

The influence of Komissarzhevskaya and Duse on the creative methods of the 20th-century masters of the Russian theatre - Yevgeny Vakhtangov, Michael Chekhov and Nikolai Demidov

Andrei Malaev-Babel

The art of Eleonora Duse and Vera Komissarzhevskaya is of paramount importance to theatre practitioners. Nevertheless, most of the scholarly and memoir works dedicated to the great *tragediennes* are written from the standpoints of theatre historians. They concern themselves with the actresses' creative biography, their interpretations of certain roles, or their resonance among contemporaries. This is understandable. Both actresses belonged to the rarest (and arguably extinct) breed of actor-tragedians, who acted "from the gut". According to common belief, actors of this kind don't have an internal technique that can be successfully taught, or conveyed, as it is "unconscious," and based solely on the mysterious workings of intuition.

Actors like Duse and Komissarzhevskaya do not fit into the rigid art of the contemporary director. With the rise of directorial theatre, their art declined, and eventually disappeared. These unpredictable creative individualities, spontaneous and explosive, could not fit inside the well-balanced structure of the modern performance. Neither could they be subjected to the laws of "ensemble" where actors are supposed to be, or at least appear, as equally talented, and every actor is to fulfill their specific, prescribed task. Putting a Duse, or a Komissarzhevskaya inside the machine of a contemporary performance is unthinkable – they would immediately break out of its frame, thus destroying the balanced composition.

This does not, of course, mean that Komis-

sarzhevskaya and Duse could not work with a director. In the life of Duse, there were guides and mentors, like Arrigo Boito (1842-1918), who were instrumental to her overall education. They helped the actress to expand her cultural horizons, and even guided her in grasping the meaning of a certain play, or role. Similarly, Komissarzhevskaya constantly sought relationships with mentor-like individuals, poets or writers. However, these artists would never prescribe an actress *how* to play a role, down to a single detail. According to Elena Kukhta, «Komissarzhevskaya's views on the director's tasks were quite conservative, restricting his function to that of a cultural advisor»¹.

The collaboration between Komissarzhevskaya and Meyerhold can be easily quoted as an example of an actor-tragedian's incompatibility with the art of the contemporary director. However, the history of this collaboration is complex; it deserves a thorough conversation that would lead us far outside of this article's scope. Not once but twice Komissarzhevskaya refused to enter the troupe of the director-driven Moscow Art Theatre. Both Komissarzhevskaya and Duse were their own directors and, arguably, actresses of one-woman shows, where everything and everybody must be submitted to their unique individuality and creative will.

Theatre of the 20th and early 21st century – chiefly directorial theatre – did not have a need for an actor who would dominate or disrupt the unified composition of the performance. The well-oiled machine of a theatrical production replaced the inimitable, magnetic individuality, and the galvanizing power of the actor-tragedian. As a result, the corporal secrets of the tragedians, and their intimate, deeply personal art, seemed to have been lost. With it we lost all traces of a tragic actor's illusive internal technique.

In the meantime, some of the most influential and profound theatrical practitioners and thinkers of the 20th century, were preoccupied with trying to discover the secrets of a tragic actor's creativity. In the Russian theatre, in particular, theatrical visionaries such as Yevgeny Vakhtangov (1883-1922) and Michael Chekhov (1891-1955) worked

to overcome the rationality and lukewarm emotionality of the realistic approach.

A more thorough and practical discussion of a tragic actor's inner technique became tangibly possible with the publication, in the early 21st century, of the creative heritage of Nikolai Demidov (1884-1953). One of the closest, and long-term associates of Stanislavsky's, and the founding director of the Moscow Art Theatre School, Demidov dedicated his life to creating the psychotechnique of the affective actor-tragedian. His models – actors whose creative process he closely explored – were Pavel Mochalov (1800-1848) and Ira Aldridge (1807-1867), Maria Yermolova (1853-1928) and Alexander Moissi (1879-1935), Eleanora Duse and Vera Komissarzhevskaya. Among the masters of Russian theatre, Demidov came the closest to demystifying the internal mechanisms of a tragic actors' process, previously considered as belonging solely to the realm of subconscious. While Demidov never argued this fact, he had also discovered, in his written works and practice, the direct ways of approaching the realm of the subconscious, and setting in motion the mechanisms of an actor's creativity.

Prior to discussing the practice of Vakhtangov, Chekhov and Demidov, as it relates to the art of Komissarzhevskaya and Duse, one has to say a few words about a man, who inspired the quest for the secrets of actor creativity in Russia and elsewhere – Konstantin Stanislavsky. Vakhtangov and Chekhov were his protégés, and Demidov, however independent, had learned plenty from their collaboration. Next to Stanislavsky, one also must consider his early collaborator, Leopold Sulerzhitsky (1872-1916) – a direct teacher to Vakhtangov and Chekhov. Sulerzhitsky was instrumental to Stanislavsky's research and innovations; he did not only support them, he inspired them. It was not by chance that Demidov called Sulerzhitsky «Stanislavsky's ideologist»².

