



A contemporary
translation by
Jean Benedetti of
Stanislavski's classic
autobiography

My Life in Art

Konstantin

Stanislavski

My Life in Art

'This wise and delightful book . . . is packed with sage, practical counsel to actors and actresses.' – ***Times Literary Supplement***

'The Stanislavski system of acting is good. What is better is the Stanislavski philosophy of art that believes in the infinitude of man . . . Even those who are not primarily interested in acting will find in Stanislavski's writing an extraordinary illumination of art.' **Brooks Atkinson, *The New York Times***

Konstantin Stanislavski was a Russian director who transformed theatre in the West with his contributions to the birth of Realist theatre and his unprecedented approach to actor training. He lived through extraordinary times and his unique contribution to the arts still endures in the 21st century. He established the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898 with, amongst other plays, the premiere of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*. Stanislavski survived revolutions, lost his fortune, found wide fame in America, and lived in internal exile under Stalin's Soviet Union. His autobiography is an inspirational testimony to an artist's imagination and endurance, and still has compelling resonance for today's practitioners.

Translator Jean Benedetti brings us, for the first time, Stanislavski's autobiography as the author himself wanted it – from the re-edited 1926 version. The text, in clear and lively English, is supplemented by a wealth of photos and illustrations, many previously unpublished.



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Konstantin
Stanislavski

My Life in Art

Translated and edited by Jean Benedetti

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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The problem of transliteration from the Cyrillic to the Roman alphabet is complex. There are a number of systems. The most complex of these is intended to be universally applicable to languages using Roman script. It is normally reserved for academic footnotes and bibliographies. Other, simpler systems are used by writers and scholars. A major difference in transliteration is in the spelling of the ends of names such as Stanislavski. It can be -ski or -sky. There are two /i/ sounds in Russian **ЫЙ** and **ИЙ** produced in the back of the mouth and forwards in the mouth respectively. Their use is determined by the proceeding consonant. /i/, as in Stanislavski is always spelled with **ИЙ**. This is strictly transliterated as -ij or, more simply -i. This is the form used by Elizabeth Hapgood, Stanislavski's original translator. However, there is a tradition, notably in the U.S., to use the spelling 'Stanislavsky', advocated by an alternative system of transliteration. This is a perfectly legitimate choice. All other European languages use the ending -ski.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The present translation is taken from the revised version of *My Life in Art* published in Moscow in 1926, which currently forms Volume I of the nine-volume *Collected Works*. This was the version Stanislavski wished to be remembered by. Only one English-language translation exists at present, published, undated, by Progress Publishers, Moscow and later reprinted by the University Press of the Pacific in 2004. This version has two disadvantages. First, it incorporates passages from the Robbins translation of 1924, which is generally considered to be unsatisfactory; second, the English is not always that of a native speaker but, rather, a literal translation which robs the text of its essentially colloquial tone. Stanislavski's text was, in large part, dictated to his secretary and so the style is 'spoken' rather than literary. Stanislavski had a reputation in his immediate circle for being an excellent raconteur.

I have departed from the Appendices in the Russian edition. These contain material, mostly minor additions and variants, which are only of interest to research scholars. I have replaced them with Stanislavski's highly personal account of his friendship with Chekhov and his unfinished account of the 1922–4 European and American tour for which there was no space in the Russian edition.

Jean Benedetti

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STANISLAVSKY'S DOUBLE *LIFE IN ART*

Laurence Senelick

On the short shelf of theatrical autobiographies that continue to be read long after their author has ceased to be a headliner, Konstantin Stanislavsky's *My Life in Art* stands foremost. It is a primer for acting classes, a source book of stage history and a guidebook for those workers in the theatre who have lost touch with their *raison d'être* and seek an artistic True North to put them back on course. In Russia, it was lauded as 'a model of superb literature and comparable to such books as Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts*'.¹ In Western Europe, Stanislavsky's counterparts in theatre reform also sang its praises. Gordon Craig lauded 'the sincerity which breathes out of every page of it [that has] raised the entire profession of the Theatrical workers to a position it cannot recede from'.² Jacques Copeau described *My Life in Art* in terms that made it sound like the vita of a saint.³

Few readers enthralled by Stanislavsky's account of his trials and errors, goals and achievements are aware of the hasty and inconvenient circumstances in which the work was composed, or the fact that it exists in two distinct versions that reflect, in their separate ways, different stages of Stanislavsky's life. The original English version of *My Life in Art* is a sorely imperfect creation. The Russian version written a couple of years later amplifies and emends its precursor, while making fresh omissions and suppressions.

My Life in Art originated as an adjunct to the publicity campaign waged by the impresario Morris Gest when the Moscow Art Theatre visited the United States of America in 1923. The Russian-born Gest, in the tradition of his father-in-law David Belasco, created an aura of aesthetic sanctity

around the players even as he noisily promoted them. This was of some importance if the anti-Soviet bias of the general public and the press was to be overcome. The Art Theatre had to be depicted as a messianic ensemble that transcended politics. Gest's press agent Oliver M. Saylor lavished much money on building bridges between the Russian actors and their Yankee audience by publishing translations and scene-by-scene synopses of the plays in their repertoire, and broadcasting press releases, photographs posed with local celebrities, and carefully stage-managed public appearances. The climax of this ballyhoo was probably reached when Stanislavsky was taken to meet Rudolph Valentino and Bebe Daniels on the set of *Monsieur Beaucaire*. Shocked by the lack of historicism in the actors' byplay, the Russian director tactfully banded the usual small talk.⁴

Early in 1923 Stanislavsky, who had been incubating such a project since 1902, approached the Boston publishers Little, Brown with a proposal for a book about his philosophy of creative performance. At the time it consisted of several copybooks filled with cut-and-pasted notes. Stanislavsky, overburdened with his responsibilities as actor, director and nominal artistic manager of the company, was a reluctant author at the best of times. In order to produce a publishable text, he turned to 39-year-old Aleksandr Arnoldovich Koiransky. They had first met in 1912, when Koiranski was a dramatic critic. After the Revolution, he emigrated to Paris and worked with the *Chauve Souris* cabaret, travelling with it to New York in 1922. When the Moscow Art Theatre's ship pulled in, Koiransky was among expatriates like Richard Boleslavski and Nikita Baliev who met it at the docks. He offered his services as stage manager and interpreter, and in photographs one sees his already short stature further dwarfed in juxtaposition with the towering Stanislavsky. According to the émigré journalist Mark Vishniak, Stanislavsky gave Koiransky 'carte blanche to organize the structure of the book . . . he allowed him to "abridge" it and make "excisions", wherever he deemed it necessary, for Stanislavsky did not consider himself "a judge of what is interesting and what isn't".'⁵

The notes were boiled down to typescript of some 120 pages, with interpolations in Stanislavsky's hand. However, when Montrose Moses, then drama editor of Little, Brown, read it, he made it clear that the publishers were interested less in theories than in a colourful biography full of anecdotes and profiles. Things Russian were in fashion, as the success of the former Moscow cabaret *Chauve Souris* and Anna Pavlova's tours demonstrated. Stanislavsky was deeply disappointed. He had hoped to launch an explanation of his 'system', not a memoir. However, American

dollars served as a powerful inducement. His tubercular son, Igor, resident of a Swiss sanatorium, needed to be supported with *valiuta*, foreign currency. The ruble was worthless outside the borders of the Soviet Union. Stanislavsky's textile factory had been nationalized at the time of the 1917 Revolution, and his contract with Gest brought in only a modest remuneration.

Koiranski recalled that he dug enough stories out of the acting textbook to provide an outline which suited Moses. On 28 May 1923 a contract for a 60,000-word work entitled *My Life in Art* was signed and a generous advance paid to Stanislavsky, on the understanding that the first part would be submitted by 1 August (three months' time!) and the finished text by 1 September. It was a foolhardy commitment, since the book had to be written from scratch and the company was now on the road. Stanislavsky cut down the number of his rehearsals and stage appearances (his roles were double-cast), and set to work with Koiranski.

At the inception, then, there were two conflicting aims to the book: it was to introduce the American public to the history and aesthetics of the Moscow Art Theatre and to entertain it with anecdotes about one man's experiments in perfecting his craft. The tension can easily be seen in the completed text.

At this time, Koiranski's English was minimal, Stanislavsky's non-existent; so they took on a Russian-born New York journalist to make a rapid translation of the text as it was produced. J. J. ('Jacques') Robbins has a biography as elusive as his real name (possibly Solovyov). According to a typed career résumé in the Dana Collection of the Houghton Library at Harvard, he had spent two years in the Imperial School of Ballet in St. Petersburg, four years in private acting lessons with the great actor Aleksandr Lenski, five years at the Children's Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre (such a thing did not exist) and had earned an MA from Moscow University. He also claimed to have been a child actor throughout Russia for six years, an assistant of Stanislavsky's at the Art Theatre, as well as a collaborator of the director Richard Boleslavsky, the cabaretist Nikita Baliev and the playwright Osip Dymov. Since Robbins was a Jew, later a staff writer for the *Jewish Daily Forward* and the *American Hebrew*, and unlikely to have the contacts in Imperial Russia he claims, this curriculum vitae sounds highly inflated. As the translation of *My Life in Art* testifies, his English was barely more advanced than Koiranski's. Robert MacGregor, chief editor of Theatre Arts Books, believed that Robbins sketched out paragraphs with Stanislavsky and helped him to rephrase his ideas, but it is more likely that he reframed them as he translated them into English.⁶

The process was laborious and time-consuming. Whenever he could

spare a moment from the theatre, Stanislavsky would dictate to Olga Bokshanskaya, the secretary of his partner Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, who had let her accompany the tour as amanuensis, occasional bit player and spy. Together Stanislavsky and Bokshanskaya would revise the typescript, and at night Stanislavsky would turn the day's product over to Koiranski for polishing. After editing it, Koiranski would then hand it to Robbins for translation. The next morning he and Stanislavsky would plot the next section to be written. This already cumbersome procedure was constantly interrupted by social engagements, parleys with movie producers, and the tour to Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston and points west.

