Theatre Training Moscow Style

Joanna Rotté

Ed. Note: Professor Rotté wrote this article in the spring of 1991—not so long ago, but an epoch or two before today's Commonwealth. The USSR is no more. Russia is ascendant. Or will it all be different again by the time you read this? We print Rotté's article because it offers a very concrete experience of a society at the brink of momentous, and as yet unfinished, change.

28 March

In the Air

Along with a delegation of 28 other American theatre workers and educators, I am on a Soviet-built airplane flying from Prague to Moscow. The seating is near capacity. Departure was delayed maybe 20 minutes. Two rows of us were requested to move from the front of the plane to the back in order to balance it. Now, although it is morning, lunch is being served, the customary meal of cold meat with beer. Before we left Prague, CNN was reporting unrest in Moscow, with the Soviet government promising to squelch any demonstration. Apparently, arms have been summoned to Red Square. On this flight the drinks are served from pitchers. The captain just passed by to use the toilet.

In Moscow

Next to Nadia our guide, I am the first of our group up from the subway into the streets approaching Red Square. Our destination is the Moscow Art Theatre. Masses of people are everywhere. The army is here—with trucks, artillery, and rifles. It is snowing. This is my first view of inner Moscow. Four of us, three women and a man, bolt from the group to take photos. We are mixed into the crowd and lose sight of the others. I stop a man and ask directions to the Moscow Art Theatre, using pidgin English. We run to where he has pointed and find the street blocked by soldiers. Our group is visible, huddled on the other side. Nadia breaks back through the army and explains our identity. Some of the soldiers smile as they part to admit us. I am reluctant to abandon the drama in the streets.

At the Moscow Art Theatre we see Oleg Tabakov as Solieri in *Amadeus*. The seats, the theatre, are small. His acting style is large, just too, too appallingly large. This is not the renowned M.A.T. quality of no-acting acting. Rather, this is capital-A acting.

The show is over, the streets are naked, and a red flag safely flies high on a building. (I later hear that three divisions of 20,000 paratroopers each were poised to descend if a demonstration had erupted. But I also hear that the army officers were ready to join the demonstrators. In any case, nothing ensued, save obedience to Gorbachev's "No Protest" decree.) It is bedtime. Everybody, I presume, has gone home to sleep.

29 March

Tabakov

In the morning we are bussed to the Moscow Art Theatre School. Tabakov, our Solieri of the night before, enters rushing. He is late to his office, where he presides in his sixth year as chancellor of the school, and he is also late to our meeting. We are already seated around an outlay of cognac, coffee, and biscuits.

With some English and the help of a translator, Tabakov speaks of the times. His coherence is fleeting. He frequently seems to lose his words, even in Russian. Perhaps being an actor, he needs a script. He tells us that the Moscow Art Theatre School was born in a tragic time, 1943, amid World War II. Then, in the 1950s, after Stalin's death, "for the first time the theatre had the smell of freedom, but the smell was not so real and not so long lived." Brezhnev entered, inaugurating "the badness times when something very serious in human life was lost, and everything was for sale, talent included." But in the building of the Moscow Art Theatre School it was possible "to save yourself if you had a real trust in the profession."

Tabakov owns that yesterday was a stupid day for his country. Because Gorbachev banned the rally, he, Tabakov, was ashamed. He says that the path to democracy is hard and long, that they are taking the first steps, that the armed powers have destroyed the human soul of the normal person, that the country needs democracy, but that there is no place for democracy in the theatre.

Tabakov tells us that the position of theatre in Russia has always been a special one, like that of the Church. When there was no place in the society for discussion, there was still the theatre. Now, he says, in these Gorbachev times, since censorship has died, the theatre is profiting. But not all of his colleagues, in his opinion, are ready for this freedom. He himself admits to disliking that some directors have come out as homosexuals. But he concedes to being from the provinces and of an older generation.

Our delegation congratulates Tabakov on his portrayal of Solieri. He is pleased but recognizes the praise as flattery. His Solieri, he assures us, is played to please the Russian women. The implication, it seems, is he considers himself a theatrical sex symbol and the women in Moscow voyeurs. But the Tabakov I saw onstage was melodramatic and distinctively unsubtle. Tabakov offstage, while charming, is somewhat cute, somewhat in disarray, and somewhat beyond sexual dynamism. When asked which role in American theatre he would most like to play, his answer is Willy Loman. I expect that is a good part for him.