While Vakhtangov and Chekhov today are more closely linked with the Russian theatrical avant-garde, Stanislavsky, Sulerzhitsky and Demidov are associated with realism. Nevertheless, I would argue that all five masters of theatre are inseparable from the avant-garde movement. I would also argue that the art of Komissarzhevskaya and Duse also belongs to the realm of theatrical avant-garde. Avant-garde is often seen as a purely formal experiment. Russian theatrical avant-garde in particular is interpreted chiefly as an attempt to translate the dichotomic rhythms of Revolutionary times into the movements and sounds of the stage. As true as this might appear, there is deeper meaning to Stanislavsky's experiments with “the line of the fantastic”, “symbolism and impressionism”, Meyerhold's constructivism and biomechanics, Vakhtangov's “fantas-

tic realism”, Tairov's “theatre of synthesis”, or Michael Chekhov's unorthodox approach to acting.

At the heart of these seemingly formal searches lies deep dissatisfaction with the mundanity of life, and the anticipation of new world, populated with free, creative humans. In the minds of the avant-garde artists, this new breed of people would surpass all hitherto known human capacities. It would be equipped with deep and mobile emotions, greater kinesthetic awareness and flexibility, and sharper senses. With these extraordinary senses, the new human of the post-Revolutionary world will be able to commune with, and transmit the higher forces. As Vakhtangov would put it, they would be capable of evoking «the spirit of creativity»³ onstage. Above all, these new creative humans would be inwardly free. Liberated from petty, mundane pursuits and concerns, they would live to create in a society dedicated to collective creation. Their impulses would be completely honest and genuinely creative.

This desire to divorce the art of the mundane is what unites Stanislavsky with those of his followers who, like Vakhtangov and Chekhov, seem to be less concerned with truth, and more adventurous in the realm of theatrical form. Even the creation of their *alma mater*, the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre, can be attributed to such dissatisfaction. On March 11, 1911, at his first meeting with the young MAT actors, soon to become the First Studio members, Stanislavsky spoke of his departure from the “external realism” of the MAT's early productions. In his talk, carefully recorded by Vakhtangov, Stanislavsky said:

We went through several stages: stylization, impressionism⁴, etc. Finally, we came back to refined realism.

This is the realism of the inner truth that exists in the life of the human spirit. This is the realism of the natural inner experience.

This realism is externally simplified, down to a minimum, for the sake of spiritual deepening⁵.

In the same talk, Stanislavsky specified some of the ways he was seeking in order to accomplish his lofty goals:

Immobility is needed.
 Different qualities of voice are needed.
 The audience must forget the impression of the eye.
 Audience must be transformed into a third creator.
 Just think of the power this theatre has.
 It can move one to do anything.
 In such a theatre, all of the arts combined act simultaneously⁶.

It is important to remember, however, that in the realm of actor's art, such a theatre existed prior to Stanislavsky and Sulerzhitsky's experiments. Immobility, soulful voice, increased radiation and subtle psychological currents – such were the staples of Duse's art. When it comes to Komissarzhevskaya's acting, she was considered «unequaled in conveying merely perceptible shades of moods»⁷.

Arguably, the very experiment of Stanislavsky's was inspired by the actors like Komissarzhevskaya and Duse. For example, one of the leading Russian-Soviet theatre historians Pavel Markov insisted that Komissarzhevskaya's performance in Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* «as if foretold the style of acting the Moscow Art Theatre is to seek in the future»⁸. Stanislavsky and Sulerzhitsky, who never fully achieved their goals, nevertheless inspired their younger colleagues and followers – especially Vakhtangov, Chekhov and Demidov – to continue the search of the acting technique of the deep, spiritual realism. Thus, the theatre of Komissarzhevskaya and Duse, the theatre of actor-tragedian, served as a direct springboard for Vakhtangov and Chekhov's innovations. It strongly influenced the 20th century Russian masters of the acting technique, and it was utilized by Demidov as a model, a basis for the development of his School of the “affective” actor-tragedian.

The descriptions of Eleanora Duse's acting are many, but few of the authors try to unlock the secrets *behind* her art. Among the memoir literature on Duse, only two accounts have been written by actors. One of these books, Eve La Gallienne's 1965 *The Mystic in the Theatre: Eleonora Duse*, is the only to approach Duse's inner technique. It also paints the portrait of

the actress whose spiritual and personal journey was inseparable from her art. In her book, Le Gallienne insists that Duse consistently and scrupulously worked on herself as a human being: as her spiritual essence matured and grew, so did her characters, and her acting. From her early years, writes La Gallienne (166), Duse exercised the kind of «self-naughting», «forgetfulness», or «abandonment of self»⁹. «A passive relinquishment of power» is another way La Gallienne described Duse's acting method.

