseur of Russian art and a torch-bearer for enlightenment.

His life, reminiscent of a Hollywood movie, reveals Maria's own journey in a wondrous light, with her impact on the history of theatre becoming more and more acknowledged. No wonder – she initiated a radical change in the thinking of a whole generation of theatre directors.

In the 1860s Maria's father left his parental home as a teenager with a small bundle over his shoulder and made his way to Vienna in search of his fortune. He cleaned boots, starved and studied: at a secondary school, then a medical school, then at the Institute of Commerce. He spent all his free time visiting museums, having caught the fine arts bug.

And then … wait for this! On their graduation day, all his fellow-students drew lots: where to go and look for work? On one of the many pieces of paper there was a name of an exotic country – Russia. That was the one picked by Joseph Knebel. His friends' raucous laughter was stifled by his determination to follow his lot. He brushed aside all the arguments that his intention was sheer madness, and left for Moscow with not a penny in his pocket.

Countless events occurred between the day he joined a German bookshop as a sales assistant and the emergence of the 'Joseph Knebel Publishing House'. His encounter with the art collector Pavel Tretyakov[1] was the one to define his fate.

Maria Knebel's father found himself in a curious land at a rare point in its history when it resolutely progressed. Russia never moves at an even trot. She either gallops away, or stumbles and falls, then struggles back to her feet and hurtles forth again. Taking the world by surprise – it is what she does best.

1 Pavel Tretyakov (1832–1898), a Russian merchant and textile manufacturer. He bequeathed his art collection to the city of Moscow. This collection served as the core of the Tretyakov Gallery, the largest collection of Russian fine art in the world (ed. note).

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Who in the West could have imagined that theatre regeneration was to come out of Moscow? At the time, having finally rejected slavery,[2] the country was determined to make up for lost opportunities.

Once the merchant class realised the benefits of disseminating knowledge, they got down to business on a characteristically grand scale. They opened museums and galleries. Not just any old gallery or museum but exemplary ones. Encyclopaedias, reference books and dictionaries were being published. Societies for the support of artists, charitable foundations and grants were established, invitations were issued to European singers to come over. Muscovites grew as proud of their Symphony Orchestra as they once had been of their market stalls. The chair of the Assembly for promoting the development of national music was a factory-owner, the Governor's cousin, Konstantin Alekseev, who performed in amateur circles under the name of Stanislavski. He set up the Society of Art and Literature. Savva Mamontov, the amateur actor's relative, built railways creating a network that connected the furthermost 'bear-infested' corners of the country. In his house he brought together new artistic talents. Mamontov discovered Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, nurtured Chaliapin, and built an exhibition pavilion for Vrubel's paintings.

Without merchant-patrons of the arts, Moscow would have been like Florence without the Medici. Tretyakov presented the city with the Gallery of Russian Art, one of the Shchukin brothers collected paintings by the Impressionists and exhibited them for free, the other brother opened the Museum of Antiquities. There was a new Theatre Museum. Book publishing flourished.

Joseph Knebel by now had mastered Russian (by the end of his life he spoke fourteen languages), and was caught up in the whirlwind of Moscow life. He, a foreigner, saw more clearly than some native Russians what a unique moment it was. Being an admirer of icon paintings as well as Russian modernists' experimentations, he was puzzled: why were they not known to the outside world?

Knebel's admiration and confusion led him to Tretyakov with a proposal to publish reproductions of the paintings from the Tretyakov collection. When asked, 'What capital do you have at your disposal?', the young enthusiast replied honestly: 'Not a kopek'. But if he got the permission to have the paintings photographed, he would persuade photographers to do it on credit, and the printing-house to give him paper and print albums on credit, too. He had no doubt that his enterprise would succeed, and offered Tretyakov all the profit from it.

'How much are you going to keep for yourself?', the money-man roared with laughter.

'Nothing. But I'd like to keep all the profits from the second edition.'

Tretyakov decided that the person in front of him was either extremely talented, or completely mad – most likely mad. Since he risked nothing personally, he mulled it over and agreed to have his collection photographed. Knebel's fate was set.