We learn there are four years of study at the Moscow Art Theatre School. The first year is all exercise and etude work. The second year includes the study of plays from both Russian and world theatre. In the third year, the students begin working on scripts, and in the fourth year, based on the school's policy that the students experience themselves with an audience, they perform productions. Before graduating, each student will appear publically upwards of 300 times.

Tabakov explains that when admitting students, the school looks not only for talent but also for intelligence, the kind of intelligence that enables a person to think about people less fortunate than, and different from, oneself. He says they want their students to become desirous of changing the world for the better through the profession. At the same time, he is worrying that, with governmental support dwindling and theatres becoming part of a market economy, the school somehow must insure that their graduates will be able to "earn bread from this profession."

At the In-Tourist

Back in the hotel room: the place of flowered wallpaper, where the refrigerator pants toward its demise; where the thick wood furniture is heavily oiled and the electrical outlets are installed lopsided; where the bathroom sink slants forward, the toilet drains upward before downward, and the tub, though tiny, is equipped with a bath faucet, a hand-held shower, and a wall-mounted shower. The drapes in the room are blue plastic, like shower curtains with lace panel insets. The building makes sounds. The closet and cabinet doors squeak, the handle on the entrance door rattles when a guest passes by. That same door won't close without being locked—is this a bit of Soviet security?

This whole venture feels like a reconnaissance mission: to get the beat of a nation in anticipation of a return trip. Some of the people in our group want to focus on finding the similarities and crossovers between our cultures, the USA's and the USSR's. But it seems to me, for understanding, we need to search out the differences. A desire for connection is not connection itself. We have no idea what lifestyles these Muscovites have endured.

This money business is perplexing. We cannot get any dollars changed! While there is no actual need for rubles, it is disconcerting to be a stranger without currency. And what is the real reason why we cannot change money? Are our guides, who work for the governmental In-Tourist Service, under orders to control our spending? to limit it to the use of hard currency only in designated shops? For example, today we were taken to Armand Hammer's hotel with shops and restaurants for foreigners bearing foreign notes. We were let loose to make purchases. But the goods were imports, or expensive. From there we let ourselves be ushered to the thresholds of three different banks. All of them were closed. Is it actually possible, as we were told, that the so-called Mafia has shut the banks? Is it feasible that rubles are being withheld from foreigners so as to force them to buy on the black market, which ostensibly the so-called Mafia controls? What is, who are, the Mafia? How could whoever they are be so powerful as to close a bank, a state institution?

The wind shrieks outside as if a jet plane were sweeping by. The room I share with Shirley Burke of our group occupies a small piece of the

27th floor. Below, mud is everywhere. One wishes that the government of *perestroika* would plant the entire city of Moscow, if not with grass, then with ivy or moss or some ground cover. This mud promotes the sense of plodding, of being mired, of malaise. Decay of the old, poor construction of the new, a whole infrastructure in motion but not working characterize Moscow. Lines, lines, the infamous lines—to McDonald's, Pizza Hut, a children's department store that is not even open, Estee Lauder; lines populated by women.

The Shchukin

What a contrast was rendered this morning between Tabakov of the Moscow Art Theatre and Vladimir Etoush, director of the Shchukin Theatre School. Meticulously attired in a navy blazer, vest, wine-colored tie, white shirt, and gray trousers, Etoush received us in his wood-paneled, carefully appointed office. Speaking through a translator, he was measured in manner, controlled, eloquent, orderly, polite, and in charge; in short, a picture of corporate regality.

The Shchukin School, he told us, was begun in 1914, in the self-same building it now occupies, by a group of students from Moscow University who wanted to practice dramatic art. They invited Evgeny Vakhtangov, then considered to be the best conveyor of Stanislavski's acting theories, to serve as their teacher. Vakhtangov straightaway mounted a production, which failed. Then he said, "Okay, now we'll do theatre seriously." On 14 October 1914, Vakhtangov delivered his first lecture, outlining a program of study that, with some modernization, remains the basis for the school today.

1. Students practice muscle relaxation, sensory awareness, and relating with a partner in the first-year movement class at the Shchukin Theatre School which was founded in 1914 by a group of Moscow students. (Photo by Joanna Rotté)

Etoush pinpointed Vakhtangov's contribution to theatre education: Vakhtangov managed to separate Stanislavski as a teacher with a system from Stanislavski practicing the aesthetics of the Moscow Art Theatre. Those aesthetics, dictated mainly by the plays of Chekhov and Gorki, Vakhtangov rejected. But the Stanislavski system he upheld. Essentially, by initiating production styles other than realistic, Vakhtangov established that, while dramatic presentation can take any form, the basis for the actor remains the Stanislavski system. Following Vakhtangov's principles, the acting and directing students of the Shchukin School are taught to function as architects making use of a solid foundation (the Stanislavski system) to create a building (the role in the play).