Nikolai Demidov considered passivity as one of the chief cultures of a tragedian's art¹⁰. When he spoke of the culture of “passivity”, he referred to the same phenomenon as Le Gallienne. According to Demidov, passivity allows a tragic actor to channel those otherworldly energies and powers essential to the embodiment of larger-than-life characters, evoking the magnitude of their personalities, and the depth of their passions. Duse herself was conscious of the creative state of passivity she achieved in her acting. In 1921, when speaking about her success to Edouard Schneider, she said: «This success belonged to something far greater than me; it was way above me; it was directed to a force which was not me – I was merely its representative»¹¹.

In regards to the art of “self-naughting”, Le Gallienne quotes Evelyn Underhill, and her *Mysticism*:

It remains a paradox of the mystics that the passivity at which they appear to aim is really a state of the most intense activity; more, that where it is wholly absent, no great creative action can take place. In it, the superficial self compels itself to be still, in order that it may liberate another more deep-seated power which is, in the ecstasy of the contemplative genius, raised to the highest pitch of efficiency¹².

The culture of passivity was practically utilized by Demidov in his techniques, such as «the great sleep of the body»¹³, and «casting away of the body»¹⁴. These techniques make the actor's body transparent, and fully subject it to the subtlest movement of the actor's psyche.

When looking at a photograph of Duse in the title role from *La signora delle camelie* (this photo seems to be taken on the set, rather than in a photographer's studio), it is clear that Duse went far beyond Stanislavskian muscular “relaxation” and release. In fact, she achieved the Demidian disappearance of the body.

Another cornerstone culture discovered by Demidov for the psychotechnique of the tragic actor, was that of “calm”. Peripheral nervousness, in everyday, mundane life, is meant to prevent a person from deeper emotional involvement. Let us imagine that an external impression (be it from a partner, circumstances or an event) is aiming for our deep emotional center. At that moment, the body's muscles tense up, creating a shield of purely peripheral



Fig. 1 *Eleonora Duse in La signora delle camelie di A. Dumas fils.* Courtesy of the Ringling Museum in Sarasota (USA).

nervous excitement. This reaction prevents an impression from traveling into our depths – a person ends up *worrying* about the event, rather than deeply experiencing it. However, an actor who can achieve deep creative calm onstage, paradoxically gains access to heightened, profound emotions. Demidov explains this paradox thus:

When a tornado swoops down upon us, it tears off roofs, uproots trees, lifts up people, planks, sand, dirt, swirls them all around, carries them farther and farther into the air... But at its center, there is *absolute* silence and stillness. Much deeper than it would be in a silent room in which the air is still moving.

This is the *calm of a creative state*, especially of an actor's creative state. There is a flurry of activity, sounds, and forces without, but within, in the center of centers, there is the absolute silence that can form only as a result of *correct vortex motion*¹⁵.

The culture of calm, in Demidov's school is deeply connected with training in *anasas*¹⁶ and *singularity*¹⁷. By *anasas* Demidov did not literally refer to a position of the body in yoga recommended for achieving concentration and calm. Instead, he was referring to any *justified* position of an actor's body onstage that is endowed with *singularity*. Once an actor's entire being is at one with sitting, standing, leaning, or lying (whatever position actors might find them-

selves in), then their body and eyes acquire the kind of *transparency* and *serenity*, associated with creative *passivity* and *perception*. At that moment, the actor's entire being becomes completely transparent, and the audience member is capable of following their every emotion or thought. Connected with the special type of "psychological breathing"¹⁸, an actor's voice gains the kind of qualities characteristic of Komissarzhevskaya and Duse speech – it appeared to have been «streaming directly from the heart, by the way of confessional exhale»¹⁹. Or, as Demidov put it, «the sound, although it never lost its beauty, carried in it such strength of will and feeling that it seemed magical»²⁰.

The Demidian art of *anasas* is quite recognizable when we take a look at La Gallienne's recollections of Duse's acting, specifically in regards to her passivity and calm:

I have never seen any other actress with such repose. Sometimes she would sit in a chair for a long period completely motionless, holding us all spellbound by sheer intensity of her thought. She did not need physical motion, not even facial expression, to convey her thoughts; she conveyed them because she really thought them ... Not that her face and body were expressionless – far from it! Sometimes her thoughts and feelings swept over them with a logic and an immediacy that convinced one she had never thought or felt these things before²¹.

