

Oliver M. Saylor, Inside the Moscow Art Theatre  
(New York, Brentano's, Inc., 1925), pp. 162-172.

### CHAPTER XIII

#### The First Studio Grows Up

On the evening of December 7, 1924, the Moscow Art Theatre, Second, celebrated the tenth anniversary and the five hundred and sixty-first performance of its production of Dickens' "The Cricket on the Hearth." That is not quite an exact statement, to be sure, for it was the First Studio that created this deathless little "Rip Van Winkle" of the modern Russian stage back in the days when the war was young. The First Studio was young, too, having to its credit only an experimental production of Heijermans' "The Loss of 'The Hope,'" and "The Cricket" established the modest little group of players in a secure place on Moscow's theatrical hearthstone. Still, though this cozy little comedy belongs to the tender youth of that populous, ambitious and all but independent new playhouse in Theatre Square which calls itself the Moscow Art Theatre, Second, the very fact that it is fondly retained in the repertory is proof of the continuing identity of the First Studio under its aspiring new title. And if this be not proof enough, consider how four members of the original cast were still playing at the tenth jubilee-- Maria Durasova as Mary Peerybingle, Nadiezhda Bromley as Mistress Fielding, Vera Solovyova as Bertha, and Boris Sushkievitch as Caleb Plummer.

Just as surely as the Musical Studio is the product of the creative genius of Nemirovitch-Dantchenko, so the First Studio grown up is beholden to the vision of Stanislavsky. Of course, although each of these children has been the particular protégé of one of the parents, both of them have profited by the environment and the traditions which the parents built jointly into the Moscow Art Theatre itself. After treading a common path for two decades, more or less, the founders of the Art Theatre conceived of two different channels for perpetuating the spirit of that theatre. That is all.

The circumstances of the upbringing of these two children, however, render one of them, Stanislavsky's, the more interesting from the standpoint of institutional development if not yet on the score of original achievement. Continuing the analogy of the family what, which I quoted from the amusing pen of Tchernoyaroff in Chapter III, the Musical Studio was reared with little if any domestic responsibility. True, it was born of the need for keeping the home stage busy and it has shared in that task ever since birth. But it was never asked to fetch and carry for the elders. It was not expected to train recruits for the Dramatic Company. Without being pampered or spoiled, it has had free rein for self-development, for the pursuit of its own career.

Not so the First Studio. It was founded by Stanislavsky not only to enable him to apply his "system" of instruction to unspoiled youth but also to drill new levies for the main

company more effectively than a school could do. In Chapter LVI of "My Life in Art" he admits the latter purpose thus: "I had dreamed that the actor who grew up in the Studio would make his first timid artistic steps in a small room which was built so as not to violate the inner creative life of the beginning artist... Only after all the artistic qualities of the Studio pupil were strengthened and it would be easy for him to carry his role to a large stage, would he be taken by us into the family of the older actors of the Theatre proper, into the midst of the true preservers of the traditions of Russian art."

That was a perfectly rational fatherly ambition. Many a family fortune, many a business enterprise, even professional reputations, have been handed on from generation to generation on this principle. On the other hand, many a happy home has been hopelessly, and needlessly, shattered by the father's blind insistence on fealty to the family tradition and the son's determination to strike out on a new tangent, to make his own way in his own way. Stanislavsky had neither the luck to achieve his first ambition nor the misfortune of an obstinate temper. When the Studio began to assert its independence, he stood ready to give guidance and counsel. With some philosophy, more misgivings and even more solicitude, he analyzed his refractory offspring thus:

"Perhaps because the desired rapprochement between the Theatre and the Studio could not take place, the actors

who grew up in the Studio preferred to remain the first in a village rather than to become the second in Rome. In the Studio they soon became famous. But when they came to us in the Theatre they were only ordinary actors in our group. God knows what such a phenomenon threatened! Perhaps the Studios, demanding so little of themselves would become good little theatres with small desires which they would be able to fulfill beautifully. Could such little theatres serve the Eternal in art, which must always make tremendous demands on the artist, demands that are always higher than his abilities? Or perhaps these little theatres would be satisfied with fashionable, speedy and cheap success, which this sphere of our art always yields."

For ten years, Stanislavsky's philosophy was necessary; his misgivings and his solicitude, plausible. The First Studio, particularly, lived on the reputation of its "Cricket," its "Twelfth Night," its "Eric XIV." True, it removed to larger quarters. But conversely, it lost Baklanova to the Musical Studio, Vakhtangoff to the Third Studio and then to death, Kolin to Balieff abroad and later to oblivion.