The school's most distinctive inheritance from Vakhtangov's program of study is that for the first year and a half the students work as themselves, without scripts, improvisationally, in sketches and short pieces devised by their instructors. The whole aim of this work is to enable them to live truthfully, that is, perform actions, in given (or suggested) circumstances. At only two intervals within the early training do the students break away from the use of themselves within the given circumstances: (1) They go outside to a factory, bakery shop, somewhere, and study the behavior and mannerisms of people at work. Through this, they begin to assimilate elements of character based on specific observation of a profession in action. (2) They search in life for the behavior of some animal or person they would like to demonstrate in class. Additionally within the first year, they study muscle relaxation, sensory awareness, physical activity with and without props, and relating with a partner.

In the latter half of the second year of their training, the students continue with improvisations, without published texts. But now they regularly take into consideration characterization. Since, according to Etoush the school recognizes that "in prose, characters are explained more fully than in drama," the students base their character sketches on prose descriptions. Any dialog is put into their own words. In these exercises, the faculty look for the students' level of taste and mentality in their choice of prose, as well as their ability to work with the material, work on their own, and realize the piece.

In the third year of study, the students perform productions they themselves create. One of these, *The Mice,* was played for us, entirely without words. It was top-level in all respects. The actors, lovely to watch, sensual, graceful and strong, were costumed all in black. They elicited startling notes and alluring melodies from real and found musical instruments. They danced, moved, and vocalized. They interacted with props, fabrics, and each other.

In the fourth year, they are ready for scripts. We were invited to sit in on a rehearsal of Ostrovsky's *The Passionate Heart,* directed by Garii Cherniakhovsky. Wrought on a constructivist set of ropes, ladders, and wooden beams, the performance style was physically and vocally gymnastic. At the same time, the acting was intimate, interconnected, and included the portrayal of a most believable drunk.

In any one semester there are 20 to 22 instructors on the Shchukin faculty, all of them graduates of the school. The faculty we observed at work were confident in their techniques and visibly possessed of teaching talent. The faculty we met in passing ranged in demeanor from elegant to sweet. An exception was the first-year acting teacher. He, it seemed to our group leader Jim Symons, must be the reincarnation of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen's director/stage manager, Ludwig Chonegk. This au-

thoritarian latter-day Prussian conducted an entire class with his fly unzipped.

The improvisations for beginning actors we observed in his session were preparations for "one of the most difficult moments onstage, the moment when the word is born." The lessons took two approaches: (1) A printed sketch, including a location and a time, is given to all the students to read. Two of them are asked to create some kind of relationship within the given circumstances. These two could then discover at what point within their relationship language became necessary. (2) Two students pick a card randomly from a number of cards containing nothing but dialog. They then create circumstances to surround, and a relationship to justify, the dialog. The words and punctuation on the card must be followed to the letter. Nothing can be uttered until the situation itself makes the word or line imperative. These improvisations were followed by a discussion among the students, the instructor, and us as to what in the work could be considered acceptable acting.

We were also guests at a first-year movement class conducted by Andrey Droznin. The exercises began with acrobatics. They proceeded to amazing, even violent, stretches, beyond supposed limits that might have hurt the students had their bodies been older or had their teacher not talked them through each step. They ended with the study of slow-motion movement that appeared Eastern in nature, as if t'ai chi inspired. The work entailed problem-solving, using each other's bodies to climb up and down, grace, efficiency, and cleanliness of line and rhythm. I myself studied voice, movement, meditation, healing practices, martial arts, Yoga, and Zen in Japan for two years. While I can claim to have experienced or witnessed the human body coaxed through all manner of exquisite endurance, the coaching skill and corporal effortlessness of this teacher excited me. He was as if made of air, without weight to his bones.

The competition for admission to the Shchukin Theatre School is severe. There are more than 100 applicants for each available place. We were seeing the wheat of Soviet actors-to-be. From the first-year students to the fourth, they developed progressively in health, beauty, and, obviously, craft. Photos of historic actors, all graduates of the school, are displayed on the walls of the grand old Shchukin building. The portraits are there, it seemed, to challenge or inspire the students, to make them reach or reflect.