Creative calm and passivity result in the kind of boldness of acting described by La Gallienne – the boldness of not worrying about being watched, not bothering to produce an impression, but rather allowing for the life to happen on its own. When striving to explain and develop similar qualities in an actor, Michael Chekhov arrived at his own "culture". He called it «the feeling of ease»²². Another "culture" of Chekhov's, the «feeling of the entirety»²³ is also familiar to Demidov, who referred to it as «life-giving oneness»²⁴. Demidov's non-analytical technique puts creative synthesis ahead of analysis. Vakhtangov, who considered creative "grasp" a sign of a genius, claimed that a genius actor «immediately, at once, embraces the character in its entirety, thus finding himself instantly at its apex. It is from this place that he perceives

the details»²⁵. Demidov took a step further, in comparison with Vakhtangov and Chekhov, and developed a School that avoided any analytical division into “elements” – be it in regards to a role, or a creative process per se. The Demidov School trains actors to develop characters, and treat the creative process, as *indivisible wholes*.

This approach is the closest to the art of Duse and Komissarzhevskaya, whose characters, and their life onstage, were endowed with what Demidov called “involuntariness” and “life-giving oneness”. A staunch opponent of Stanislavskian “activity”, Demidov based his entire technique in involuntariness, freedom, passivity and calm. These qualities, or cultures of acting, could be clearly observed in Duse. Once more, we refer to the expert observation of La Gallienne to illustrate this statement. When comparing Duse with Sarah Bernard, La Gallienne writes of the latter: «Compared with Duse’s, her art was overstressed, [...] *overactive*»²⁶ (Italics added). She continues: «With Duse, one thought of Rimbaud’s saying: “Action is a way to spoil something”. [...] With Duse you were not aware that she was ‘doing’ anything; it was so effortless; it seemed so easy»²⁷.

A similar description of Komissarzhevskaya’s acting can be found in Sergei Yablonsky’s *On Theatre*:

You do not observe acting “technique” [...] the mechanism that springs things into motion is entirely concealed [...] She merely lived onstage, and this spectacle appeared to be filled with such victoriously irresistible beauty that all the gimmickry of acting technique simply faded in comparison²⁸.

La Gallienne seems to echo Yablonsky, as she speaks of synthesis and “oneness” in regards to Duse: «The perfect blending of all the elements composing her performance made it almost impossible to analyze it – to break it down into its separate parts. The impact of the whole was too overwhelming»²⁹.

Complete obedience to the involuntary creative impulse is yet another staple of the Demidov technique. However, the origin of the impulse is of the most importance. When a complete harmony of an actor’s being is achieved – their mind, feelings and will be-

come centered. At such moments, an actor is guided as if by one force streaming from one single place. Both Demidov and Chekhov believed that, depending on a character (characterization), this center tends to shift. Moreover, at any given moment, a character’s center might shift, based on the circumstances, events, impressions, etc. At the same time, actor-tragedians – those capable of transforming into significant, inwardly rich human beings (such as Othello, Hamlet, Ophelia or Desdemona) – such actors possess what Michael Chekhov considered to be «an ideal body’s center»³⁰. Chekhov placed it into the chest, while Demidov specified that the ideal center belongs to the solar plexus (the seat of emotions). All outside impressions, and all other impulses (those coming from the will and the mind) channel through this center, thus allowing a tragic actor to “operate” (move, think, speak and feel) with their entire being – as one indivisible whole. The center, through which all impressions and impulses are channeled, thus becomes one powerful driving force of the actor’s creative life onstage. The center thus contributes to the fulfillment of the goal behind the Chekhov technique: to find a complete harmony between the actor’s body, mind and psychology. According to the French writer Fernand Noziere’s account, Duse was striving toward a similar goal. «She told me» Noziere recalls, «of her aspiration to achieve total harmony; of her never-ceasing effort to realize a perfect affect between speech, mime, and gesture; I sensed that her mind was passionately engaged in completely mastering the science of eurhythmics»³¹.

La Gallienne claims that, by the end of her career, Duse achieved the “total harmony” she strived for:

Her [Duse’s] walk [...] was beautiful – not because of any conscious effort to walk beautifully, but simply because her mind impelled her to move, and her body quite naturally obeyed the impulse. [...] Her entire body, like that of an animal, was instantly obedient to the impulse of the brain. She had succeeded in conquering all trace of self-consciousness which generally prevents human beings – especially an actor, exposed as he must be to the focus of so many eyes – from reaching this kind of freedom³².

Freedom, achieved through total obedience to inner impulse, is the first and foremost quality – at the heart of Demidov’s technique. According to Demidov, «freedom, spontaneity, and the creative state are inevitably tied together, and ... they inevitably coexist; ... *this freedom is always present* already in a simple, even simplest creative event; moreover, that freedom is *the very essence of creativity*, and an *integral part*»³³.