In June the company left for Europe for a brief rest. On board ship, Stanislavsky continued to dictate the memoirs to Bokshanskaya, simultaneously with his 'pedagogical novel' *History of a Stage Production*. Work was delayed while procuring a Remington typewriter with a Cyrillic keyboard, but resumed throughout the summer holiday of 1923 in Freiburg-im-Schwarzwald and during rehearsals in Varennes of a new repertory for next winter's return to America.⁷ In a letter to his sister, Stanislavsky reported, 'Wrote and wrote without a let-up all summer long. Wrote 60,000 words and haven't even reached the major themes required, i.e. the founding of the Art Theatre . . . Figure on publishing not a thin but a fat book. I carry on writing but we're already reaching the deadline – 1 September.'⁸ Back in Manhattan the pressures mounted. A regular recipient of his complaints was the astute critic and booster of the Art Theatre, Lyubov Gurevich. He wrote to her in November 1923 that 'I have to write all sorts of things I don't want to.' His eyesight was failing and he could work for only three hours a day, neglecting his correspondence to finish the infernal book.⁹

You aren't allowed to work what with all the many interviews, deputations and the horde of acquaintances who invite you to dinner parties or balls or concerts, etc., etc. There has to be someplace to hide . . . They set up a private room for me at the splendid New York Public Library . . . In the new room the work began to go full tilt. I've been writing like a convict at hard labour, with only a few days left to live. I write even during intermissions and on the trolleys and in restaurants and on the avenues.¹⁰

Nearly a year had passed since the contract was signed and the publishers showed signs of impatience, forcing Stanislavsky to work all the more feverishly. In April 1924, Little, Brown demanded that the manuscript

be delivered in two weeks' time or they would abrogate the contract. Advertisements were appearing with the notice that the book would go on sale on 26 April. Stanislavsky panicked, for he had already spent the advance and needed the balance of the payment. To Nemirovich-Danchenko back in Moscow, he wrote from Chicago: 'All my hopes lie in the book. Igor's fate depends on it. And this is deadly serious. If he has to return to Moscow before time, he will perish.'¹¹

Stanislavsky had had no time to reread or revise the completed manuscript which totalled 150,000 words. Decades later Koiransky recalled:

By that time the script had grown to more than 560 pages, print. It was heartbreaking to see the great man almost in hysterics. I decide [*sic*] that the time had come to cut the Gordian knot. I sat down, and, then and there, wrote the only passage I had contributed to the book, the one beginning with 'There is no art that does not demand virtuosity' . . . (p.570). In it I quoted Degas. When I read it to Stanislavsky he asked: 'Who is Degas?' and added the last lines which conclude the book.

That night we had dinner at [the choreographer] Michel Fokine's. The host asked Stanislavsky how his book was coming. Stanislavsky looked unhappily at me across the table and said, 'Well, Koiranski says that it is finished.'¹²

My Life in Art finally appeared under Little, Brown's imprint in May 1924, in a handsome edition of 5,000 copies, lavishly illustrated (the contract had stipulated that Stanislavsky provide the pictures). Robbins' translation had been a rush job, the exigencies of the printer's schedule obviating any polishing or revising, especially since some of the chapters had been published in newspapers as a preliminary teaser. The English playwright St. John Ervine was right to call it 'flat and, on occasion, execrable English'.¹³ Robbins' prose is thick with solecisms: something is 'deserving of notation' or is at one's 'call and beck'. What is clearly the Russian for 'gossamer' is rendered as 'cobweblike' – not at all the same thing – 'trumpery' is mistaken as 'frumpery', and terms like 'incarnify' and 'artillerists' create awkward non-equivalents of their presumably straightforward Russian counterparts. At one point we are told that Chekhov was wont to 'roll with long laughter'. Far more serious are mistranslations that obscure the sense. For instance, the statement that Gordon Craig objected to 'actors' *kabotinstvo* [*cabotinage*, hamming it up, playing to the gallery] especially in women' is transformed by Robbins into 'the usual behaviour of actors and especially actresses'. This is an unfortunate gaffe, since the term *cabotinage* had been brought into currency by Meyerhold, who made it

an artistic touchstone for a flamboyant performance style alien to the Art Theatre. No wonder the American director Joshua Logan was led to remark that 'the books Stanislavsky wrote himself are difficult to understand in English translation. His writing is nowhere as vivid as his speech.'¹⁴

Stanislavsky had his own misgivings. He was embarrassed by the elegance of the edition and wrote home: 'The contents are not up to the [physical layout of] the book. I didn't think it would come out so fancy. Of course, everything's a mess, there are absurd omissions, but there my inexperience is to blame. I hope to publish it in other languages as edited by me.'¹⁵

Ever the businessman, with a successful career of factory management behind him, Stanislavsky made sure that the money he had hoped to earn from the book would be secure. Because the Soviet Union did not subscribe to international copyright law, issuing the book in English in the USA obtained Berne Convention copyright for his heirs. Stanislavsky hoped that a German translation might prove lucrative, but, given that country's inflated economy, no German publisher could be found to offer an advance. Moreover, he would have to go through Little, Brown which held the world rights. With his financial acumen, Stanislavsky decided that if he could get a Russian edition issued by a Soviet publisher and then have it translated into German, all other translations would be based on that, and he would receive the royalties directly.¹⁶ In a letter to a would-be German translator he indicated the important differences between the American version and the new one he was beginning.

I am ready and willing to enter into discussions with you about this, what's more I'll make it clear that in America the book was written especially for the American reader, and I am now reworking it for Russia. The difference between these two versions is that the first one abounds in information of a somewhat anecdotal nature, having in view a simple-minded reader.

As to the second, that is, the Russian edition, it will be for the more serious reader and will treat the question of art more profoundly.¹⁷

On his return to Moscow in August 1924, after two years of touring abroad, Stanislavsky was approached by the Soviet publishing house Academia which was projecting a series of theatrical autobiographies and hoped to launch it with *My Life in Art*. The Russian version of the book was put together between September 1924 and early 1925. Since he was directing new productions, Stanislavsky worked on it only at night. By January he was able to state: 'I have finished a totally new version, which is

definitely more successful, more interesting and more necessary than the American one.'¹⁸ This was, however, a mere first draft. He still found the task of writing hellish and, as the deadline approached, had avidly accepted Lyubov Gurevich's offer to serve as his editor: 'I am embarrassed, disconcerted, moved, grateful for all your work. Don't bother standing on ceremony: cross out everything that's superfluous. I have no attachment to and affection for my literary "exercises".' He dreaded rewriting and gave her full authority to delete anything that was 'abominably written'. Gurevich demurred that she approached his text with reverence and limited herself to correcting only things which 'could impair the reader's concentration or hobble the imagination'.¹⁹ She pooh-poohed his fear that the book might be 'bourgeois', but warned him of clichés and repetition. He accepted her conflation of short chapters into long ones and the new titles for them she provided

Stanislavsky was upset to hear others describe his book as 'bourgeois' because it was a standard Bolshevik term of abuse, usually in the vernacular form 'boorzhooy'. The far left Theatrical October movement in art, led by Meyerhold and Mayakovsky, was calling for the abolition of all pre-Revolutionary theatres, the Moscow Art chief among them. Stanislavsky had personally come under attack for sticking with such an obsolete organization when his own creativity might be directed to Soviet goals. Consequently, many of the changes made to *My Life in Art* were geared specifically to address problems the Art Theatre was facing in a Soviet world. In his notes for the revision, to answer critics who complained that the Art Theatre was elitist in its appeal, Stanislavsky jotted down the new point that he and Nemirovich-Danchenko had first called the Moscow Art the Publicly Accessible (*Obshchedostupny*) Theatre 'because there was no way to be national (limited repertoire). Nevertheless we hoped to offer popular prices.' Another note shows that Stanislavsky intended to use *My Life in Art* as propaganda in the struggle between the tenets of psychological realism and the constructivist theatricality sponsored by his former colleague Meyerhold, at this time the most influential director in Russia.

In the chapter on the Revolution say that constructivism is a good thing, but they didn't make very good use of it and it was discarded.

Predict that the actor's art is on the decline. In the chapter on the Revolution state that this is the result of all that affected stylization.

And he reserved a rod in pickle for over-zealous disciples. 'Renounce all my students who turn my system into mathematics.'²⁰

Unfamiliar with book-making, Stanislavsky was shocked when the long

galley-sheets arrived from the printer for correction. He feared the book was to appear in that outlandish format.²¹ Overwhelmed by his duties to the theatre, he grieved to Gurevich:

I have no life because of this book. The publishers are insistent. They demand that I meet the contracted deadline, otherwise all expenses and losses fall on me. They overwhelm me with questions and galley proofs. I don't understand their marks . . . When I turn in the last manuscript and proof-sheet I'll be the happiest man on earth, but when the book comes out – I think . . . I'll look for a hook to hang myself from. Yes! . . . It's abominable enough to be an actor, but a writer!! . . .?²²

The Russian recension of *My Life in Art* came off the presses early in September 1926, in a press-run of 6,000 copies, a very substantial number for that time, and on coated paper with illustrative vignettes. As Stanislavsky hoped, this version has remained the basis for all translations into languages other than English. Unfortunately, one cannot make a line-by-line comparison of it with the American version based on manuscripts, for, although the manuscript of the Russian edition is to be found in the Moscow Art Theatre archives, the original Russian text of the 1924 American version has disappeared. Stanislavsky's original phrasing can be conjectured only from Robbins' translation which is literal to the point of ineptitude, or from those passages in the Russian version that are identical. What with the corrections, additions and annotations of Koiranski and Robbins, Stanislavsky's original typescript probably constituted a palimpsest.²³

The American *My Life in Art* had had as an underlying motivation the need to explain Russia to foreigners, particularly the seismic alteration of the old ways of life to the new. Consequently it contained a number of generalizations about Russian character and culture (e.g. 'Our art still smells of the soil') which would be both egregious and unnecessary for a Russian reader. Such emphatic typology is clear from the first chapter, entitled 'Old Russia', which bore an almost folkloric character. It may have been intended to help American audiences understand the background of a play like *Tsar Fyodor*, first produced in 1898, but still exhibited in the 1920s as a dazzling piece of exotica.