30 March

The Moscow Art Theatre

Our group leader has convinced Tabakov to invite us back to the Moscow Art Theatre School to look in on the classes. We are seated on the periphery of a first-year acting class being conducted by Mikhail Lobanov for 23 students. He explains that the main idea of this introductory training is to teach young actors to exist onstage freely, without tension. Normally, they would begin with techniques for relaxation. But these are dispensed with today in favor of offering us a demonstration. Indeed, the class seems choreographed. After each exercise, the students arise en masse, pick up their chairs, and put them down in a new place altogether.

The exercises, mainly derived from the teachings of Michael Chekhov, are meant to develop the students': (1) concentration of attention, (2) emotional depth, and (3) sense of imagination. The most intriguing and

2. Photos of historic actors, all graduates of the Shchukin Theatre School, line the walls of the classrooms to challenge and inspire the students. (Photo by Joanna Rotté)

energetically executed is one in which a student becomes his or her favorite toy, followed by all the class imitating the toy. Other exercises make use of or develop tempo-rhythm, breathing, stretching, and Yogic concentration, so as "to free the actor to receive the world!" according to Lobanov; also, mirroring, sculpting each other's bodies, relaxation to stimulate emotional freedom, and games, so as to "allow the actors to forget they are in class." Finally, there is a sexist number in which the girls simulate flowers and the boys trees. Each student, whether flower or tree, is to live its life through the seasons from spring onward. One young man insists on becoming a flower but none of the young women opt for trees. In this studio acting is fun; moreover, it is as if acting lacks a purpose other than to have fun. Some of the exercises evoke no more than a display of cleverness. Off to the side, Tabakov sits and watches. Treated with deference, he is the instated master.

We have been bussed over to the Theatre Union to meet with producers, executive directors, and artistic directors. These, the big guns, are gathered in the office of Mikhail Yulianov, the union's chairman, and director of and actor for the Vakhtangov Theatre. Yulianov describes the union as simultaneously a social and creative organization. Primarily, it functions to monitor theatre education and to insure favorable working conditions for professionals as well as students.

Yulianov defers to Andrei Goncharov, secretary of the union, who is also director of the Mayakovsky Theatre and a professor who has been involved in education for the past 50 years. Goncharov tells us his interest lies in defining the Russian national character and in codifying the principles underlying the Russian school of theatre. He is determined to aid his republic in establishing state laws, social situations, and aesthetic principles that revolve around the human being.

Goncharov's immediate focus is actor-training. He insists that to effect change one must first look to the process of selecting actors for the stage. He says that this process should begin when the students are in high school, earlier than it does now in the Soviet Union. Basically, he explains, recruitment entails a search for people with talent, and admission presupposes the use of a number of tests for identifying certain "actorly" qualities. The determining feature for admission must be "the possibility to attract attention." If this feature is identified, it makes sense to accept that person. If this feature is absent, it is useless to train that person since "internal qualities are impossible to acquire." Once enrolled, students should be educated in a "responsiveness of perception"; that is, the ability to see oneself and transform oneself. Goncharov acknowledges that the "aesthetics of Stanislavski's theatre are dead and in the past." But he extolls Stanislavski's approaches to personality and the subconscious as major paths for expressing one's individuality. Ultimately, in his view, the actor must be trained to reveal imaginative thinking onstage so that the audience perceives a human being.

While speaking, Goncharov picks up articles on the desk in front of him—a paperweight, a letter opener, a book. He examines these things as he talks, fingering them as if they were props. Putting each article down in a different place, he rearranges the space around him. He leans forward, taps the desktop, leans backward, strokes his head, and brings his hands to his face. He is a physical being. Furthermore, he is a being dedicated to the physiological and psychological laws governing action and motivation as found in the research of Seminov, an academic psychologist.

What Goncharov considers unique about Russian theatre in the context of world theatre is that in the Soviet Union actor training, as well as director training, includes lessons learned not only from Stanislavski but also from Vakhtangov, Meyerhold, and Michael Chekhov. There have been changes since Stanislavski. Increasingly more attention has been given to the mental and physical aspects of acting, as needed to play, for example, *Tartuffe*. Also, distinctions have been drawn between psychological action and poetic action. In poetic action, the actor constructs an outline of behavior through which visionary ideas may be implemented. Together with his colleagues, Goncharov is "trying to realize through a canvas of behavior an actor's whole mode of existence." At the same time, he admits that "the Russian theatre remains [true to its roots] psychological." That is because, he explains, until recently, their lives were

taken up with protest theatre, "which forgot the human being." They missed, he regrets, the sum of absurdist theatre and everything that followed. But now, he tells us, some of them are looking beyond Russia.