2 This refers to the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 (ed. note).

Soon in every respectable household – as they used to call it then – there were albums, monographs, children's books, books on the history of architecture and the history of costume, all of them published by Knebel. The books took pride of place among owners' possessions – they were works of art in themselves. The typeface, illustrations, the interleafing between the pages, all spoke of the publisher's supreme taste and his awareness of his high educational mission.

Joseph (later baptised as 'Osip') Knebel's apartment, in the same building as his publishing house and the bookshop, soon turned into a favourite meeting place for writers, philosophers and painters.

The list of people Masha[3] Knebel met at her parent's house reads like an encyclopaedia of Russian artistic life. To pick but one, her guide into the world of art was Igor Grabar,[4] a friend of her father's. Together with Masha, her sister and her brother he staged *tableaux vivants* based on different paintings. Her memories of Levitan, Roerich, Benois and Dobuzhinsky,[5] or of sitting on Leo Tolstoy's lap while he told her a fairy-tale, helped Maria Knebel, the actress, director and pedagogue, to survive the trying times she was destined to live in.

Dostoyevsky says in *The Brothers Karamazov*: 'Nothing is better, or stronger, or healthier, or more beneficial for one's life than a wonderful memory of some kind, especially if it comes from childhood, from the parental home. … If a person brings a multitude of such memories with him into his life, then he is saved for as long as he lives.'

Maria Knebel was saved, having just started to live.

She worshipped her father. She inherited from him many qualities to be proud of: his zest for life, fortitude, tenacity in pursuing goals, seasoned with a healthy dose of risk-taking, a mixture of idealism and a sober pragmatism. What is more, she inherited his educational mission (so in tune with the Russian sense of the messianic role of art).

Most probably that is why Maria Knebel came into her own in pedagogy, a discipline that requires a clear sense of one's mission.

The second half of her long life was, for the most part, devoted to pedagogy and the great tasks closely connected with it, which Knebel took upon herself. Surprisingly, she succeeded in accomplishing them despite the fact that the prevailing historical circumstances, all that Russian tumult, were not conducive to such things.

It is easy to identify these tasks among Knebel's multifaceted interests.

The first task. To save for posterity the character and discoveries of Michael Chekhov,[6] whose Studio she joined as a nineteen-year-old girl. It was thanks

3 Masha is short for Maria (trans. note).

4 Igor Grabar (1871–1960), painter, restorer and art historian. A member of the artistic fellowship World of Art**.** Before World War I, Grabar wrote a number of monographs on Russian painters for the Joseph Knebel Publishing House. His book on Repin was published in 1937 (ed. note).

5 Russian Symbolists and stage-designers, part of the World of Art movement (ed. note).

6 Michael Chekhov (1891–1955), the son of Anton Chekhov's elder brother Alexander. At sixteen he joined the Suvorin Theatre, St Petersburg, at nineteen became an actor at the Maly Theatre,

to him that she realised: 'A teacher's creative personality is a powerful formative force.'

Unlike most of his colleagues, Chekhov was not as concerned with the result as with getting the grasp of internal and external acting techniques. He believed the actor had to master them until they developed into *new capacities of his soul*.

There is a well-known Stanislavski quote that his system must be studied by observing Misha[7] Chekhov, whose acting expresses it fully. But like any true disciple, Chekhov searched for his own answers to the secrets of his craft. At the point when, due to his mental illness,[8] Chekhov was not able to perform in public, he craved contact with young people at his own Studio. Chekhov's classes made Knebel, still a schoolgirl at the time, give up her ambition of devoting her life to mathematics and instead hurled her in the direction of theatre.

Her father was not at all thrilled with such an unexpected turnaround. But despite bringing his children up very strictly, he never stood in the way of their true passion. It was clear that Maria was spellbound by the sacred mysteries that took place at the Chekhov Studio.

In her memoir, *My Whole Life*, she conjures up, with enviable powers of observation, the atmosphere of the Studio, Chekhov's anguish and spiritual search, his way of rehearsing. In the book she presents Chekhov's disagreements with Stanislavski as an error of judgement that led this astonishing actor to his inner crisis and emigration. (What was that about? She must have done it in response to the demands of the time.)

For some reason the actor's escape from the country is branded as a mistake in her book. And yet it is well known that the warrant for his arrest had been issued already. Chekhov would have met the same fate as Meyerhold and the many others who were murdered by the Bolsheviks.