The Demidov School trains freedom as obedience to impulses, but it also trains “Freedom of Center”, “Freedom of Radiation”, “Freedom of Movement, Gaze and Voice”. The

issue of radiation connects the Demidov School with Stanislavsky's exercises in "emitting and receiving of rays", and it certainly bridges Demidov with Chekhov, whose teachings on radiation and center are of special interest to us, in regards to the art of Duse and Komissarzhevskaya. During one of his classes, Demidov made the following statement in regards to a tragic actor's center:

Moissi³⁴ and Komissarzhevskaya did not walk, but rather something carried them, like a feather. They walked by something essential in them, by their very center. It is remarkable that, physically, our body's center of gravity coincides with its nervous center – with the solar plexus. Located on the spinal cord, it regulates all of our emotions. One must sense this center and try to walk, and sit, while carrying this center inside, without the slightest effort³⁵.

Another aspect of Duse's art, as mentioned before, was the strong sense of radiation. La Gallienne writes of the «extraordinary spiritual emanation that flowed from her [Duse's] whole being, like a visible ray of light»³⁶. In a different passage, La Gallienne gives a brilliant account of radiation in acting, characteristic of the art of Duse:

A great actor is not confined within the actual limits of the body. He is charged with an inner vitality that reaches out across the footlights into the farthest corners of the auditorium; it is almost tangible; it emanates from him, like an aura. When he stretches out his hand [...] vitality and rightness of the intention behind the gesture [...] carries beyond the hand itself³⁷.

Michael Chekhov's work with radiation is quite well known, both from his books, and from the classes he conducted with actors – in Russia, Europe, and the United States. Demidov's work with radiation is less known, and most of the materials connected with this chapter of his heritage remain unpublished. In his lectures and classes, delivered at the Fourth Studio of the Moscow Art Theater, and at the MAT School between 1921 and 1925, Demidov connected the phenomenon of radiation with the center, physical and psychological singularity, the freedom of muscles ("sleep of the body"), and with psychological exposure and openness. On one occasion, he said:

Stage presence, the most remarkable thing of all, implies radiation that comes out of one single place, flowing unabstractedly – also toward one single place. An actor admits everything to himself, freely giving away his own Self. A path toward stage presence lies through radiating one's singular Self, and through receiving radiations into one's Self. Everything is open, direct communion with everything; my Self is exposed to the point of humility; the secret of stage presence lies in the elimination of Self³⁸.

Demidov's definition of radiation points to its deeply hidden spiritual sources, and it explains the strong stage presence of Komissarzhevskaya and Duse, who dared to bring



their own Selves to the stage, unprotected and exposed. In particular, Duse's ceaseless work on "self-naughting", on taming her own ego, finds a new explanation in Demidov's work. Michael Chekhov also spoke of the necessity to bring one's honest, unpretentious Self to the stage, and he believed that an artist has the right to do so once they've reached a connection with their Higher Self³⁹. Demidov, in his turn, insisted that a person's right to be an artist had to be earned, and spoke of the direct connection between the inner richness of an actor's persona and that of their characters and art.

The invisible, yet tangible energies radiated by a tragic actor, are conveyed not only to the living beings (partners and audiences); they also transfigure the inanimate world. Both Duse and Komissarzhevskaya were known for "animating" their costumes and props, and for achieving a certain psychological merger with inanimate objects.

In the Demidov School, as well as in Vakhtangov's practices and in the Chekhov technique, we find exercises with physical objects, aimed at perfecting an actor's skill of receptivity, tactile sensitivity and physical imagination. In these exercises, actors are trained to merge with objects, and perceive them with physiological concreteness – without resorting to physical touch. Both Duse and Komissarzhevskaya clearly possessed this skill. According to La Gallienne Duse's hands were «so sensitively aware that one felt she could determine the texture of an object without even touching it – as though her fingers had antennae extending far beyond them»⁴⁰.

Herman Bang had this to say about Duse's connection with her props:

She knows how to communicate, not only through her body and through her hands, but through everything she touches. [...] A rose, a handkerchief, a chain, come to life under her hands; and while she herself remains silent and almost motionless, these inanimate things act for her. As though by magic they reflect the slightest chance of mood⁴¹.