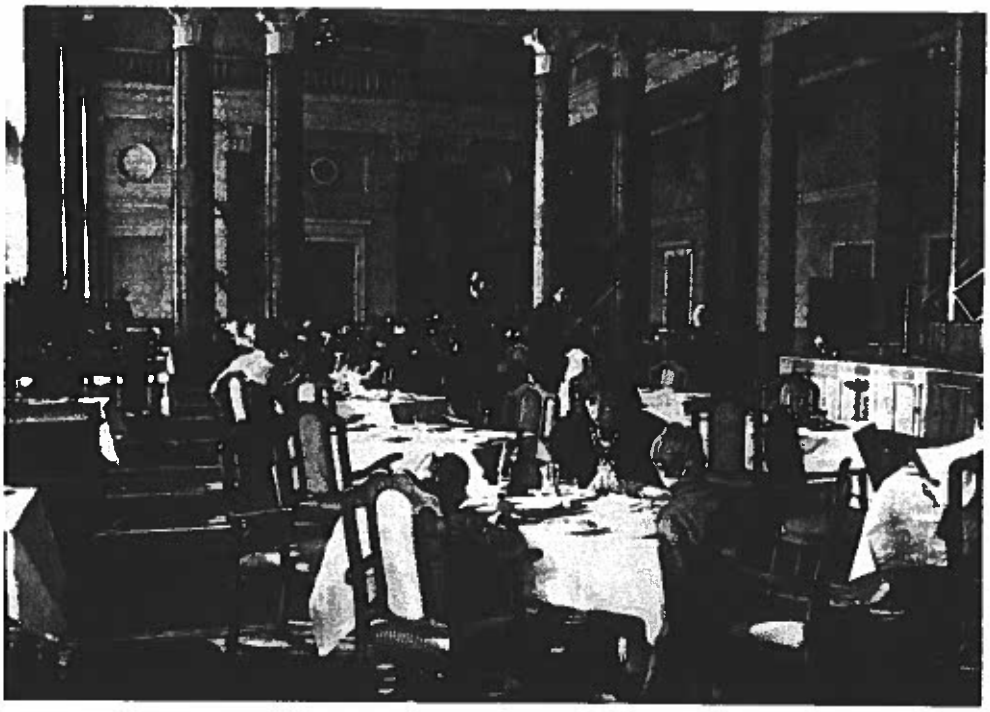
Other Soviet people comment, the union's leading men and the women who support them. They answer our questions. When I ask whose theories, whose influences outside Russia (for example, those of Brecht, Grotowski, Barba, etc.) they are now investigating, Tabakov asserts, "The theatre is not a restaurant from which to pick and choose." These union delegates are gracious. But when we inquire if they wish to know anything about theatre or theatre training in America, they appear confused. Are they shy? Is their hesitation because no one famous is among us? They are, after all, the living Soviet counterparts of John Houseman and Tyrone Guthrie, while our names are unimpressive outside academia. In the end, they are modestly curious, while essentially unreceptive. As with so much over here, we are on unstable footing.

Moscow Sights

We are treated to a hurricane tour of Moscow by bus. How strange it is to hear: "On your right is a church, and there on the left is the headquarters of the KGB . . . Here is the statue of Pushkin and there is the building for the Minister of Internal Affairs." Gray building after gray building looms at us through the bus windows. All blend with the gray skies and the gray suits and the gray pavement. Our tour guide, Svetlana, motions us to, "Look at that building there. It's the Maly Theatre." When someone asks, "Which one?" Svetlana replies, "The gray one." Our entire busload rocks with laughter.

We are admitted to Red Square, whereas ordinary Soviet citizens are not. Outside the gates, a student lifts up an original Russian flag. Vadim, one of our guides, is surprised to see this symbol of resistance. Lenin's tomb, that granite mausoleum on the edge of the Square, is closed. So are St. Basil's of the golden cupolas, the History Museum, and the GUM Department Store—all closed. Three times, of three different people, I ask why Lenin's tomb is shut. The speculations are: some facial restoration is in order; the government fears vandalism; the tomb is secured annually to pump up the body. Joe Brandesky of our group informs Tom Markus and me of a recent *Newsweek* report. Ostensibly, the Tzar, indeed the whole royal family plus servants, have been found via their bones and teeth, burned and acid-drenched at the bottom of a sealed well. Apparently, the assassination was a formalized plan and pact, not a whim, not a terrorist attack, but a contemplated and fulfilled strategy with Lenin's signature. Will Lenin and his tomb also eventually disappear? Or will all of *glasnost* evaporate and everyone be forced to regress? Like feminism in the USA, it seems here and now, in spite of the guarded gates on Red Square, that liberation has gone too far to go all the way back.