Turning to the Russian version of 1926, one is first struck by the number of changes made to conform with Soviet ideology. Almost all religious references are dropped. Uncle Vanya's mother no longer reads the works of Professor Serebryakov as if they were the Bible; she simply 'reads avidly'. Gordon Craig's comparison of Hamlet to Christ is modified to 'the

best of men', although the allusion to Golgotha unaccountably stands. Gone is the theatre-loving peasant who 'seemed to make a ceremony of transubstantiation of eating the soup', and, of course, the last line of the book, 'May the Lord aid me in my task!' has to become the blander: 'This labour stands by me in readiness and I hope to carry it out in my next book.'²⁴

Communist Party censorship in the mid-1920s was not as rigid as it was to become. Still, the need to conform with Soviet ideology eliminates Stanislavsky's earlier sympathy with pre-Revolutionary society. Chekhov's ironic remark that 'Our gentry are wonderful people' disappears. The reader is not trusted to make the distinction between pre- and post-Revolutionary societies, and so Chekhov's criticism, 'it is not their fault that Russian life kills initiative and the best of beginnings and interferes with the free action and life of men and women' is also excised. Nothing more is heard of Stanislavsky's annoyance when performances of *An Enemy of the People* were broken up by political demonstrations.

Soviet prudery is responsible for at least one cut, which is amusing, since Stanislavsky was himself the most decorous of men. We are no longer treated to the picture of Gordon Craig 'in his Adamic costume, lying in an icy bath at the time of a 25-degree frost'.

In general, anything that might seem derogatory or indiscreet is suppressed in the Russian edition, and this is most evident in the chapters dealing with Chekhov. Some of Chekhov's friends, particularly the writer Ivan Bunin, objected strenuously to the way in which the writer was depicted in *My Life in Art*. For instance, Chekhov's conversation, as recorded by Stanislavsky, is liberally strewn with the emphatic particle *zhe*, which Bunin insisted was not a characteristic of Chekhov's speech.²⁵ What Bunin did not know was that the portrayal of Chekhov was considerably toned down from that in the American edition. The story of Chekhov's poker-faced replies to questions about his plays is followed in the Russian edition with 'This was one more example of Chekhov's wise and profound laconism,' and the anecdote about the sound effects for the fire in *Three Sisters* is similarly glossed with 'And therein Chekhov's pithy and profoundly conceived laconism was displayed.' Presumably, these comments are made to prevent the reader from thinking of Chekhov as flippant. A description of Chekhov's 'pure, childlike laughter', indeed any reference to his laughing, is cut. One seeks in vain in the Russian edition for Chekhov's joke about a bomb, his high opinion of Meyerhold, his being 'hurt, confused and even insulted', his attitude to Ibsen, his fishing, his quoting *The Inspector General*, and his allusion to the actor Artyom as a typical Slav, all features of the American edition. The effect is to depersonalize and deify Chekhov, to

remove him from the homely and accessible sphere, and turn him into a tin god in the pantheon of Russian literature. To redress the balance, the Russian edition ends its chapter on Chekhov with a lengthy explanation of why he is not out of date, why he is progressive, and how the Art Theatre seeks to bring out 'the dream, the leitmotiv' in his plays. Chekhov was out of fashion in the Soviet theatre in the experimental 1920s, and Stanislavsky felt the need to justify the Art Theatre's continued adherence to him in its repertoire.

Other changes in the Russian version have to do with individuals: it is no longer Olga Knipper who fainted onstage, but 'one of the actresses'. Some are merely cosmetic, as when a 'villainous smile' relaxes simply into a 'smile'. For the most part, however, the tendency is to second-guess the events of the past and to use them to justify policies of the present. The statement in the American version that Nemirovich and Stanislavsky did not think *The Cherry Orchard* ready to open and found it boring is not even whispered in the Russian version. In 1924 Stanislavsky explained that the Art Theatre production of Leonid Andreyev's quasi-symbolist play *The Life of Man* had failed because they had not succeeded 'in finding and creating in ourselves and in the performances the gloomy soul of Andreyev, the true mysticism which we sought on the stage at that time, the retreat from realism and the entrance into the spheres of the abstract'. In 1926, eschewing any suggestion that it might be theatrically desirable to achieve mysticism, Stanislavsky ascribed the failure to a fall from grace: 'Having severed ourselves from realism, we actors felt impotent and rather lost.'

If much of the freshness and spontaneity of *My Life in Art* is thus vitiated by bringing it into conformity with the dictates of Party policy, Stanislavsky and Gurevich can hardly be blamed, for they were striving to keep the Art Theatre alive and well in parlous times. There are, in fact, compensations for the omissions. New chapters on Gorky, on the production of Byron's *Cain* (although minus the remark found in the American edition that *Cain* was a touchstone for peasant audiences), a good deal of material on training singers (the result of Stanislavsky's experimental work with music students) and on the creative mood, and comments on the originals of the characters in *The Cherry Orchard* make their first appearance. A new penultimate chapter, probably a recension of one he deleted from the American edition, details Stanislavsky's hostile response to the Meyerholdian concept of theatricality. This is primarily material that might have bored the American playgoer of 1924, but was of considerable interest to the Russian theatre world in 1926, and, from our vantage point, should intrigue the modern acting student and theatre historian.²⁶

One of the major omissions from the Russian version is a great

improvement: Stanislavsky's romantic retelling of the plot of *The Seagull*. To enlighten American audiences about a play he thought might be beyond them, he stressed Konstantin's talent, characterized Trigorin as a 'scoundrelly Lovelace', and hoped that Nina's recitation of the soliloquy in Konstantin's playlet would 'force Treplev and the spectators in the theatre to shed holy tears called forth by the power of art'. Accredited by Stanislavsky's authority, this misguided interpretation influenced English-language criticism and stage productions for decades and is far from extinct. Whether Stanislavsky dropped this gushing misinterpretation from the 1926 version at the behest of Lyubov Gurevich (who was probably responsible for lopping 'cultured, soft, elegant, poetic, free, enchanting, unforgettable' from the description of Uncle Vanya), or because he had developed a more sophisticated view, or because a new, proletarian public was not to be wooed by such bourgeois sentimentality, is a moot point. The result, however, is to tighten up the intellectual fabric of the work.

Edwin Duerr has pointed out that such tightening, due to Gurevich's editorial savvy, greatly improved the book's organization.

[T]he original 61 chapters, most of them retitled, are lengthened to 72. Also, the first two sections, called 'Artistic Childhood' and 'Artistic Adolescence', pp.13–116, are a new arrangement of the original pp.3–147; Ch. III becomes Ch. I, Ch. IV follows Ch. V, becoming two chapters with enough left over for later pages. Ch. IX is pushed ahead of Ch. VI, which includes material from Ch. VII, etc. The third section, 'Artistic Adolescence', pp.119–342, while often newly paragraphed, briefly cut, rewritten, and expanded, contains much of the new material.²⁷

This reorganization reduces the rambling nature of certain sections and disciplines the thematic recurrence of key ideas.

Finally, one advantage of the Russian edition over the American is that, whatever Lyubov Gurevich's emendations, the language is Stanislavsky's own: simple, often colloquial, occasionally pompous or flowery, but a language that is clearly the voice of an individual. After reading excerpts from the still unpolished draft of the Russian *My Life in Art*, Gurevich expressed an enthusiasm that still seems justified. She declared it 'one of the most remarkable works of memoir writing I have ever happened to read, combining enchanting humor and lightness of narration with uncommonly courageous psychological self-analysis and deep-rooted artistic integrity. It is written with true literary talent – even the figures depicted in passing stand before the reader as if alive. And it will live on for a long, long time. Or I'll eat my head!'²⁸

Stanislavsky's memoir is certainly on a par with other classics of Russian autobiography, Sergey Aksakov's or Leo Tolstoy's (and for men of Stanislavsky's generation, Tolstoy was held as a model of moral perfection, to be imitated in his sincerity and unsparing self-examination). It offers the same rich, detailed evocation of a bygone past, the same circumstantial account of the growth of a sensibility, the same direct narrative style that keeps the reader turning pages as if it were a novel. *My Life in Art* is highly selective: there is nothing about his married life or his children. One would never learn from it that he managed his family's textile mill up to the outbreak of the Revolution. Rousseau's confessional mode is alien to him. In this respect, it resembles the memoirs left by scientists such as Darwin and Fabre, a record exclusively of intellectual growth. 'Intellectual' is, however, not a word to apply to Stanislavsky. He did not attend university and encountered the avant-garde ideas of his time only when they were current in the *Zeitgeist*.²⁹ Much of his taste in music, the fine arts and literature had been formed in the late nineteenth century and he often had to be instructed in the newest trends by Nemirovich-Danchenko. He was apolitical and unreligious, or rather was an instinctive liberal and believer, without inflexible convictions in either realm. For him, art was the be all and end all, a surrogate for religion, an attainable ideal, unavailable in everyday life. In this sense, he was wholly a man of the theatre.

The title *My Life in Art* is therefore entirely accurate. Stanislavsky's powers of description are lavished not on domestic events or natural phenomena, but on backstage scenes, episodes in rehearsal halls, performances observed from the audience or the wings. He never indulges in psychological analysis, but is alert to the external impression which jolts the artist's imagination into action. The impulses for art are always seen to come from outside. This leads him to avoid overmuch attention to private life or personal idiosyncrasies, to be gentlemanly in his discretion. There are no full-length portraits of individuals, except as they are appraised as artists or persons who had an influence on art. Without expatiating at length on any one phenomenon, Stanislavsky manages to evoke the precise nature of a given player or production.

What keeps the book from being a mere collection of anecdotes or the inventory of a long career is its recurrent theme of questing: throughout Stanislavsky shows himself in search of the secret to artistic inspiration. In his parleys with the publishing house Academia, he had specified:

Although I ordinarily call my book memoirs (sometimes even an autobiography), this title is very conventional and might make the wrong impression.