But young Tchekhoff remained. And suddenly, without warning - just as a young man finds himself, quits floundering and starts off under full steam toward a definite goal - the First Studio came of age a year ago and grew up over night around the nucleus of this gifted nephew of the beloved playwright. Under the stimulus of the Art Theatre's reorganization,

imparting its own stimulus to that reordering of the household, the First Studio ceased to be the youthful and indifferent Misha; became the dignified, mature and ambitious Mihail Constantinovitch [Alexandrovitch]; rented the spacious and imposing Rozlobin or Novy Theatre, facing and flanking the century-old playhouses supported by the State in Theatre Square; assumed, with parental permission, the prerogatives and responsibilities of the Moscow Art Theatre, Second; and boldly announced a "modern" production of "Hamlet."

The executive and administrative structure required by this program has been sufficiently indicated in the chart accompanying Chapter III. Every function of the theatre, as I have said, is beholden directly to Tchekhoff through a board of directors over which he presides. He is answerable, in turn, only to Nemirovitch-Dantchenko by the loose thread that binds monarch and father-confessor. His role, therefore, is not unlike that of the two founders of the Art Theatre in its early days, and, like them, he has round him a faithful band of co-workers, trained to play together by years of intimate association. Including Tchekhoff himself, I count an even dozen artists in the theatre's first line today who were the backbone of the First Studio ensemble back in the winter of 1917-18: Ivan Bersenieff, Boris Sushklevitch, Valentin Smuishlyaieff, Alexi Tchekban, V. Gotovtseff, A. Geyrot, and Miles. Vera Solovyova, Sophia Ghiatsintova, Maria Durasova, S. Birman and Nadiezhda Bromley.

At first glance, it seems that the Moscow Art Theatre;

Second, has chosen to stress its likeness, its family resemblance, to its parent, rather than its independent personality. Simple, severe seats duplicating those of the original Art Theatre were installed when the débris of various tenants since the Revolution was cleared out of the building. The insignia of the Sea-Gull enters into the decorative scheme, reposes on the curtain. The ushers wear identical uniforms. The house is kept as scrupulously spotless. The program carries the same warning: "During the performance, entrance into the auditorium is prohibited." Applause is frowned on until the final curtain falls. The prompter is never heard, as he is in all other Moscow playhouses except the Art Theatre - constant rehearsals see to that! The repertory is billed with that of the parent. The parent pays a visit in full force to the stage of the son once or twice a week with "The Lower Depths" or another play in the current repertory. And in return for this courtesy, young Tchekhoff not only retains his formal membership in the parent company but joins it on occasion to play the role of Hlestyakoff in "The Inspector General."

Now, lest these similarities may have misled you, pick up a program of the Moscow Art Theatre, Second. First, you will note that it is illustrated with the leading figures in the play; next, that the regisseurs have provided an explanation of their interpretation of the play; and finally, that everyone who had a hand in the production is duly

credited - not only the players but the regisseurs, their assistant, the scenic artist, the composer, the director of the chorus, the master of fencing, the makers of the costumes, the hats, the wigs, the coiffures and the stage settings, the head of the mechanical staff, the stage manager and the electrician! In the Art Theatre, these details have always been discretely veiled behind the impersonal visage of the theatre itself. But youth and independence demand recognition.

Further evidence of these forces and of a spirit not unlike that of the Musical Studio in its disparagement of the strictly realistic tenets of the parent emerges in the regisseurs' apology for their work. Let us read what they have to say about their "Hamlet" while we wait for the curtains to part:

"What interested us in Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' is the juxtaposition of two types of human nature and the development between them of the struggle with each other. One of them is of a protesting nature, heroic, fighting for the affirmation of that which forms the substance of his life. This is our Hamlet. In order to bring out more vividly and to underscore his supreme significance, we had to cut the text of the tragedy and eliminate from it everything that might impede its whirlwind impetuosity. To this end we consciously infringed upon an age-old tragedy for the sake of a better understanding of Hamlet himself. As early as the middle of the second act, he takes his sword in hand and never relinquishes it until the end of the tragedy. We have

emphasized the restlessness of Hamlet by condensing the obstacles which he met on his way. From this point emerges the motive of King and eternity. King Claudius embodies all that which impedes the heroic Hamlet. He is egoistic, conservative, haughty and pompous. He is a hindrance to everything that moves forward. And our Hamlet holds firm in the elemental and sacred struggle against all that the King represents. Based on the understanding of Hamlet and the King as two forces constantly struggling with each other, the entire cast of characters is grouped in two hostile camps, confronting one another. One of them, with Hamlet against the King, includes Horatio, Marcellus, Bernardo, Francisco, all the Players and also Hamlet's beloved Ophelia. The other camp, with the King against Hamlet, consists of all the courtiers, headed by Polonius. And finally, there are those characters whose relation to the tragedy seems to place them in the hands of both fighting camps, for example Laertes and the Queen.

"In order to concentrate our color values, we deemed it necessary to transfer the action of 'Hamlet' to the Middle Ages, as to an epoch which expressed with dazzling brightness the elements and the spirit of this struggle - that is, the heroic and the opponent of the heroic.