One feels uncomfortable in a Red Square for tourists only. One feels equally uncomfortable in restaurants that were formerly the dining rooms of palaces, rooms that even now are not, and certainly then were not, gathering places for the proletariat. One feels uncomfortable either eating the catered food or leaving it uneaten. I, who do not eat flesh, attempt a gesture of amends by wrapping up slices of leftover meats for delivery to the hotel maids. What remains to be eaten, meal after meal, in addition to the ubiquitous potato, is rich, brown bread and cucumbers. So far we have tasted neither tea nor vodka.



3. A former palace was converted into this Moscow restaurant. (Photo by Joanna Rotté)

Stalinist Aesthetics

It is post-intermission in the lobby of the Maly Theatre. We are here for a sold-out, long-time-in-the-repertoire production of Ostrovsky's *The Handsome Man*. Kevin Kennison, Jon Whitmore, and I just could not withstand Act II. The scenery is painted flats, blues and pinks together, with few set pieces. The costumes are unmatched and do not fit the actors. Like our lodgings, the theatre designs lack aesthetic unity. One wonders if the practice, moreover, the concept, of interior decorating has missed the USSR. Not Russia of old but the USSR. The set decoration we have seen in the professional theatre, though not in the schools, is abysmal. The room decoration in public places is garish. A variety of textures and materials are used to assemble a space. Natural is mixed with artificial, high with low. All are drenched in an unlikely palette of colors, as in the Russian cathedrals or a Japanese kimono. But here, in modern times, none of it coheres. Apparently, the spirit to make variety harmonious has been lost.

Our hotel is even more unredeemingly paradoxical. Frankly, it is grotesque. The restaurant therein is adorned with docklike piles which are sinister, even cruel looking. The floor is marble. The paneling is woodgrain plastic. The furniture is Danish modern. The hotel was built to house visiting athletes for the 1980 Olympics. In truth, I could believe the Americans backed out of the 1980 Olympics not for any political reason regarding Afghanistan but because they had heard about the accommodations in Moscow. Surely, the Soviets built the hotel as a psychological tactic: to depress and debilitate their opponents. The bedsheets are good, 100 percent cotton, though stiff like the toilet paper. The bathroom accoutrements are, again, chosen on the principle of diversity. There are undersized terry-cloth bath towels, dish towels, cotton and linen hand towels—towels as variegated as a pile of laundry. The floor tiles in the bathroom are mismatched, the wall tiles are mismatched, altogether it is a grab bag of tiles. Every permanent section of the room

appears as if it had been installed by someone drunk or at best by a tradesperson lacking a pattern and a plumbline.

Why does nothing fit in, in and of itself, nor with its neighbor? For a nation whose ideology purports community, the decor is astoundingly dissonant, element by element. For a nation that succeeds in superlative theatre training, the aesthetics are startlingly askew. This is not postmodernism, but indifference.

The lounge furniture at the Maly Theatre is vinyl. Indeed, I have not seen a real leather chair yet. Blessedly, there are grand pianos everywhere, and fantastic marble or parquet floors. But floor patterns and floor colors rarely blend with the patterns and colors of the walls. The Maly Theatre lobby is somewhat exceptional. Done in a scope of browns, it is perhaps restful.

So many women wear boots. So many chandeliers are ostentatious. I wish I could know what seizes the minds of waiters with severe, intense expressions. Or what conciliates the heart of the disingenuous hotel floor-attendant with gold teeth. And what of Nadia, the freelance tour guide who could be mistaken for an American college kid? Or Svetlana, the Armenian institutional tour guide, who behaves utterly pro forma—what excites her nerves? And then there is Vadim, the other freelance tour guide. An amateur theatre wag recently back from English-language studies in Britain, he is gentle. Vadim brings me books and has arranged for Frank Cornelius and I to see a youth theatre's satirical review tomorrow night.