This book is about a actor's creative process, written in the form of a confession by the actor himself, a narrative of his quests and discoveries, successes and failures, his indefatigable striving to make his creativity intelligible, discover its inner laws and the secret of its effect on the spectator. Insofar as the basic stuff of the book is the impressions and experiences of the actor himself, of course it is reminiscent and documentary, but it is selective following a strictly assigned theme, following one clearly defined principle . . .³⁰

Like Don Quixote or Bunyan's Christian, he never loses sight of the ideal, no matter how bruised or battered he is by failure, no matter how far he strays down the wrong path. Candid in its depiction of his mistakes and temptations, *My Life in Art* is indeed a Pilgrim's Progress, with each artist encountered by its protagonist serving as a forerunner. Stanislavsky himself was aware of the devotional overtones of his book:

I've been told that the title calls to mind the famous religious work 'My Life in Christ'. Never mind, this association, if it occurs to anyone, is not a problem. On the contrary, it underlines the accompanying idea in my book of quests and heroic deeds, the idea of serving a sublime mission.³¹

Consequently, if we are to 'rethink Stanislavsky', as a Russian-born historian once put it,³² we would do well to begin with this new translation of the version its author considered definitive. A unique combination of personal narrative, cultural history, aesthetic theory and reflections on actor training, *My Life in Art* is a cornerstone of the modern theatre.

STANISLAVSKI'S HIDDEN *LIFE IN ART*

Jean Benedetti

My Life in Art is as significant for what it conceals as for what it reveals. What Konstantin Stanislavski hides is the true nature of his relationship with Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. The association which had begun at a euphoric eighteen-hour meeting in 1897 was already under serious strain by 1904 and that resulted in a feud that lasted for more than thirty years.

The basis of the dispute was never personal but purely artistic and was centred on the nature of theatre itself. For Nemirovich, the theatre was a branch of literature; it was its 'handmaiden'. For Stanislavski the theatre was an art itself, with the actor at its heart. Nemirovich began with a detailed analysis of the script in which he defined the meaning of the play, its structure and the function of the characters. It was then his task to teach the actors how to embody his concepts. He thought that in Stanislavski he had found the perfect director to transfer his concepts to the stage

Stanislavski, on the other hand, was not to be contained and sought increasingly to release the actor's creative abilities within a given framework. The first tensions between the two points of view appeared in Nemirovich's production of *Julius Caesar* in 1902. Nemirovich was concerned with the architecture of the play, with the portrait of a society rather than individuals; Stanislavski was concerned to portray Brutus as a human being. The two approaches proved to be incompatible. The giant sets dwarfed the actors, as can be seen from the production photos. In *My Life in Art*, Stanislavski refers only in passing to the difficulties the actors had to bring their characters to life given Nemirovich's directing style. In private, however, he described the experience as sheer torture. He felt as though every bit of the set was bathed in his sweat.

The disagreement between the two men was exacerbated when in 1905 Stanislavski decided to finance an independent studio led by Vsevolod Meyerhold, whom Nemirovich detested. Meyerhold had new and original ideas about rehearsal methods, including improvisation, which was anathema to the literary Nemirovich. Stanislavski, however, was unstoppable in his search for new methods of acting and Meyerhold had given him the stimulus he needed.

Matters came to a head in 1907 in a bitter private exchange of letters, sent from office to office. In consequence, the following year, in an effort to prevent the theatre from falling apart, acknowledging that Nemirovich was the better administrator, Stanislavski resigned from the board of management. He did not have any control over policy until after the Revolution (1917). Under the compromise agreement that was made, Stanislavski agreed to continue performing the roles he had created, and to play others as required, but demanded the right to produce one play, of his own choice, without interference. Stanislavski merely refers to this 'parting of the ways' as a natural consequence of his and Nemirovich's coming to individual, artistic maturity.

Stanislavski also glosses over the reasons for the creation of the First Studio in 1912. The 'system' was not generally well received by the Art Theatre company. Stanislavski was even excluded from the school he had created on the grounds that his work was 'disruptive'. Although in 1911, Nemirovich declared the 'system' the official working methods of the Moscow Art Theatre, this was a purely tactical move to prevent Stanislavski from leaving the company. In a letter to his wife he revealed how much he hated the 'system', which he found time-consuming and unproductive. Stanislavski was not duped by this appearance of support and decided to turn to a new generation. It was at the First Studio that the 'system' was first properly taught.

Having founded the Studio, he more or less abandoned the Art Theatre for the next four years, creating only one new role, Salieri in Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri*.

The major omission in the book is an event that Stanislavski described as 'my tragedy'. In 1917 the theatre decided to stage an adaptation of Dostoevski's *The Village of Stepanchovo*. Stanislavski had scored a great success in his twenties in his own adaptation. Now he worked much more slowly, searching out the character. Opening night was approaching. The theatre needed a success after a long period of stagnation but Nemirovich doubted whether Stanislavski would be ready in time. He therefore imposed his own interpretation of the character which Stanislavski with his sense of discipline accepted without question. He could not, however,

reconcile Nemirovich's ideas with his own. The dress rehearsal was a disaster. Stanislavski was in tears. The next day Nemirovich announced that he had been removed from the cast. The long-term effects were shattering. Stanislavski's confidence had been destroyed. He never again created a major new role.

The truth of the feud between the two men remained a closely guarded secret until the 1960s. In the first instance, both Stanislavski and Nemirovich were aware that any hint of disunity would give ammunition to their enemies when the theatre was still in its infancy. Second, it was essential to show a united front after the Revolution when the Art Theatre was under attack from the avant-garde and the hard Left. Third, once the Art Theatre had been declared the official model for all Soviet theatres, the myth of the perfect monument had to be maintained. Thus when in 1962 the magazine *Istoricheski Arkhiv* published private and often angry exchanges of letters between Stanislavski and Nemirovich, the issue was seized and the magazine shut down. Some copies, fortunately, had already reached the West and were partly translated first in France.¹

Finally, the sections of the book dealing with Chekhov have to be read with caution. When Stanislavski came to revise *My Life in Art*, in 1924 and 1925, as a matter of courtesy he invited Nemirovich to draft the sections on Chekhov. These he incorporated unchanged into the revised edition. Nemirovich's version of events, however, did not entirely coincide with the facts. He took the opportunity to create the legend of a Stanislavski who never really understood Chekhov and that it was he who had initiated his colleague into a proper understanding of Chekhov's works. He continued to elaborate this version over the years,² and it is this account that has long been accepted by scholars and critics. Fortunately we possess Stanislavski's own account of his relationship with Chekhov drafted in 1906. This is included in the Appendices.

Artistic Childhood



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OBSTINACY

I was born in Moscow on 8 August 1863, the border between two eras. I still remember the vestiges of serfdom, tallow candles, Carcel lamps, bone-shaking carts, carriages, couriers, flintlock rifles and tiny cannon that looked like toys.

My eyes have seen the coming of railways to Russia, with express trains, steamboats. The searchlight, the automobile, the airplane, the Dreadnought, the submarine, the telephone, with or without wires, the radio-telegraph, the 12-inch gun were all invented.

And so I have gone from tallow candles to the searchlight, from the rickety cart to the airplane, from the sailing boat to the submarine, from couriers to the radio-telegraph, from the flintlock to Big Bertha, from serfdom to Bolshevism and Communism. A varied, many-sided life that has been shaken at its very foundations more than once.

My father, Sergei Vladimirovich Alekseev, was a thoroughbred Russian and Muscovite, a manufacturer and industrialist. My mother, Elizaveta Vasilievna Alekseeva, Russian on her father's side and French on her mother's, was the daughter of Marie Varley, a well-known Parisian actress in her time, who was on tour in Petersburg. Varley married Vasili Abramovich Yakovliev, a rich man who owned quarries in Finland, who erected the Aleksandrovski column in what used to be Winter Palace Square.¹ She soon separated from him,² leaving two daughters behind, my mother and my aunt. Yakovliev took a second wife, Madame B, who was Turkish on her mother's side and Greek on her father's, and put the children in her charge. Life in their home was on the grand scale, an obvious reflection of the courtly habits the new Madame Yakovliev had inherited from her mother who had formerly been one of the sultan's wives. Old B. . . stole her from the harem hidden in a trunk which was placed among the ordinary luggage. The trunk was opened once they were at sea and the former prisoner of the harem was freed. Like Madame Yakovliev, her sister, who married my uncle, liked the social round. They both gave dinners and balls.

Moscow and Petersburg danced their way through the 60s and 70s.

During the season there were balls every day and young people could go to two or three houses in one evening. I remember those balls. Guests arrived in coaches drawn by four, six horses, footmen stiff in their finest livery front and back. Outside the house there were bonfires and beside them were refreshments for the coachmen. Meals were prepared below stairs for the footmen. Flowers and finery abounded. The women had glittering jewels at breast and throat, and those who liked to sum up other people's wealth assessed what they were worth. Those women who appeared to be the least well off amid this splendour felt sad and humiliated to look so poor. The rich, however, held their heads high and thought themselves the queens of the ball. Cotillions with all their complicated steps continued non-stop for five hours, with gifts and prizes for the best performers. Dancing, generally, only ended in the early morning and the young men merely changed clothes and left for the office or the ministry.

My mother and father had no liking for the social round and only joined in exceptionally. They liked to live at home. My mother spent her life in the nursery, devoting herself entirely to us, her children, all nine of us.

Until he was married my father slept in the same bed as my grandfather, who was known for his patriarchal way of life which he derived from his own father, a peasant and vegetable seller from Yaroslavl. After his marriage he moved to his marriage bed where he stayed until the end of his life. He died in it.

My parents loved each other deeply, both in their youth and in their old age. They loved their children just as deeply and wanted us near them. I have a vivid memory from early days, my christening which in fact I created in my imagination from things my nanny told me. Another vivid memory of the distant past is that of my first appearance onstage. It happened in our estate at Liubimovka, some 50 kilometres from Moscow, near Taraskova train station on the Yaroslavl line. The performance took place in a small outhouse, in the courtyard of our property. A small stage had been set up in the archway of this little house, which was more or less in ruins, with a curtain made up of blankets. As usual we were to present tableaux called 'The Four Seasons'. As a three- or four-year-old child I played winter. As always in these circumstances there was a small pine tree planted in the middle of the stage, with bits of cotton on it. Sitting on the ground, wrapped up in a greatcoat, with a fur hat on my head, a long white beard on my chin and turned up moustaches, I had no idea where I was supposed to look or what I was supposed to do. Even then, unconsciously, I felt the embarrassment of meaningless inactivity onstage and that is what I have feared the most ever since. After the applause,

which I liked very much, I was given a different pose for an encore. I stood before a pile of wood before me, representing a fire, with a lighted candle on it and I was given a branch with which I was to pretend to stir it.