Now it seems that the zeal with which Knebel went about making sure that Michael Chekhov's creative legacy saw the light of day, in his native land, may have been provoked by her desire to overcome her own fear of the powers that had cast him out.

Maria considered it her life's duty to bring her teacher back to Russia, if only in print. She said that she could not – must not – die until that was accomplished. 'I must' were two words Knebel used constantly.

A lot of her efforts went into persuading the oafs in high authority that the publication of her teacher's books was essential, but she always came up against the same obstacle: 'Chekhov? the follower of Steiner's ideas? Out of the question! Not now, not ever!'

Moscow, at twenty joined the Moscow Art Theatre. An actor of genius: many of the roles he played left an indelible mark on the history of Russian theatre. In 1928 he emigrated to Germany, and then to the USA in 1938 (ed. note).

7 Misha is short for Mikhail (Michael) (trans. note).

8 See more at the end of the book in an excerpt from Maria Knebel's memoirs *My Whole Life* (ed. note).

Maria even started to frequent gatherings of some Marxist philosophers in the hope of finding a loophole in the impenetrable wall of their materialistic ideology through which she could smuggle in Chekhov's anthroposophy.

It had been much easier for Joseph Knebel, poor as he was, to talk to the millionaire Tretyakov. But had her father been alive, he would have been proud of his daughter. She did get what she had been fighting for, and lived long enough to see the publication of the first volume of Michael Chekhov's works – though not long enough to see the second volume come out. She never learnt that the censors, who also denounced Knebel's introduction as a political error typical of the idealist philosophy, banned its publication.

Maybe it was for the best that she had never learnt that, and left this world with a sense of having fulfilled her duty to her teacher. Which she did indeed.

Knebel's other task was to disseminate the method of active analysis that was passed to her directly by Stanislavski.

She got into the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT)[9] via its Second Studio where creative independence and initiative were nurtured and encouraged. Maria often repeated the motto she fell in love with at the time: 'No one can be taught; everyone can be self-taught.'

It was there that she first got interested in directing. But she never seriously considered doing it. Nevertheless, it seems quite auspicious that as a young Studio member Knebel first appeared on the MAT stage as a daughter of Dr Stockmann played by Stanislavski.[10]

And then …? From then on she lived under the spell of the MAT creator's charismatic personality, unwaveringly loyal to him. Meyerhold once came to see Knebel in Dostoyevsky's *Uncle's Dream* and paid her a visit backstage: There isn't much else you can do here at the MAT! Such a physical and comedic role comes once in a blue moon, doesn't it? Come and join my company. No future for you here.' According to Maria, she never even gave it another thought.

Still the temptation must have been great. In the 1920s avant-garde theatre reached the crest of the revolutionary wave. At the same time the Moscow Art Theatre – the theatre of the Russian intelligentsia – was desperately floundering about, looking for a way to survive. It was not clear whether they could make it to the shore, navigating to safety through the stormy events of those damned days that carried artistically inclined youth further and further to the left …

The young actress managed to hold back from changing sides thanks to the ethics and aesthetics of the Moscow Art Theatre being close to the tastes cultivated at her father's house, and to everything she had absorbed at the Michael Chekhov Studio. As for Meyerhold, his words proved to be prophetic.

Maria's lot at the MAT was not a happy one. Increasingly lavished with government honours the MAT turned into a showcase establishment for spectacles. After the demise of the theatre's founding fathers, Knebel's position went from bad to worse.

9 MAT – abbreviation for the Moscow Art Theatre ('MXT' in Russian) (trans. note).

10 Doctor Stockmann – a character in Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People* (trans. note).

But she never wavered from being a true disciple. She lived for the Art Theatre that had once been the standard of fine acting. She lived for Stanislavski, with his experiments and eccentricities who to his dying day sought 'the blue bird' of truth.

The Soviet image of Stanislavski as a sort of all-knowing theatrical Stalin is a sham. Communists, while smothering the culture with sanctimonious deviousness, canonised the director so that they could use him in their fight against dissent. It seems that in the very idea of 'the system' they saw something absolute that would allow them to induce order into the most disorderly of all things – creativity.

Stanislavski invited Maria to teach at his Studio, when he was no longer able to and, by all accounts, did not want to go anywhere near the MAT. At death's door, he felt an urgent need to pass on to those he trusted the new working method he had discovered. He suggested that Knebel should do as he himself was doing: 'teach and learn'.