"Hence we derived the elements of Gothic architecture, the medieval costume and the medieval painting, which became the basis of the external aspects of the production. Hence we derived the pomp of the court scenes in accordance with the brilliance and splendor with which the Middle Ages surrounded



the sovereign of its world. Still, under no circumstances do we wish to solve the tragedy in an every-day realistic manner. Therefore, we disclose the Middle Ages as our creative fancy has dictated. We take from the Middle Ages only that which emphasizes more sharply the basic lines of the struggle between two ancient adverse elements: the heroic and the bright; the conservative and the dark."

Obviously, the "Hamlet" which the regisseurs, Smuishlyaiieff, Tatarinoff and Tchegan, have devised will not be an Elizabethan revival, a clutter of realistic walls and armor, a Sweet Prince in dress suit, or a Gordon Craig pageant in white and gold against changing screens, such as the Art Theatre itself disclosed with Katchaloff as Hamlet a dozen years ago. This surmise proves correct when the Sea-Gull curtains part. Instead, we have a "Hamlet" seen through colored and distorted lenses, a "Hamlet" startlingly stylized. If I were to characterize it briefly, I would say that it is the Jones-Hopkins-Barrymore "Hamlet" carried from the realm of ordered fantasy into a world of exaggerated nightmare. There are steps. But they don't stay put; they shift here and there for the various scenes. The Ghost, likewise, is a shaft of light, though its lines are uttered by Hamlet's subconscious self. Probably the paragraph from their apology which Tchegan's regisseurs have executed most successfully is that which calls for sharp contrast in the aspect and the mien of the hostile camps. Not only in costume and bearing and control of stage lighting is this antithesis conveyed, but also in a

subtle atmosphere which the players radiate from their inner consciousness. One group distinctly attracts; the other just as intensely repels. The means intended to propagate revulsion against the Court are particularly expressive - degenerate facial masks, mincing gait, hollow, artificial and insincere voice tones, servility alternate with insolence. Hamlet and his camp are not so vividly etched; they appear for what they are rather by contrast. As a whole, therefore, the production stands somewhere between the Art Theatre's traditional realism and the purely cerebral constructivism of Tairoff and Meyerhold - probably nearer the latter than the former. It is amusing to see how bigoted critics of the new dispensation snatch the radical interpretation of the tragedy and particularly the discredit which Tchekhoff and his fellow-artists heap upon royalty, to make of "Hamlet" a proletarian holiday!

Although Tchekhoff's Hamlet has made him Moscow's darling today, I was distinctly disappointed in his performance. His unmistakable talents, I feel sure, are not those which Hamlet demands. And in striving to make them fit the task, he strains and tears his voice, much as John Barrymore did on his off nights or when he was consciously trying to make a good impression. In both cases, Russian and American, half the effort wisely applied would achieve twice the results. In the graveyard scene Tchekhoff was particularly fine and moving. His Hamlet was still young when I saw it, and if he will take this finely and sensitively poised scene as his

keynote, he will ultimately become a great Hamlet. But Moscow, as I have said, thinks he is one already and bestows such plaudits as even Katchaloff never won for his Prince of Denmark.

In addition to "Hamlet" and the older plays of First Studio days, the current repertory includes Lieskoff's "The Spendthrift," Tolstoy's "Love - the Golden Book," an inept performance of "King Lear," and "The Taming of the Shrew." In rehearsal, if not already presented to the public, are: "Petersburg," by Alexander Bieloy, and "The Flea," a comedy by Eugene Zamiatin, written on the theme of a novel by Lieskoff entitled "Left-handed." Zamiatin is the author of the satiric novel, "We," which was published in this country last winter but has not yet appeared in Russia. For his play, the celebrated artist, Kruihoff, has designed the settings.

From this survey of the Moscow Art Theatre, Second, it is apparent that if Stanislavsky's first hopes for the First Studio were not realized, neither have his forebodings come true. Content for a while to be "a good little theatre with small desires which it would be able to fulfill beautifully," the First Studio has felt the urge of high ambition. Its true career still lies ahead. But so did that of the Art Theatre itself back in 1898. And the people who founded it were little if any younger than Tchekhoff and his co-workers.

Already the ambition of the Moscow Art Theatre, Second, visualizes for it a tour abroad and an audience waiting for it in America. Perhaps - in time. But not yet. "Hamlet,"

"Erik XIV," "Twelfth Night" and "The Cricket on the Hearth" are all good reserve productions, but what this company needs for success abroad is a series of genuine Russian productions of Russian plays. To expand the repertory in this direction will take time. In the last seven years, the map of the Theatre International has shifted its boundaries. When I returned from Moscow in 1918, I hadn't the faintest dream that the parent company of the Art Theatre would ever budge from the old homestead, though a visit from the First Studio seemed a desirable possibility. Today, the veterans have come and gone, leaving behind them standards that the Studios, even grown up, will find staring them in the face to challenge them even more severely than they do at home.

# ★ PRESENT MANAGEMENT OF THE MOSCOW ART THEATRE ★