'Understand? It's pretend, not real,' they explained.

I was absolutely forbidden to put the stick in the fire. I thought that was stupid. 'Why pretend when I really can put the stick in the fire.'

The curtains hadn't even opened for the encore when full of interest and curiosity I put the stick in the fire. That seemed to me a natural and logical action, one that had meaning. It was even more natural for the cotton to catch fire. There was panic, everyone shouted. They picked me up, and carried me across the courtyard to the nursery. I cried bitterly.

Since that evening I have known, on the one hand, the living pleasure success can give, of being onstage and performing meaningful actions, and, on the other, the misery of failure, of just sitting in front of an audience.

So my debut ended in failure and it stemmed from my obstinacy, which, at times, especially in my early childhood, could reach considerable proportions. My natural obstinacy, to a certain extent, has had a good and bad influence on my artistic life. That is why I dwell on it. I have had to fight hard against it.

So, once when I was very small I was playing about while we were having morning tea and my father reprimanded me. I answered him rudely, without any malice, I was just thoughtless. My father laughed at me. Not being able to find anything to say back to him I grew confused and angry with myself. To hide my embarrassment and show that I was not afraid of my father, I made a meaningless threat. I just don't know how it left my tongue.

'Then I won't let you go to Auntie Vera's.'

'Nonsense,' my father said. 'How are you going to stop me?'

Realizing I was talking nonsense, I grew even angrier with myself. My mood darkened, I grew more obstinate and didn't notice myself repeating, 'I won't let you go to Auntie Vera's.'

My father shrugged his shoulders and said nothing. I took it as an insult. No one wanted to speak to me! So then, in for a penny, in for a pound!

'Then I won't let you go to Auntie Vera's.' 'Then I won't let you go to Auntie Vera's.' I obstinately, almost impudently repeated the same sentence in different tones and emphases.

My father ordered me to be silent and so I said, loud and clear,

'Then I won't let you go to Auntie Vera's.'

My father continued reading his newspaper. But he couldn't conceal his inward irritation from me.

'Then I won't let you go to Auntie Vera's.' 'Then I won't let you go to Auntie Vera's.' Maddeningly, obstinately I hammered out the words unable to counter the demonic force that had taken hold of me. I felt helpless before it, I began to be afraid of it.

'Then I won't let you go to Auntie Vera's,' I repeated after a pause, despite myself, unable to control myself.

Father now became angry while I ever more noisily and obstinately repeated the same stupid words because I couldn't stop myself. My father banged his finger on the table and I repeated the same gesture together with the exasperating words. My father stood up, so did I, together with the same old refrain. My father almost shouted (something he never did) and so did I, with a tremor in my voice. My father regained control and spoke in a gentle voice. I remember that touched me deeply and I wanted to give in. But, despite myself, I repeated the words but in soft tones that lent them a hint of mockery. My father warned me he would make me stand in the corner. I repeated what he said in the same tone of voice.

'You'll get no lunch,' father said, more loudly.

'Then I won't let you go to Auntie Vera's,' I said, in despair in my father's tones.

'Kostya, think about what you're doing,' my father shouted, throwing his paper down on the table.

I felt an evil rage inside which made me fling down my napkin and yell as loudly as I could:

'Then I won't let you go to Auntie Vera's.'

'At least we'll get it over with,' I thought.

My father almost exploded, his lips trembled, but he regained control and quickly left the room, throwing out the awful words:

'You are not my son.'

As soon as I was alone, the victor, my folly left me.

'Papa, forgive me, I won't do it again,' I cried after him, breaking down in tears. But he was already far away and didn't hear my words of sorrow.

I recall every step of my childish frenzy as if it were yesterday, and, as I remember, I feel sorrow in my heart.

On another occasion, in another fit of obstinacy, I was roundly defeated. Over dinner I boasted loudly that I wasn't afraid to take Blackie – an evil-tempered horse – out of my father's stables.

'Fine,' my father joked, 'after our meal we'll put you in a big coat and boots and you can show us how brave you are.'

'I'm not afraid, I'll take him out,' I repeated.

My brothers and sisters took me to task and told me I was a coward. To prove their point they cited compromising examples. The more discomforting their accusations became, the more, in my confusion, headstrong I became, repeating:

'I'm not afraid! I will take him out!'

Again my obstinacy had gone so far I needed a lesson. After dinner they put me in a fur coat, boots, hat and gloves. They led me into the courtyard and left me alone there, awaiting my arrival at the front door with Blackie. It was pitch black all round. It seemed even darker because of the light coming from the drawing room windows, up there from which they were probably watching me. Utterly frozen I bit my gloves hard hoping that the tension and pain would take my mind off the things around me. A few feet away I heard steps crunching the snow, a pulley grinding and a gate clanging. It had to be the coachman going to the stables for Blackie that I had promised to lead out. I thought of a huge black horse, pawing the ground, ready to rear up, bolt and drag me behind him like a piece of wood. Of course, if I had imagined this earlier, over dinner, I would not have been so boastful. But then I had spoken without thinking and to cry off now would be shameful, so I obstinately carried on.

Those were my thoughts in the darkness, mainly as a distraction, so as not to look to left or right, where it was very dark.

'I'll stay here a long time until they get worried and come and fetch me,' I decided.

Someone cried out in pain and I listened to the noises around me. There were so many! Each more frightening than the other! Someone was moving! Nearer! A dog? A rat? I took a few steps to a nearby corner in the wall. At the same time there was the sound of a distant crash. What was it? There it was again! And again! Very near! It had to be the horse in the stable, kicking against the door, or a carriage going over the potholes in the street. But what was that hissing? . . . and that whistling? It seemed that all the frightening noises I had ever imagined had suddenly come together and were raging all round me.

'Ah!' I yelled and leapt back into the corner. Someone had grabbed my leg. But it was my dear old dog Roska, my best friend. Now we were two! It wasn't so scary! I gathered him up and he began to lick my face with his dirty tongue. My heavy, cumbersome coat more or less joined to my hood hindered my movements and made it impossible to protect my face. I turned his muzzle away and Roska began to go to sleep in my arms and feeling warm, was still. Someone suddenly came out of the door. Were they coming for me already? My heart beat in expectation. But no they were going into the coach house . . .

'They must be very ashamed by now. Throwing me, a young child, out into the cold . . . as in a fairy tale . . . I'll never forgive them.'

The muffled sound of a piano came from the house.

'Is that my brother playing? As if nothing was happening! They're playing! They've forgotten me! How long do I have to stay here before they remember?' It was awful and I wanted to be in the drawing room, in the warm, by the piano soon.

'Idiot! I'm an idiot! Making up a silly story about Blackie! Blockhead!' I shouted to myself. I was furious. I understood the ridiculousness of my situation, from which, apparently, there was no way out.

The gate creaked, horses' hoofs clattered, wheels crunched over the snow. A coach drew up to the front door. It opened and closed, and the coach turned round in the courtyard.

'My cousins,' I remembered. 'They're expected this evening. I won't go back home for anything in the world. I'm not going to look a coward in front of them.'

The visiting coachman knocked on the coach house window, our own coachman came out, they talked loudly, opened the doors and stabled the horses.

'I'll go to them and ask them to give me Blackie. They won't do it, so then I'll go back inside and tell them they refused, and it will be the truth. That's the best way out.'

The idea excited me. I put Roska down and went towards the stables.

'If only I can get across this big, black yard.' I took a step and stopped because just then a hired carriage came through the gates and I was afraid I would fall under its horses in the dark. Then came a kind of disaster. I don't know what it was because I couldn't make anything out in the dark. But the horses harnessed to the carriage in the barn began to neigh, then to paw the ground, then to rear about. The horse of the hired carriage, so it seemed, also bolted. Something was dragging the coach all round the courtyard. The coachmen rushed out, shouting, 'Whoah, stay, don't let it go!' . . .

I can't remember anything more. I went to the front door and rang. The porter came at once and let me in. Of course he knew what had been happening and was expecting me. The shape of my father appeared briefly in the hall door and our governess looked at me from upstairs. I sat on a chair without taking my coat off. My return to the house was a surprise even to me and I still didn't know what I was going to do – go on being stubborn and say that I had only come inside to get warm so I could then go back to Blackie or admit my lack of courage and give in? I was so unhappy with myself for having been so faint hearted that I no longer

believed in myself as a fearless hero. Besides which, it was no longer any good going on playacting, as everyone seemed to have forgotten me.

'Fine! I'll forget about it, too. I'll take my coat off and after a while go to the drawing room.'

That's what I did. Not one single soul asked me about Blackie – a conspiracy of silence, evidently.

THE CIRCUS

Impressions of my late childhood are even more deeply engraved on my heart. They have to do with my artistic needs and experiences. I only have to picture my childhood world and I am young again and full of old, familiar feelings.

For example, the night before and the morning of a feast day. We had to get up early and then came a day full of delights. We needed them to preserve energy for the long succession of joyless days at school and the boring evenings. Nature requires holidays and pleasure, and anyone who stands in her way arouses hostility and resentment but those who encourage her deserve heartfelt thanks.

Over morning tea our parents inform us we have to go and visit our aunt (boring like all aunts) or, even worse, that after breakfast we have visitors, cousins we don't like. We sit stock still, lost. It has been hard for us to wait for our free day and now they have taken it away from us and made it all tedious. How are we to last out till the next holiday?

If the day is lost, one hope remained – the evening. Who knows, perhaps my father who understands better than anyone what children want has already taken a box at the circus, or the ballet, or even, if the worst comes to the worst, the opera. Or even for a play . . . Tickets for the circus or the theatre are the butler's responsibility. Where is he, we ask? Has he gone out? Where? Left or right? Has the coachman been told not to use the large, strong dray horses. If he has, it's a good sign. It means we need a large four-seater coach, the one that takes us children to the theatre. If the horses have already been used during the day, it's a bad sign. No circus, no theatre.