She became the Master's right-hand person in the sessions he conducted at his house. Away from the hustle and bustle of the theatre, from its practical preoccupations, Stanislavski concentrated on his theoretical work. As a director, he always found it hard to realise his fresh ideas under the 'standard operating conditions'. Now he was in a rush to share his latest research, anticipating that it could take theatre to a qualitatively different level.

Maria was asked to focus on the issues of 'artistic recitation' and 'verbal action' – part and parcel of the innovative approach to making productions based on text-analysis done *in action*.

It took Knebel years to interpret that discovery and find ways and means of realising it in the process of rehearsals. Her books convey the essence of that experiment in such depth that they have become handbooks for anyone practising theatre.

They require a thoughtful reading. There is no point in giving a quick summary of the method that liberates actors from inertia and expands their potential – no one can do it better than Knebel. Let's just say that its foundation is the salutary spirit of improvisation that had so enchanted Maria at the Studio of her first teacher, Michael Chekhov.

Knebel's third task – bringing Stanislavski's teachings together with the theoretical legacy of the other MAT's founder, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko[11] – turned out to be the most complex of all and the hardest issue to resolve. Conscious of this as she was, she never ceased trying to find a solution. She succeeded in going down that road as far as it was possible, for as long as she could justify it.

11 Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858–1943), writer, stage director, co-founder and joint Artistic Director of the Moscow Arts Theatre (together with Stanislavski). The whole of that theatre's history is marked by a complex personal relationship between the two directors. Less known in the West than Stanislavski, Nemirovich-Danchenko left behind vital literary works as well as his own theatrical theoretical legacy (ed. note).

Her determination is easily explained by the fact that she was one of the few *mkhatovets*[12] who managed to stay on good and creative terms with both leaders of the MAT who had been in a relationship of 'hostile friendship' for many years. She stayed above the violent skirmishes between the internal cliques at the theatre. The secret to her apparent impartiality could be found in the gift that later assured her pedagogical success: her ability to read people.

When asked about Stanislavski, her answer was succinct: 'A genius.'

When speaking of Nemirovich-Danchenko, her third mentor, she chose her words more carefully to express the magnitude and tragedy of his personality.

'The second plane', 'inner monologue', 'the nature of the character's attention and mentality' – these concepts were an integral part of the MAT's artistic endeavours instilled by Nemirovich-Danchenko into the actors' consciousness at every rehearsal.

Knebel could not rest easy, knowing that Nemirovich-Danchenko's practical experience and theoretical research were underrated, under-researched. She was convinced that his legacy must be used in educating the younger generations. She went out of her way to make sure that her students got a vivid sense of the rehearsals that she had taken part in. The direct outcome of this was her book *Nemirovich-Danchenko's School of Directing*, the best book ever written about this major theatrical figure.

The intervening period between Maria Knebel's times and today allows us to separate the essential from the secondary; sing praises to this, question that. But the turmoil of feelings that made up each passing day can easily go unnoticed. The incidental retreats into the shadows, while the essential reveals itself in a blinding light that destroys all semitones and nuances.

And yet, when we hear that one day Maria's father led her up to a mirror and asked her to have a closer look at herself before deciding if it was feasible to dream of the stage with looks like hers; or when we sense in her admiration for Michael Chekhov the young girl's heart beating faster – it is as if we are lifted by a warm wave and pulled into the depths of time, away from our cold rationality. There, in the past, we sense the hot flow of days.

It would be a pity if someone reading Knebel's books were to imagine her as an academic and dispassionate mentor. Such a woman could never have enthralled hundreds of students.

She was infectiously charismatic in spite of being, to a conventional eye, plain; she was audacious, damn clever, wickedly mischievous and funny. Quick shrewd eyes, a reassuring smile, instantaneous responses. Someone compared her to a little mouse, but oh no … She was more like a little monkey, poking fun at those who imagined they knew and understood her better than she did herself.