In comparison, Valentina Verigina had this to say about Komissarzhevskaya's acting: «Her inner energy conveyed to the audience

through the inanimate objects – this is how charged they became through her fingers»⁴². Verigina's wording is more accurate than Bang's. Where Bang speaks of Duse's ability to "communicate" through her body, hands and objects, Verigina speaks of the objects being "charged" with the actress' energy – with the "electricity" of her life and being. With tragic actors, one cannot speak of deliberate or calculated communication – what conveys to the audience is the manifestation of their subconscious life. Similarly, La Gallienne, who often insists on Duse's pre-calculation, admits that Duse, who «used her hands a great deal, did not "gesticulate" with them. They were simply an integral part of the "total harmony"». In saying so, La Gallienne admits to the subconscious nature of a tragic actor's creativity, rooted in passivity, involuntariness, the channeling of energies, and the "forgetfulness" of self.

Paradoxically, this "abandonment" of self, exercised by Komissarzhevskaya and Duse, resulted in the strongest possible radiation of their creative personality onstage. The more they lost themselves, their physical bodies, and the more they disappeared in their characters, the stronger they manifested their individualities onstage. As a result, both actresses were often charged with playing one and the same role in every character – the one of Komissarzhevskaya or Duse.

According to Kukhta, «rather than nurturing a role in her, Komissarzhevskaya realized herself in the role. Theatre was her direct way to self-realize her individuality – her glorious creative manifestation»⁴³. It is for the same reason that some of Duse's audiences and critics charged her with always remaining "Duse" in all of her roles. Their own mundane understanding of the personalities of Marguerite Gautier, or Nora, or Hedda Gabler, was "smaller" than the characters created by «one of the most gifted, intelligent, enlightened, and most beautiful women of her century»⁴⁴. The personality of the actress, in certain instances, expanded the character. In other instances, it illuminated the true intentions of the playwright – those intentions not always accessible to an average person in their own banal reading, or in a similarly banal acting.

This ability to transcend the mask of the character, to dare expose one's personal self completely, and appear onstage unprotected, or psychologically naked – is a tragic actor's exclusive gift. Demidov considered it heroism of the highest order. He found the explanation of this phenomenon in the fact that, for a tragic actor, theatre, acting, is never their goal, but rather the mean leading to a higher goal – far loftier than theatre per se. Tragic actors are mystics in theatre, dedicated to their own intimate, yet all-consuming theme. Demidov, in his book *An Artist's Process Onstage*, drew the following comparison between a non-tragedian, and a tragic, or "affective" actor:

Some, like [...] Maria Savina [1854-1915], say: «the stage is my life»⁴⁵; or, like Stanislavsky [1988: 95] – «the smell of backstage, and of make-up intoxicated me», and so on ...

Others, like Duse, gave up the stage for twelve years; like Komissarzhevskaya gave it up [...] in order to start a school; [...]

For the former, the stage is their life; for the latter, it is only a means. The latter have something higher that they would like to say, and they value the stage because with its help they can say it better and fuller than in any other medium (they have appropriate abilities for the stage). But as soon as another "means" presents itself – one they consider more effective – they leave the stage without any doubts or hesitation⁴⁶.

Needles to say, tragic actors could never be satisfied with theatre as a "professional", or commercial institution. The everyday, mundane life and pursuits of an actor-craftsman are alien to them. It must be in such moments of dissatisfaction that Duse (as quoted by Arthur Symons) went so far as to say:

To save the theatre, the theatre must be destroyed, the actors and actresses must all die of the plague. They poison the air, they make art impossible. It is not drama that they play, but pieces for the theatre. We should return to the Greek, play in the open air; the drama dies of stalls and boxes and evening dress, and people who come to digest dinner⁴⁷.

Shortly before her death, Komissarzhevskaya said almost the same thing to Andrei Bely, who felt the following record of their conversation:

She is tired of the stage; the stage broke her; she went through the theatre – new and old; both of them broke her, having left a heavy sense of bewilderment; theatre in the contemporary cultural conditions is an end to a man; it is not theatre that is needed, but the new life; the new act will appear in life; it will come from new people; [...] a new man must be cultivated from infancy; [...] she decided to dedicate her entire experience and the whole force of her strivings to the creation of a new man-actor; an image of a large institution appears in her imagination, almost a kindergarten that would transform into a school, and even a theatrical university; pedagogue-teachers of this hitherto unseen enterprise must be chosen people, who yearn for a man⁴⁸.

This dissatisfaction with the state of modern theatre, and the quest for the theatre of the future, connects both Komissarzhevskaya and Duse with the representatives of the Russian theatrical avant-garde. When speaking of the two actresses in relation to avant-garde, what instantly comes to mind is Komissarzhevskaya's collaboration with Meyerhold on the theatre of symbolism, or Duse's dedication to the symbolist theatre of D'Annunzio. However, their true innovations lay within the expansion of the phenomenon of "realism", to touch upon its non-mundane, loftier spheres.