But the butler has returned, gone to my father's study and given him something from his briefcase. What? We watch. As soon as my father has left his study, we run as fast as we can to his desk. But we don't find anything except a dreary pile of papers. Our hearts sink. But if we see a small piece of red or yellow paper, that's to say tickets for the circus, our hearts beat so loud you can hear them and everything is bright. Then our aunt and cousins don't seem so dreary. Then we are very nice to our guests so that in the evening father can say:

'Today the children behaved so well with our guests, were so good with their aunt that we can give them a little (or maybe a big!) reward. What do you think it could be?'

Red with excitement, with bits of food sticking in our throats, we wait for what happens next.

Without a word father looks in his jacket pocket for something, slowly, carefully but doesn't find anything. We can't bear to wait any longer, we jump up, run to him, surround him while our governess shouts loudly:

*'Enfants, écoutez donc ce qu'on vous dit. On ne quitte pas sa place pendant le dîner.'*³

Meanwhile, father looks in another pocket, rummages about in it, takes out his wallet, slowly turns out his pockets and – nothing!

'I've lost it!' he exclaims, playing his role with great naturalness.

The blood drains from our cheeks and freezes in our veins. We are taken back to our places and made to sit. But we don't take our eyes off father. We try to get at the truth from the eyes of our brothers and friends, 'Is he joking or not?' And father takes something out of his waistcoat pocket and says with a sly smile:

'Found it!' and waves a red ticket in the air.

No one can stop us now. We jump away from the table, we dance, bang our feet, wave our napkins, hug our father, hang about his neck, kiss him and love him dearly.

After that another worry: not to be late!

We eat without bothering to chew, we can't wait for the meal to be over, then we run to the nursery, take off our ordinary clothes, and put on our Sunday best. Then we sit down and wait, worried that father will be late. He likes to doze after coffee in the empty room. How are we to wake him up? . . . We approach him, banging our feet, drop something, we shout our heads off in the next room, pretending we don't know he's nearby. But father always sleeps soundly.

'We're going to be late! We're going to be late!' we worry, looking at the grandfather clock every minute – 'We'll miss the overture, that's clear!'

Missing the overture at the circus is a sacrifice!

'It's seven o'clock already!' we cry. Father will have to wake up, get dressed – he might even shave – it will be at least 7.20. And then we realize that we shall not only miss the overture but the first item on the bill, 'Vltige arrêtée performed by Ciniselli Junior' as well. How much we wanted to see it! . . . We have to rescue our evening. We'll go and sigh outside our mother's room. Right now she seems nicer than father. We go to her, and sob and sigh. Mother understands our tactics and goes to rouse our father.

'If you want to treat the children, then do it but don't torment them,' she says to him – *Tu l'as voulu, Georges Dandin*.⁴ So get on with it!

Father gets up, stretches, kisses mother and walks away still drugged with sleep while we rush head over heels downstairs to the coachman, Alexei, telling him to drive as fast as he can. We sit in the four-seater, swinging our legs to make the wait seem easier. It feels as though we are moving. But still no father. We're beginning to harbour ill-will towards him. Not a sign of gratitude. They're here at last. Father takes his seat. The carriage creaks over the snow, rocking us. We rock too to help it forward. And suddenly, quite unexpectedly, it stops. We're there! . . . But not only the second number is over but the third as well. Fortunately our favourites, Moreno, Mariana and Inserti, have not yet been on. Neither has she. Our box was directly opposite the artists' entry. From there you could see what was going on backstage, the personal lives of these strange, wonderful people who live constantly close to death and risk their lives with a smile. Aren't they nervous before they come on? Suddenly it could be the last moment of their lives. But they are calm, they talk about trivia, about money, about supper. Heroes!

The band strikes up a well-known polka, it's her item '*Danse de Châte*', performed on the ground and on horseback by the young girl, Elvira. And here she is. My friends know my secret, this is my item, she is my girl and they do everything for me. I have the best opera glasses, they give me more room, they congratulate me quietly. She really is adorable this evening. At the end of her item Elvira goes towards the exit and passes within two steps of me. The closeness of her turns my head, I have to do something special and here am I jumping out of the box and kissing her skirt and rushing back to my seat. I sit there, like a condemned man, not daring to move, near to tears. My friends congratulate me while, behind me, my father laughs:

'Congratulations, Kostya, of course,' he jokes, 'you're engaged. When's the wedding?'

The last very boring item is 'Horseback quadrille performed by the entire company'. After that the long succession of dreary, joyless days begins, without the slightest hope of coming back next Sunday. Mother doesn't allow the children to be spoiled very often. But the circus is the best thing in the world.

To make the pleasure last longer and live in happy memories I arrange a secret meeting with a friend.

'You absolutely must come!'

'What's it about?'

'Come and you'll find out. It's very important.'

The following day my friend came and we went into a dark room. I confided a great secret to him, that I had decided to become a circus master when I grew up. Since there was no going back on my decision, it had to be sealed by an oath. We took an icon from the wall and I solemnly swore that I would definitely become a circus master. Then we planned the programme for future performances. We made a list of company members out of the finest names of clowns and horsemen.

While waiting for my circus to open, we decided to put on a performance at home, as training. We created a provisional company out of brothers, sisters and friends. We chose the items and the participants.

'A liberty horse, I'm the master and trainer, you're the stallion! Then I'll play an Auguste while you roll out the carpet. Then musical clowns.'

As Master, I assigned myself all the best roles, and they let me have them, since I was a professional. I had sworn an oath and there was no going back. The performance was to take place the following Sunday since there was no hope that we would be taken to the circus or even the ballet.

We had much to do out of lesson time and in the evenings. First of all we had to print the tickets and the money with which to pay for them and set up a box office, i.e., hang a blanket over a door with a little window in it where someone would sit the whole day before the performance. That was very important since a proper box office would give the impression of a real circus. We had to think about the costumes, too, and the hoops with fine paper through which we would leap during the '*pas de châte*', and the ropes and pickets that would serve as a fence for the trained horses. We had to think about the music. That formed the greater part of the performance. But my brother, who was the only one who could replace the orchestra, was extremely irresponsible and wayward. He didn't take our project seriously and so could get up to anything. He could be playing happily and then, right in front of the audience, decide to roll on the ground, kick his legs in the air and yell:

'I don't want to play any more!'

In the end he would start playing again for a bar of chocolate, but the performance had been disrupted by his stupidity. It was no longer 'really real'. And that was what was most important to us. People have to believe that everything is being done seriously, naturally, otherwise it has no interest at all.

Audiences were slim. Always from within the house. There is nowhere in the world that even the worst kinds of theatres and actors don't have their devotees. They are convinced that no one else is capable of appreciating the hidden talents of their protégés. We, too, had our devotees who attended our performances for their own (note, not our) pleasure. One of

these 'fans' was my father's elderly bookkeeper. We gave him a place of honour at our circus, which flattered him greatly.

To keep the box office going, many members of our home audience came all day to buy tickets. Then, as it were, they lost them and came to tell us so. There were long explanations every time, demands for the director (me) to give instructions. I dragged myself away from what I was doing and went to the box office to grant or deny a pass. We had a special book of passes which were numbered and labelled:

'Constanzio Alexeev Circus.'

On the days we gave a performance we made up and dressed many hours before the start. By pinning jackets and waistcoats we managed to make them look something like evening dress. We made clowns' costumes out of nightshirts which we tied at the ankles to make them look vaguely like baggy trousers. The master and trainer (me) was given my father's old top hat. Clowns' hats were made out of paper. Trousers rolled up to the knees and bare legs looked like acrobats' tights. With the aid of lard, powder and beetroot juice we managed to whiten our faces, make our cheeks pink and redden our lips. We used coal to blacken our eyebrows and draw triangles on the clowns' cheeks. The show began in good order but because of the regular upsets caused by my elder brother, the audience dispersed and the performance was interrupted. There was bitterness in our hearts and ahead a long, long dreary succession of days and evenings of a week of schoolwork. Then there was the shining prospect of next Sunday. Perhaps, this time, we could count on going to the circus or the theatre again.

Sunday again, torment and worry throughout the day again, and delight during dinner again. This time it's the theatre. A visit to the ballet isn't like one to the circus. It is a much more serious matter. Mother takes charge of the expedition. First we are washed, put into Russian-style silk shirts, baggy velvet trousers and suede boots. They pull on our white gloves, with strict instructions not to get them black (as usually happens) but to keep them clean until we get back home. So, we would spend the entire evening, fingers spread, hands stuck out in front of us, so as not to dirty them. But we would thoughtlessly take a piece of chocolate or rub a poster in big letters on which the ink was still wet or, out of sheer excitement, grip the dirty, plush front of the box. And, immediately, white turned to grey with black spots.

Mother would put on her finest frock and be beautiful. I loved to sit by her as she got ready and watch her arrange her hair. This time they brought along the servants' children, or poor children to whom they were guardians. One large carriage was not enough and so we went in several

smaller ones, as on a picnic. We took along a specially made plank of wood which was placed on two chairs set wide apart and on which eight children could sit side by side, like sparrows on a fence. Nannies, governesses and chambermaids sat in the back of the box, while, at the front, mother prepared little things to eat in the interval, pouring tea that had been brought in special bottles for the little ones. Friends would come to see her and go into raptures over us. We would be introduced but we would see nothing except that vast golden expanse that is ours, the Bolshoi Theatre. The smell of the gas which was used at the time to light the theatre and the circus had a magical effect on me. It was part of my idea of theatre and the delight I took in it stirred and excited me.

The huge auditorium with its thousands packed from roof to floor and side to side talking noisily until the curtain and during the intervals, the orchestra striking up, the lights dimming slowly, the curtains opening, the vast stage, on which people looked like midgets, the traps, the flames, the sea-storm on the backdrop, the prop shipwreck, the dozens of big and little fountains, with real water, the fish swimming in the deep, the huge whale, made me blush, blench and run with tears or sweat, freeze especially when the beautiful ballerina begged the corsair to free her. The subject of the ballet is a fairy tale, a romantic story, and I love it. The wonderful transformations, collapses, eruptions. The music thunders, something cracks and collapses. It's almost like the circus. The most boring and irrelevant thing about the ballet, as I thought then, was the dancing. The ballerinas would strike a pose at the beginning of their dance and I found it boring. Not one of them could compare with Mlle. Elvira at the circus.