Looking at the grey-haired Knebel, it was easy to imagine her as Charlotta in *The Cherry Orchard*, a role she once played. So much in her appeared

12 A Russian name for the company-members of the Moscow Art Theatre, MAT, or 'MXT' in Russian, pronounced 'M-Kh-a-T', hence 'mkhatovets' (trans. note).

contradictory: her fortitude despite being ill-suited to everyday life, her keen curiosity about everything despite being very private herself, her readiness to face vicissitudes of life despite her child-like helplessness. Her many students, as they fought for the right to get a taxi for their professor from GITIS[13] to Studentcheskaya Street where she lived, or to see her to her door, could have exclaimed like an estate owner in a Chekhov play, 'Enchantress, I'm simply in love'.

She was infected with the bug of playfulness. In her youth she loved to act old women. She loved character-acting, its acute characterisation and outrageous physicality (think back on those Michael Chekhov lessons, and Meyerhold's invitation to join his company).

Her father on seeing her onstage for the first time said, 'If at twenty you play old women, when are you going to be young? I think, it is rather sad.'

He did not get a chance to witness the phenomenon of Maria's life: as years went by she grew younger. She even grew prettier. Perhaps by being in constant contact with the young, she was charged by their energy. Or perhaps it was because in the critical moments of her life she, just like her father, demonstrated singular will-power and remained true to her principles: she did not pursue material rewards, nor did she engage in frenzied battles with her adversaries, aware that the worst part of being the winner was to inherit the vices of the loser.

Her irregular features were further transformed by the inner light radiated only by those few lucky chosen ones who have found the purpose and meaning of their life on earth.

One of her colleagues at GITIS, whose relationship with her was far from perfect, christened her Mother Teresa of the Directing Faculty.

The opening sentence of her book *The Poetry of Pedagogy* – with the title that itself expressed the very essence of what she had lived for – says: 'Pedagogy requires a person to have qualities akin to those of a mother.'

She had no surviving children. One child died in infancy, the other at birth. That's all we know about the tragedy that had clearly left its mark. Not given to confidences, Maria kept private things private. Only a few isolated remarks, usually humorous in nature, might reveal to those close to her that her life as a woman had been a rich and complex one.

She chuckled and cut short a mutual friend of ours who tried to confide in her, 'It all sounds very familiar – I've had three husbands after all.'

She also preferred to keep her theatrical trials and tribulations to herself. If she had to speak of them, she did so reluctantly, with no drama. That's good breeding for you! Less focus on yourself, on your own feelings, more – on others. Her memoirs are full of tenderness for the people she writes about. The rest of it is left at the periphery of her consciousness – no, not even her

13 GITIS, an abbreviation for the State Institute of Theatre Arts (now the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts) in Moscow, largest and oldest independent theatre arts school in Russia. Maria Knebel began her work at the Directing Department there in 1948 (ed. note).

consciousness, but her narrative. She neither could nor wanted to talk about 'the rest of it', at most in passing, through hints. Her book *My Whole Life* is – in reality – only a part of it, a minuscule part of what she had been through.

We can only assume that the chapter on the MAT's rehearsals of the play about the Leader of the Proletariat, Lenin, would have been shorter, had her book been published after the Rottweiler-style censorship and the power that instigated it had ceased to exist. And yet, personally Maria owed a lot to the play's protagonist. After the Revolution, when her father was stripped of everything he had created through his hard work and talent, the Leader did not destroy him. Instead he asked Joseph Knebel to take charge of organising the national printing business. That saved him from famine or execution.

It is pretty certain that Maria Knebel's account of the lawlessness and humiliations suffered by artists would have been more detailed and fearless had they not all lived in 'the most liberal country in the world'.

The problem was not that she and her second husband were coerced into sharing their apartment first with one large family, then with two – until all they had left was a single room with just a thin plywood partition separating it from the entrance hall; nor was it that Knebel, while working at the country's premier theatre, had to earn extra cash in order to survive and feed her family, working as a guide at the Tretyakov Gallery where her father's ascent had begun; nor that she had to sell her prized possession – her father's albums of reproductions: unassuming in her everyday life, Maria Knebel stoically endured all these hardships, with quiet dignity and no bitterness, without calling anyone to account.

She stood by those with whom she shared time and space. When her communal flat neighbours were being dragged off to the labour camps one after another, Knebel looked after their families, helping them in every way she could.

But the plague spared no one. Soon after, Maria's much loved brother Nikolai was arrested in front of her, her mother and her sister.