Komissarzhevskaya's true quest was not formal; it was a deeply spiritual quest. Her failure to find common language with Meyerhold can be explained by her tendency to «appear soaring in the air, only while stepping on earth»⁴⁹. At the same time, her soaring posture always lifted her above the mundane reality of the so-called realism. This is why she inevitably broke out of the realistic "type" and "individuality" of her characters, affirming what Michael Chekhov would call an "archetype" of a role, and her own larger-than-life individuality of a great artist. The realism of Duse and Komissarzhevskaya was – first and foremost – *deeply spiritual*. Their symbolism was what Maeterlinck once called, in talking to Stanislavsky, «ultra-naturalism of elevated feelings»⁵⁰.

When comparing the art of Duse with that of the Moscow Art Theatre, La Gallienne wrote: «Where the actors of the Moscow Art Theatre were "naturalistic," Duse was Nature»⁵¹. Nevertheless, Stanislavsky – this inspirer and teacher of the Russian theatrical avant-garde artists – also crossed into a new territory with his search for the "spiritual deepening" of realism. His struggle to achieve his desired results was conditioned, among other things, by the imperfection of human material.

A similar dream of a new actor-human caused Sulerzhitsky to insist on the monastery-like environment of the First Studio. That same striving drove Vakhtangov to recreate this convent-like atmosphere at his own Studio. His means of cultivating actors consisted as much of moral upbringing, as they did of actor training.

After Vakhtangov's death, Michael Chekhov and Demidov, each in their own way, continued to develop the new acting technique. Chekhov, at one time, confined himself and his students to the idyllic seclusion of Devonshire. There, at the utopian Dartington Hall, for three years, he dedicated himself to the cultivation of the actor for the "theatre of the future". Demidov, this Russian Don Quixote, fought against the windmills of theatrical dogmas, and persevered – despite tremendous odds.

The art of Duse and Komissarzhevskaya predates and inspires the work of the Russian avant-garde artists. These

two actresses only seem to belong to the past – material for theatre historians alone. Still unsurpassed in the power of their impact on the audiences, they might inspire in some the nostalgia for the "good old days" when the art of the director was in its infancy, and the audiences could experience the great actors' magic – undiluted and pure. Nikolai Demidov, for one, did not believe that the art of great actors, like Komissarzhevskaya and Duse, «existed and then vanished»⁵². «On the contrary» he wrote, «I think that art as a stable achievement has yet to truly exist. There have been individual ascents; there have been Praxiteleses, Raphaels, Paganinis, Mozarts, Beethovens, Garricks, Mochalovs, Yermolovas, Aldridges... They flew over the world like a shimmering comet, shone through our darkness, and hid again, leaving only bewilderment in their wake»⁵³.

What this means is that contemporaries of Duse and Komissarzhevskaya, directors and actors, were only partially ready to receive their art. At large, this art belongs to an actor of a new formation, to a future artist-human, who is yet to be cultivated. Therefore, Komissarzhevskaya and Duse belong chiefly to the future. To paraphrase what Vakhtangov once said of Meyerhold: «they gave roots to the theatre of the future. The future will give them their due»⁵⁴.

Notes

1 E. Kuchta, *Komissarževskaja*, in *Russkoe akterskoe iskusstvo XX veka*, 1, edited by S. Bušueva, RIII, St. Petersburg 1992, p. 47.

2 N. Demidov, *Tvorčeskoe Nasledie*, vol. II, edited by M. Laskina, Giperion, St. Petersburg 2004, p. 52.

3 «A man's creative spirit is greater than [his] religious and social sense». Ye. Vakhtangov, *The Vakhtangov Sourcebook*, edited by A. Malaev-Babel, Routledge, London and New York 2011, p. 135.

4 Stanislavsky refers to his co-productions with Leopold Sulerzhitsky, staged between 1907 and 1910, as well as to their collaboration with Gordon Craig on *Hamlet*.

5 *Evgenij Vachtangov: Dokumenty i svidetel'stva*, vol. I, edited by V. Ivanov, Indrik, Moscow 2011, p. 223.