There was, however, an exception. The prima ballerina at the time was someone we knew, the wife of a friend of my father's. The fact of knowing a celebrity who appeared on the stage of a theatre like the Bolshoi and was the centre of attention for thousands filled me with pride. I could be with, speak to someone others could only admire from afar. Nobody, for example, knew what her voice was like, but I did. Nobody knew what her life was like, what her husband and children were like, but I did. You see, for everyone she was the 'Maid from Hell', the heroine of a ballet and nothing more, but for me she was also a friend. That is why I had such respect for her dancing. During the ensembles I tried to find another friend, my dancing master, amid all the people rushing about the stage. I was amazed at the way he could remember every leap, step and movement. In the interval our great delight was to run through the enormous corridors, rooms, crowded foyers in which, because of their great resonance, echoed back the sound of our heels.

Sometimes during the week we would give an impromptu ballet. It was

impossible to spend a Sunday on it. That belonged entirely to the circus. Our governess E. A. Kunina was the ballet mistress and also the musician. We played and danced to her singing. The ballet was called *The Naiad and the Fisherman*. But I didn't like it. We had to act being in love, kiss, and I felt embarrassed. I preferred to kill, save, condemn to death, pardon . . . But the worst thing was that, without rime or reason, a number had been introduced that we were learning with our dancing master. That smacked of the school room and so I hated it.

PUPPET THEATRE

After many trials and tribulations, my closest friend and I came to the conclusion that further work with amateurs (that's what we called brothers, sisters and anyone other than ourselves) was impossible, either when it came to the circus or to the ballet. Besides which, our means were so limited that the most important things in the theatre were missing: sets, effects, trap doors, sea, fire, storm . . . How were we to represent them in an ordinary room with sheets and blankets, and while the potted palms and fresh flowers were still there? So it was decided that we should replace real actors with cardboard ones, and to start a puppet theatre with sets, effects and every kind of theatrical trick.

'You know this is not a betrayal of the circus,' I said, in my capacity as a future master, 'but a regrettable necessity.'

But puppet theatre required a lot of money. We needed a large table that would be placed in the middle of double doors. We hung sheets to fill the gaps above and below the puppet stage. And so, the audience was in one room, and in the other, connecting room, was the stage and all that went on behind. That is where we all worked, actors, designers, directors, creating all kinds of effects. My elder brother also joined in – he could draw wonderfully and he loved trickery. Besides his gifts we had money put by and we needed launch capital. A carpenter I had known almost since the day I was born, and who regularly worked in the house, took pity on us and agreed to help us, at a low cost and on credit.

'It will soon be Christmas,' we assured him, 'and then Easter. We'll be given money and then we'll pay.'

While the table was being made, we started on the sets. At first we had to draw them on wrapping paper which crumpled and tore but we didn't lose heart as, with time, we would get rich (performances would be charged for, in real silver coins at 10 kopeks a ticket) and then we would buy drawing paper and glue our brown-paper sketches on it. We couldn't ask our parents for money. They might not approve of what we were doing

as it might distract us from our studies. Thereafter, as we considered ourselves as producers, directors, managers of a new theatre, our lives were suddenly very full. We had to think about or do something every minute.

The only hindrance was our wretched lessons. There was always something I was working on for the theatre hidden in my desk drawer – a puppet, that would have to be drawn completely and painted, a piece of the set, a bush, a tree, an outline plan for a new production. Books on the desk, sets in the drawer. As soon as the tutor left the room sets plopped onto the desk covered by a book or simply slipped inside it. When the tutor came back I simply turned the page and everything was hidden. We drew plans for staging in the margins of our exercise books and school-books. Is it a plan or a geometric figure, can you tell?

We staged many operas and ballets, or rather extracts from them. We always chose disaster. For example, the scene in *The Corsair* which begins with a calm sea during the daytime, then turbulent during the night, the shipwreck, the heroes swimming to safety, the bright beams of the searchlight, the rescue, the moon rising, prayers, sunrise. Or, for example, the scene from *Don Juan* with the appearance of the Commendatore, Don Juan falling into hell with flames coming out of the trap (made from children's talcum powder), the house collapsing turning the stage into a burning inferno in which the swirling flames and smoke played the principal role. Often the set caught fire and had to be replaced by another. We put on a ballet called *Robert and Bertram* – two robbers. At night they would secretly steal out of prison and then visit the townsfolk through their windows. All the tickets went for our productions, despite the fact they had to be paid for. Many people came to encourage us, others for their own pleasure.

Our constant admirer, the old bookkeeper, did everything he could to publicize our new theatre. He came with his whole family, relations and friends. Now we didn't have to think up things to do in the box office. There was more than enough. And there was even more to do backstage. The box office opened just before the show, for evening sales, as it were. Once because of the size of the audience we had to move from a small room to a large, but we were punished for our greed because the quality of our performance fell.

There can be no self-interest in art, we decided.

Now we were always happy on Sundays even when there was no circus or ballet. And what is more, if we were asked to choose between the two, we always preferred the latter. Not as a betrayal, but because our new interest in puppets obliged us to go to the theatre and watch productions, learn, find material for our puppet shows.

Our walks between lessons took on great meaning. Previously, we used

to go to the Kuznetski Bridge to buy photographs of circus artists, constantly on the lookout for new pictures which we didn't already have in our collection. Now, with the birth of our puppet theatre, there was a new need for all kinds of material which we would generally discover or buy on our walks. Now we were not too lazy to go out as before. We bought all kind of pictures of landscapes and costumes, which helped us make the sets and the puppets. They were the first volumes in my future library.

ITALIAN OPERA

My brother and I were taken to the opera in our early years, but we didn't set any great store by these outings. The opera was, so to speak, an extra and we demanded that it should not be included as part of the normal programme to the detriment of other pleasures like the circus. The music was boring. Nonetheless, I am very grateful to my parents for having made us listen to music in our earliest years. I have no doubt that it had a beneficial influence on my ear, the development of my taste and on my eye that became accustomed to what was theatrically beautiful. We had a subscription for the whole season, that is for forty or fifty performances, and we sat in a lower tier box near the stage. I still have extremely vivid impressions of the Italian opera, which are, of course, greater than my impressions of the circus. I think that this is because these impressions were strong, and yet I was not consciously aware of them, I took them in naturally, unconsciously, not just mentally but physically. I only understood and valued these impressions subsequently in recollection. The circus thrilled and delighted me – as a child. But, as an adult, these memories were no longer of any interest and I forgot them.

In St. Petersburg a great deal of money was spent on the Italian opera as on the German and French theatres. The finest French actors were brought over, as were the greatest singers in the world.

At the beginning of the season posters were put up announcing the members of the company, who were almost exclusively international stars: Adelina Patti, Lucca, Nilsson, Volpini, Arteau, Viardot, Tamberlik, Mario, Stanio and, later, Mazzini, Cotogni, Padilla, Bagaggiolo, Giametta, Zembrich.

I can remember many operas with the finest international celebrities. For example, in Rossini's *Barbiere di Siviglia*, Rosina was sung by either Patti or Lucca, Almavia by Niccolini, Capoul by Manzini, Figaro by Cotogni or Padilla, Don Basilio by Giametta, Bartolo by the renowned comic bass Bossi. Could any other city in Europe boast such splendour?

Memories of these Italian operas are not only engraved on my ear and

eye but physically, i.e., I experience them not only as emotion but in my body. When I remember them I feel the same physical state that was aroused by Adelina's silvery top notes, her *collaratura*, her technique which made me gasp physically, her chest notes which almost made me pass out, and it was impossible to hold back a smile of satisfaction. I also recall her neat, small figure and her profile, as though it were carved in ivory.

I have retained the same elemental, bodily sensations of that king of baritones, Cotogni, or of Giametta. I am excited when I think of them. I remember a charity concert in the home of one of our friends. In a small room two heroes sang a duet from *The Puritan*, flooding the room with waves of baritone notes, that filled the heart with intoxicating southern passion. Giametta as Mephistopheles with his huge, handsome figure, and Cotogni with his genial, open face, with a huge scar on his cheek, magnificent, hale, an Adonis in his way.

Here is an example of how strong my youthful impressions of Cotogni were. In 1910, that is to say some thirty-five years after he came to Moscow, I was in Rome and was going with a friends down some narrow sidestreet. Suddenly from an upper floor soared a high, ringing, tempestuous, heroic, electrifying note. I experienced a familiar sensation.

'Cotogni!' I cried

'Yes, this is where he lives,' my friend confirmed. 'How did you recognize it?' he asked in amazement.

'I felt it,' I answered. 'It isn't something you forget.'

I have the same physical memory of vocal power of the baritones Bagaggiolo, Graziani, or the dramatic sopranos Arteau and Nilsson and, subsequently, Tamagno. I have the same physical memories of the fascinating timbre of voices like Lucca, Volpini, Mazzini from my youth.

But I retain other sorts of impression, despite the fact that I must have been too young to know what they were. They are of a somewhat aesthetic nature. I remember Naudin's absolutely astonishing way of singing. He had almost no voice but was, perhaps, the best vocalist of the old school that I have ever had the opportunity to hear. He was old and ugly but we children preferred him to much younger singers. I also remember the baritone, Padilla, the exceptional perfection of his phrasing and diction (in Italian which we children did not understand) either in Don Juan's Serenade by Mozart, or in *Barbiere*. And, in childhood, these impressions were very strong, absorbed naturally and understood later. Nor will I ever forget the clarity, the precision, the polish and the rhythmic acting of the tenor Capoul, who created wonderful roles and at the same time a very fashionable hairstyle.

To their shame, our music lovers did not treat the wonders they were offered with sufficient respect. They introduced the abominable fashion of arriving very late, of coming in and taking their seats noisily just as famous singers were delivering a pure silvery high note or taking your breath away with a piano-pianissimo. This false chic is redolent of a chambermaid who thinks it good form to look down her nose at everything.