Everything was leading to her being arrested next. Nemirovich-Danchenko made a vow that as long as he was at the theatre, Maria would continue to work alongside him. But her colleagues kept their distance, whenever possible avoiding coming face to face with her in the passageways of the theatre, or backstage.

These are all well-established realities of life under Stalin. As they say, worse things happened. Her brother was lucky. He did make it back from the place that very few returned from. The point of this is: what strength of character it took her to not lose heart, to go on making theatre and develop the methodology of acting!

A pushy student once asked her point-blank, 'How can we hold out against the insanity of the world? How can we go on living?' Knebel answered, 'Self-improvement.' 'But what about you? You, having seen what you have seen, experienced first-hand all that, God forbid, anyone else will have to – where do you get your strength from? What keeps you going?' – 'Self-improvement', she responded with a smile.

To draw her students into this life-saving process is the goal of Knebel's pedagogy.

She followed her own teacher's tenet. Once, during spectacular jubilee celebrations for his seventieth birthday, Stanislavski, when asked 'What constitutes earthly happiness?', tore off a piece of paper from a flower wrapper and scribbled a powerful statement with his weakened hand: 'Cognition. Art and work, getting to the essence …'

Her interest in what goes on inside us, in the mysteries of the creative sense of self and the ways to attain it, nudged Knebel towards directing.

At the time, there was a deep-rooted belief that directing was not a woman's profession. Maria found the only genuine way to overcome that prejudice: she made use of the advantages she had without trying to imitate the characteristics of a male director, employing her adaptability, flexibility, solicitude and gentleness in working with volatile actors.

She realised that she had an ability to 'fuse' with an actor, to penetrate deep into their soul, and sense what they were going through while creating the character. And the actor was eager to accept her help, sensing her care and feeling empathy for their anguish and struggle.

'A midwife that helps to deliver the production', one of the early comparisons Stanislavski had found to help define the director's function. This could have been said of Knebel when she first started directing.

She never became an outstanding stage director. But her knowledge of painting and sculpture, of all the different fine arts genres, and her impeccable taste allowed her to master the craft of staging (in as much as it interested her). Maria was invited to join the Yermolov Studio,[14] while her old classmate, Nikolai Khmelev,[15] the best actor of the new MAT generation with a studio of his own, suggested they should form a new theatre together.

There is no better place than a theatre studio for a director in the making!

There is no inertia or scepticism there. Time spent at a studio[16] is brief but highly beneficial, the time when the *studijtsy*'s[17] hunger to grasp the secrets of their profession is stronger than their awareness of the relative nature of what they desire; when soloists are still happy to sing in the chorus; when the theatre studio, in trying to make sense of life, starts to inhabit it as it searches for its identity amidst the general hustle and bustle.

At the Studio, where there was no fear of making mistakes or of failing, Maria Knebel could put to the test the method of active analysis. This method

14 The Yermolov Studio, formed in 1925 and named after a great Russian actress from the Maly Theatre in Moscow, merged with Nikolai Khmelev's Studio in 1937. Khmelev became the Head of the new Studio, which was later to become the Yermolov Theatre (ed. note).

15 Nikolai Khmelev (1901–1945). An actor and director at the Moscow Art Theatre (ed. note).

16 In Russia 'studio' refers to a relatively open theatrical infrastructure, something between a laboratory and a workshop. Under the leadership of an actor or a director young people are brought together in a studio for educational and experimental work (ed. note).

17 *Studijtsy* – members of a studio theatre (trans. note).

requires a particular rehearsal set-up: it is necessary to turn the person's gaze towards their inner self, to awaken the dormant improvisational nature in every actor.

That's where Maria started to rehearse using etudes,[18] and became a confirmed believer in the method. From then on, come what may, she never abandoned it. She did not imitate her mentors; she came up with new exercises, looked for new approaches, and did everything she could to make actors fall in love with that little-known way of rehearsing.

It worked because of the close attention she paid to each student's individuality. A pedagogue by nature, she would always make adjustments according to the unique artistic and intrinsic characteristics of each person she taught. She was up-front about the difficulties that actors would encounter when applying the method especially by those accustomed to working in the old way. That set her apart from the opportunists who forced 'the system' on everyone, the way Peter the Great forced propagation of potatoes.