31 March

Cars and Quarters

Looking out from the hotel room at these surrounding domiciles, I count approximately 396 units per building. Figuring a minimum of 3 persons per unit, I estimate each building houses at least 1,000 people. Early on this Sunday morning (Palm Sunday in the USSR, Easter Sunday in the USA), there are 27 cars in the lot of the facing building. This means of 396 units, 369 are without cars. About 80 percent of the people living here, 30 minutes from the center of Moscow, are carless. Mercifully, there is not the strangulating pollution in Moscow as there is in Prague; there are decidedly fewer cars in Moscow than in Prague. People here use the buses and subways, which function fine and arrive frequently. But they are dirty. The subways are as unclean as in New York or in Philadelphia. Not much of anything out-of-doors is washed, not the avenues and streets and not the cars. These massive apartment buildings are horrid. They are less revolting than the urban slum buildings in the United States, but horrid nevertheless. People live in them, cultivated people and once-removed peasant people.

The wall-mounted shower head in our hotel bathroom was fake. I would have said it was veneer if there were an aesthetic of veneer in the USSR, but there is not.

These Russians are emotive people, passionate in their expression onstage and desirous of acclamation. The sensuality in their acting is sex out on the surface, not a tease, but straightforward, and not Puritanically impaired. They appear warm towards each other in life, men and women together, and uninhibited onstage. It makes me desirous of making love with a Russian man.

We flee the hotel for a tour of the Kremlin cathedrals. So much wealth on the walls and up in the domes that one wonders how the old women shuffling through can reconcile this ornateness with the presumed austerity of their own quarters. Vadim suggests they are content to have their churches back. The weather is more than brisk. Even as we nestle towards each other for warmth, on the way down from the Kremlin hill, Dick Block of our group is beseiged by a flock of gypsy children. In an instant the children have vanished and his wallet is discovered missing.

Just prior to boarding our bus, several young men accost us with gutteral sounds and sign language. From their pockets, under coats, beneath hats, within bags, they bring forth Russian dolls, those wooden stacking dolls. While uncovering a $5 mark inscribed on the palms of their hands, they press us to buy a doll. I remember that back in New York during our orientation at JFK airport, and well before that in pretrip memoranda, we were warned repeatedly not to purchase anything on the black market. Allegedly, we would hazard arrest, incarceration, even deportation. We have so far heeded those warnings. Indeed, when two young men named Alex and Oleg, with jewelry for sale, approached some of us on the path to the Kremlin, we were not seduced. However, Frank Cornelius volunteered the name of our hotel, suggesting the young men might bring some Moscow University sweatshirts around after hours. Now, here we are, on our fourth day in Moscow, without souvenirs. Given the proximity of our bus, we are emboldened to disobedience. Each of us hands over dollars until all the dolls are bought. The transactions are swift and under the eyes of our guides. It is not until we are secure within the bus that I realize the entire group of black market dollsellers were deaf mutes.

We are driven to the Anton Chekhov Museum, situated in a red brick house once occupied by the playwright, and find it closed. There is leisure after lunch to visit Chekhov's grave in Moscow's V.I.P. cemetery. A large, secluded, intriguing landscape, the cemetery is crowded this Sunday with both the living and dead. We stop by the resting places of Gogol, Nemirovich-Dantchenko, Bulgakov, and Khrushchev. The style of each tombstone is meant to be characteristic of the departed. Chekhov's, a pure white, softly curving, upright slab lifting into a peak, with a slim roof of slate on top, is the simplest and most pleasing. Most remarkable is an off-white stone statue of a man formally dressed in a communist uniform. Sculpted from the thighs up into a standing posture, he is holding a telephone to his ear—as if life had ceased for him in the middle of a call. Some of us wager as to what his profession might have been, this V.I.P. bureaucrat cut off on the telephone.

Our destination is an artisans' cooperative, shadily dealing in dollars, on the outskirts of Moscow. The prices are reasonable. The artifacts, though essentially decorative and probably mass-produced, are not without charm. Assuming this is to be our final opportunity for picking up gifts in Moscow, everyone buys something. Our assumption is misguided. Without notice, we are bussed to Arbat Street. Here is the open market of Moscow, sometimes compared to Paris's St. Germain-des-Prés. But Paris takes francs only, while on Arbat Street any currency but rubles takes the lottery. This is the black market in full rock-and-roll, and the tactics for circumventing Soviet law are elementary. You see something desirable, inquire after the price, and receive it in rubles. In