There was another kind of chic which was even worse. The members of certain clubs with a subscription to the Italian opera would play cards throughout the entire performance. They only came to the theatre to hear a high C from a famous tenor. When the act began, the front stalls were still half empty but a few minutes before the famous note there was pandemonium, creaking chairs, talk, the 'cognoscenti'. Our famous club members were coming in. Once the famous note was over, with one or two encores, there was pandemonium again, the 'cognoscenti' were off to finish their game of cards. Tasteless, empty, talentless people.

To my sorrow I have witnessed the decline of the art of singing, the loss of the secret of placing the voice, of *bel canto* and musical diction. At the end of the last century there was a mania again for Italian opera in Moscow. The private opera company of Savva Mamontov,⁵ a well-known patron of the arts, was drawn from the finest singers from abroad. Many of them proved to be talented and also real artists. But the memories of those who can recall phenomena like Patti, Lucca, effaced more recent memories. Chaliapin does not enter into it. He is at the very summit, far above the others. But there was, and still is, exceptionally good raw vocal material. The famous tenor Tamagno is an example. Here is his strength. Until his first appearance in Moscow he had not received much publicity. People expected a good singer, nothing more. Tamagno came on dressed as Othello with his great frame and powerful physique and suddenly let out an ear-shattering note. The audience instinctively, as one, recoiled, protecting themselves against the shock. A second note, even stronger, a third stronger still and when the final note appeared like a flame out of a volcano on the word 'Mohaaaamedans', the audience lost consciousness for several minutes. We all jumped up. Friends looked at each other, stranger turned to stranger with the same question, 'Did you hear that? What is it?' The orchestra stopped playing, there was confusion onstage. But suddenly the audience came back to their senses and rushed towards the stage, yelling with enthusiasm, demanding an encore.

On his next tour, Tamagno sang at the Bolshoi. The opening fell on the Tsar's birthday so there was an anthem before the performance. The orchestra, chorus and soloists, except Tamagno, were all gathered downstage, singing full out and playing forte, when one free-sounding note

rang out towards the audience, then a second and a third, drowning out all the singers, chorus and orchestra. Nothing else was heard apart from them, and no one wanted to hear anything but them. It was Tamagno, hidden behind the chorus. He was a second-rate musician. He often exploded, sang off-key, missed the beat, lost the rhythm. He was a bad actor, but was not completely without talent. That was why you could do wonders with him. His Othello was one such a wonder. He was ideal both in the musical and dramatic sense. He studied the role for many years (yes, years) with such geniuses as Verdi himself on the musical side and the elderly Tommaso Salvini on the dramatic side.

Young artists need to know what can be obtained by hard work, technique and genuine artistry. Tamagno was great in this role not only because he was taught by two geniuses, but because of the fire and energy, the naturalness and spontaneity God had given him. His teachers, masters of technique, managed to reveal the essence of his talent. Alone he could do nothing. He was taught to play the role but did not understand what he was doing, or master the art of the actor.

I speak of my memories because it is important to me for the subsequent parts of my book that the reader should share my experiences of sound, music, rhythm and voice. In time they played an important role in my working life as an artist. I only realized that recently, as my work as an actor was on the wane. I realized the significance of these basic impressions. They were the spur that guided me, quite recently, to study voice and how to place it, nobility of sound, diction, rhythmical, musical inflexions, the physical essence of vowels, consonants, words and sentences, soliloquies. All of them applied to the demands of the drama. But all in good time and, for the moment, let my musical memories merely leave a trace in the reader's mind.

I mention all these memories also to show young actors how important it is for us to receive very beautiful, strong impressions. The actor should be able to observe (and not just observe but see) the beautiful in every aspect of his art and life. He needs the impressions left by good performance and actors, concerts, museums, travel, great pictures of all trends from the far left to the far right, from the most false to the most true, since no one knows what can move his heart and reveal his hidden talent.

PRANKS

The actor needs, above all, people around him from whom he can draw creative material.

Fate has spoiled me all my life by providing such people and relationships. It began with my living in a time when there was a great upsurge in art, science and aesthetics. As is well known, in Moscow this was significantly encouraged by young merchants who entered Russian life for the first time and in addition to their industrial and commercial activities took a great interest in the arts.

For example, Pavel Tretyakov founded a famous gallery which he donated to the city of Moscow. He worked from morning to night in his office or his factory but in the evening he looked after his gallery or talked to young artists he found talented. After a year or two their pictures went into the gallery and they ceased to be merely well known, they became famous. And Tretyakov was so modest a patron! Who could have seen a Russian Medici in his bashful, timid and lean body and religious-looking face? Instead of taking a holiday in the summer he went abroad to become acquainted with European paintings and museums and then, following a fixed pattern, he would go on a walking tour and gradually covered almost the whole of Germany, France and part of Spain.

Another industrialist, K. T. Soldatenkov, set about publishing books that could not count on a large edition but were essential for science or generally for culture and education. He transformed his beautiful house, in the Greek style, into a library. The windows were never bright with festive lights and only the two windows of his study shone in the darkness, modestly lit long into the night.

Like Soldatenkov, M. V. Sabashnikov was also a patron of literature and books and founded a well-known, culturally important publishing house.

Sergei Shchukin put together a collection of modern French pictures, which anyone wanting to know about painting could visit, free of charge. His brother, Piotr, created a large museum of Russian antiques.

Aleksei Bakhrushin used his own money to create the only theatre museum in Russia with a collection of anything connected with Russian theatre and in part West European theatre.

And there is also the remarkable figure of one of the builders of Russian cultural life, Savva Mamontov, a man of exceptional talent, versatility, energy and scope who was simultaneously singer, actor in opera, director, playwright, founder of a Russian private opera house, patron of the fine arts, like Tretyakov, and the builder of many Russian railways.

But I shall speak of him all in good time, as I will of another wealthy patron of the theatre, Savva Morozov, who was intimately involved in the creation of the Moscow Art Theatre.

The people in my immediate entourage also had an influence in shaping

my mind artistically. They were not distinguished by any exceptional talent but they knew how to work, rest and enjoy themselves.

Many pranks were started by Kozma Prutkov⁶ in our family. My cousins S lived next door to our property. They were highly educated and advanced for the time, perfecting the manufacture of textiles in Russia. Their home was noisy and happy. In the evenings there were arguments and discussions on social matters – the activities of local councils and government. On public holidays up to the beginning of the hunting season they did target shooting for prizes. Shots could be heard from midday to sunset. The hunting season began after St. Peter's Day, first for game, then for wolves, bears and foxes. In autumn and winter the kennels came alive. On public holidays, early in the morning, the huntsmen gathered, horns sounded, horsemen and men on foot paraded, surrounded by packs of dogs, singing. The huntsmen drove in carriages with, behind them, a cart carrying provisions. We children didn't take part in the hunt, but we got up very early to see it off and looked enviously at the huntsmen's excited faces. And when they returned from the hunt we loved to see the dead beasts. Then there was a common bath or a swim and in the evening, music, dancing, conjuring, cards and charades. Sometimes whole families gathered and organized water sports. During the day swimming for prizes and in the evening we went on the river in decorated boats. In the front there was an enormous boat with thirty men with a wind band.

On Midsummer's Eve young and old alike created an enchanted forest. They dressed themselves in sheets, put on make-up and hid, waiting for people coming to look for ferns. As soon as they approached our practical jokers suddenly leaped out from behind the trees or sprang out of the bushes. Others sailed down the river standing in the front of boats draped like themselves in white sheets. These trailing white apparitions made a great impression.

There were other rather more cruel pranks. One victim was a young German musician, our first music teacher. He was as naive as a fourteen-year-old girl and believed anything we said to frighten him. It was laughable. For example, we once persuaded him that a brawny peasant girl had appeared in the village, that she was madly in love with him and was looking for him everywhere. One night he returned to his rooms, undressed and went into his bedroom with a candle. Brawny Akulina was in his bed. The German leapt out of the window, which fortunately was not very high. Our dogs saw his bare legs and nightshirt and started to bite. His yells filled the estate. The main house awoke, sleepy faces appeared at windows, the women also began to scream, not knowing what had happened. But the band of practical jokers, who had been

watching what was happening, rushed to his aid and saved the poor, half-naked German. At the same time the joker dressed up as Akulina jumped out of bed, left it rumpled and deliberately forgot an article of female underwear. The secret was never revealed and the story of Akulina continued to frighten the naive young man – destined to become a musical celebrity – and more. He would have lost his mind had my father not intervened and put an end to these antics.

And we, like our elders, liked practical jokes that were the forebears of theatrical tricks and effects. Thus, for example, many summer residencies had been built around our estate in Liubimovka. The owners went boating on the river that flowed past our property. Their incessant shouts, their bad singing gave us no peace. We decided to frighten our unwelcome neighbours. This is what we did. We bought a large ox's bladder, put a wig on it, drew eyes, a nose, a chin and ears. The result was a yellowish face like a drowned man or a sea-monster. We tied it to a long rope with the end attached to weights which we threw to the bottom of the river, attaching the other end to a tree. We hid in the bushes. The rope that was attached to the shore, naturally, dragged the painted bladder to the bottom. We only had to release the rope and the bladder leapt to the surface with all its might. The unsuspecting holidaymakers rowed down the river. We spied on them. When the boat arrived at our chosen spot, a hairy monster rose up out of the water and disappeared back down again. The effect was indescribable.

We young ones not only copied and mirrored our immediate family life but responded in our own way to what was happening beyond the walls of our home and our estate. And these impressions were often reflected in our play, rather like a performance, when we became other people or created another life which was nothing like the real life we lived at home. For example, when universal military service was introduced into Russia, we created our own army out of boys the same age as we. We even had two armies, my brother's and mine. The one commander for both armies was a close friend of my father's. He put out a call and so from all the surrounding villages came boys of ten or eleven to take part in our game. They were our new friends. Everything was based on complete equality. We were all privates with only one commander-in-chief who had to make non-commissioned officers out of us and then turn us into officers.

It was open competition. Everyone wanted to understand the mysteries of military affairs and become an officer as quickly as possible. A number of the young recruits proved serious competition and in the beginning were better than we in the use of weapons, but later in the programme, when it was decided that our soldiers had to be literate, my brother and I