6 Ivi, p. 220.

7 Exter, *Teatral'naja chronika*, in «Moskovskie vedomosti», December 30 1902, pp. 3-4.

8 P. Markov, *O teatre*, vol. I, Iskusstvo, Moscow

- 1974, p. 224.
- 9 Cfr. E. La Gallienne, *The Mystic in Theatre: Eleonora Duse*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York 1966, p. 166.
- 10 Cfr. N. Demidov, *Tvorčeskoe Nasledie*, vol. IV, edited by M. Laskina, Baltiyskiye Sezony, St. Petersburg 2009, p. 201.
- 11 Schneider, as quoted in E. La Gallienne, *The Mystic in Theatre: Eleonora Duse*, cit., p. 24.
- 12 E. Underhill, *Mysticism*, Methuen Publishing, London 1912, p. 60.
- 13 N. Demidov, *Tvorčeskoe Nasledie*, cit., vol. IV, p. 226.
- 14 Ivi, p. 230.
- 15 Ivi, pp. 228-229.
- 16 Ivi, p. 231.
- 17 Cfr. N. Demidov, *Tvorčeskoe Nasledie*, vol. III, edited by M. Laskina, Nestor-Istoriya, St. Petersburg 2007, pp. 341-342.
- 18 Cfr. N. Demidov, *Tvorčeskoe Nasledie*, cit., vol. IV, p. 255.
- 19 A. Izmajlov (Smolenskij), *Za sinej ptitsey*, in *V.F. Komissarževskaja*, Solnce Rossii, St. Petersburg 1915, p. 29.
- 20 N. Demidov, *Tvorčeskoe Nasledie*, cit., vol. III, p. 33.
- 21 E. La Gallienne, *The Mystic in Theatre: Eleonora Duse*, cit., p. 147.
- 22 Cfr. M. Chekhov, *To the Actor*, Routledge, London and New York 2002, p. 14.
- 23 Ivi, p. 17.
- 24 Cfr. N. Demidov, *Tvorčeskoe Nasledie*, vol. I, edited by M. Laskina, Giperion, St. Petersburg, 2004, p. 157.
- 25 Ye. Vakhtangov, *The Vakhtangov Sourcebook*, edited by A. Malaev-Babel, Routledge, London and New York 2011, p. 105.
- 26 E. La Gallienne, *The Mystic in Theatre: Eleonora Duse*, cit., p. 146.
- 27 *Ibidem*.
- 28 S. Jablonskij, *O teatre*, Tipografija Sytina, Moscow 1909, p. 236.
- 29 E. La Gallienne, *The Mystic in Theatre: Eleonora Duse*, cit., p. 151.
- 30 Cfr. M. Čechov, *O tehnike aktera*, United States of America 1946, p. 102.
- 31 Noziere, as quoted in E. La Gallienne, *The Mystic in Theatre: Eleonora Duse*, cit., p. 150.
- 32 E. La Gallienne, *The Mystic in Theatre: Eleonora Duse*, cit., p. 151.
- 33 N. Demidov, *Tvorčeskoe Nasledie*, cit., vol. II, p. 54.
- 34 Alexander Moissi (1879-1935), a German actor, Albanian by descent.
- 35 N. Demidov, *Tvorčeskoe Nasledie*, cit., vol. IV, p. 384.
- 36 E. La Gallienne, *The Mystic in Theatre: Eleonora Duse*, cit., p.147.
- 37 Ivi, p. 155.
- 38 N. Demidov, Fund 59 of the St. Petersburg State Theatre Library. The Demidov Archive (uncatalogued). Lectures 1924-1925, notebook 2, p. 79.
- 39 Cfr. A. Malaev-Babel, *Michael Chekhov and Yevgeny Vakhtangov: A Creative Dialogue*, in *The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov*, edited by M.-C. Autant-Mathieu and Y. Meerzon, Routledge, London and New York 2015, p.187.
- 40 E. La Gallienne, *The Mystic in Theatre: Eleonora Duse*, cit., p.156.
- 41 H. Bang, *Menschen und Masken*, H. Bondy, Berlin 1909, p. 68. Translated by E. La Gallienne.
- 42 V. Verigina, *Vospominanija*, Iskusstvo, Leningrad 1974, p. 64.
- 43 E. Kuchta, *Komissarževskaja*, cit., p. 23.
- 44 N. Demidov, *Tvorčeskoe Nasledie*, cit., vol. III, p. 33.
- 45 Savina frequently used these phrase to autographed her photographs.
- 46 Ivi, pp. 79-80.
- 47 A. Symons, *Studies in Seven Arts*, Archibald Constable, London 1906, p. 336.
- 48 A. Bely, *Meždu dvuch revoljucij*, Izdatel'stvo pisatelej, Leningrad 1934, p. 389.
- 49 S. Ya., *Gastroli Komissarževskoj: "Ogni Ivanovoj Noči"*, in «Russkoe slovo», September 16 1909, p. 6.
- 50 Stanislavsky, quoted in N. Demidov, *Tvorčeskoe Nasledie*, cit., vol. I, p. 115.
- 51 E. La Gallienne, *The Mystic in Theatre: Eleonora Duse*, cit., p. 149.
- 52 N. Demidov, *Tvorčeskoe Nasledie*, cit., vol. I, p. 90.
- 53 *Ibidem*.
- 54 Ye. Vakhtangov, *The Vakhtangov Sourcebook*, edited by A. Malaev-Babel, Routledge, London and New York 2011, p. 128.