Her father, Joseph Knebel, had once taken his little Maria to see Surikov's *Boyarynya Morozova*.[19] For a long time the little girl peered at the woman who had chosen exile over apostasy. Fighting for her right to cross herself with two fingers rather than three, the Boyarynya proudly thrusts them up. 'What is she fighting for?' – 'For her faith.' Maria did not possess the Boyarynya's stately bearing, feverish eyes or affecting gestures. Tiny, funny, impractical in everyday life, and seemingly helpless … And yet! She was as firm in her convictions, and in her likes and dislikes – she never, no matter what, let go of the essence, the fundamental principles of the school she came from. Throughout the years of adversity, she upheld her faith – that which cannot be taken away from someone without taking their life. She became the Master in her own right.

Misfortunes ambushed the Yermolov Studio. Two of its directors, Tereshkovich and Azarin, unexpectedly died. Here is what Knebel wrote about it later in her life:

> Khmelev and I talked all through the night. The two Studios had to be merged. That was the only way out. We were connected in so many ways, had shared so many thoughts and experiences. But the deaths of the two directors were not to be the last of the many catastrophes of that tragic 1937 – one after another we were losing our actors. That night we talked of it all. And of the particular kind of unity, both human and creative, that was required in the face of what was going on; we talked about each other, and of our innermost beliefs …

18 The meaning of the term 'etude' as used in theatre was developed in detail in Maria Knebel's practice and writings. See chapter 'Etude rehearsals' (ed. note).

19 A famous painting by Vasily Surikov at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. See Fig. A1 at the end of the book (ed. note).

There is no explicit mention that the night-time conversation took place at the height of Stalin's persecutions. That year's tragic losses might explain the bitter state of affairs at the Studio. But if we read the text carefully, then everything – from 'losing our actors' to 'our innermost beliefs' – each word, each sentence reveals the true meaning of what was said.

Under Khmelev's wing Knebel put on productions that compelled even her foes, as well as misogynists, to acknowledge Maria's skill as a director. It was the training-ground for new exciting actors, with the whole of Moscow flocking to see her production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Celebrating *joie de vivre* in those dark times was a thing worthy of admiration. Not everyone would have had the courage to rise above the turmoil of those days.

The production, incandescent with tragedy and comedy, came to life through improvisations. As a result, the actors' work had a lightness of touch, and its exquisite style combined the natural and the fantastical. The best qualities of a genuine art theatre could be discerned within it. The show was not just a one-off success story but the laying of the path that made it possible to progress.

Knebel was aware that for the *studijtsy* it was important to know what lay ahead. But neither Stanislavski, nor – later on – Nemirovich-Danchenko, took kindly to their assistant's work elsewhere. For her, too, the MAT was home. How could she disregard its interests? And once the war broke out, with the theatre evacuated to Saratov, there was no longer any question – her place was at the MAT.

Knebel could not imagine herself without the Moscow Art Theatre. On top of that, it was far from easy working with her adored Khmelev. Despite being attached to Maria, the actor was jealous of her relationship with the *studijtsy*. With his heightened vulnerability and mistrust, it was not easy to sustain the now legendary high-minded relationship that they now had.

Khmelev used to 'quarrel silently' with anyone who expressed an opinion he did not share. Great actor though he was, he was also, as is often the case, egocentric and liked to be the centre of attention. His egocentricity was so pronounced that once a friend remarked when they visited the Louvre together, 'Nikolai, are we here to look at you, or at the *Mona Lisa*?'

Even Khmelev's sudden death was touched with a sinister theatricality: he was in full costume and make-up for the part of Ivan the Terrible when death caught up with him during the run-through of the play *Hard Times*.[20]

1949. No Stanislavski, no Nemirovich-Danchenko, no Khmelev. And this is the country that had defeated fascism beyond its boundaries, but failed to do so on its own soil.

Shielded by the rallying cry to combat 'rootless cosmopolitans', the systematic persecutions of intelligentsia, particularly those of Jewish extraction, had got under way. Knebel never admitted this motive to be part of the plot which led to her expulsion from the MAT, but the reverberations of it were there. She pretended not to hear them, embarrassed for those who danced to its tune.

20 The 2nd Part of Alexei Tolstoy's (1883–1945) play *Ivan the Terrible*, written in 1943 (ed. note).