4. The performer Fedor Shaliapin (1873–1938) at rest in Moscow's V.I.P. cemetery. (Photo by Joanna Rotté)

your head you translate the rubles into dollars, applying a rate favorable to yourself. You make an offer. Negotiations ensue and either you walk away to another stall in search of a more felicitous bargain or you and the merchant come to terms on a price. If so, you are escorted behind a wall, into an entranceway, up a side street—or you just hold there casually on the Arbat with a benign expression until the item is passed over in exchange for dollars concealed in your palm. A few police mill about, even some undercover ones you are told. But this black marketeering is such a kick of adrenaline, and these police are so apparently negligent, you do not much worry about consequences. You are a typical American with cash engaged in a consumer ritual in the Eastern bloc. And the sellers, mostly young men, the emergent entrepreneurial class of Russia, speak enough of the right English (along with enough of the right German, French, and Dutch) to put you at ease in stealing away with a bunch of pretty stuff for far less than a handful of dollars. An hour and a half later, back in the bus, our people are flushed with the aftermath of glutonous frenzy. We have lacquer boxes, brooches, and hair barrettes, wristwatches, woolen shawls with flowers and fringe, reproductions of icons, drawings and watercolors, pens, rabbit-fur hats, army jackets, and stacking dolls. Most astonishingly, we have Gorby dolls—yes, stacking dolls with Gorbachev on the outside and Brezhnev inside him, then Krushchev, Brezhnev, Stalin, and, the tiniest of all, a little Lenin. I wonder if the dollmakers will soon be carving out a Yeltsin to fit on top of Gorbachev.

At the hotel, I switch the black-and-white TV from an Italian lesson to a music video of a very young Mick Jagger. In the morning, there were aerobics and a docutour of an American factory. This, our last night in Moscow, is to be feted with a banquet on the premises. Various dignitaries we have met during the week have been invited. But Frank and I, with the help of Vadim, have planned an event off the group agenda. Honoring my request, Vadim has cajoled the bus driver into taking the three of us into the city. We are driven to the Moscow Theatre for Young Spectators. At the theatre Vadim introduces us around, arranges for a rendezvous with the director at intermission, and presents us with complimentary tickets. Then he catches a subway and city bus back to the hotel where he is needed as a translator for the banquet. The show is *Good-bye, America!!!* and Vadim has already seen it four times.

At last I am attending some real theatre. There was Josef Svoboda's miraculous *Minotaurus* for the Laterna Magika in Prague, but this *Good-bye, America!!!* is new. The genre is musical satire, a send-up of the communist propaganda promulgated for years about America—specifically, propaganda signifying our greed, ignorance, racism, absence of personal discipline, and maniacal march towards world domination. *Good-bye, America!!!* recalls the comment of our tour guide Nadia that the worst thing emerging in these glasnost times is the knowledge that one previously had been lied to. The people, she said, especially her parents' generation, are heartbroken and angry. According to Vadim, *Good-bye, America!!!* crystalizes the Party line fed to the citizens: that this big, strong country in the West wanted to overpower their nation and enslave the people to work like animals. The lead character is Mister Twister, a fat, cigar-smoking American capitalist, costumed in a red, white, and blue ballooned-out jumpsuit, accompanied on a tour of Russia by his mindless wife and two socially deviant kids. The whole of the three walls and ceiling of the stage are hung with Stalinist-era prisoner-camp uniforms and boots. The production is awesome and incredibly funny. Its music is good, upbeat Russian rock-and-roll played on a red grand piano, as well as recorded rock including the Beatles' "Back in the U.S.S.R." Everything, conceived by the actors and directed by Henrietta Yanovskaya, is well performed. The packed-in audience, as throughout Moscow theatre, but even more so here, is of all ages and statuses, with many, many young and very young people in the house. *Good-bye, America!!!* is a gift.

REFLECTIONS

After the show, back at the hotel, the others have had their banquet and we are now in discussion. Everyone is drinking vodka. One of the Russian directors, Garii Cherniakovsky, whose work on Ostrovsky we had seen in rehearsal at the Shchukin Theatre School, tells us that banqueting is unknown to him and his colleagues. For them to dine in a restaurant is unthinkable since they cannot afford the price. Essentially, he says, they live like dogs. But Cherniakovsky has a daughter at a university in the United States and in his homeland is a highly regarded, consistently employed stage director and teacher. He sketches for us his estimation of a director; that is, a leader, the author of the production, the person who provides energy and a push. In his opinion, women do not make good directors. But I have just seen *Good-bye, America!!!*, di-

rected by a woman. As for directing students, he insists they must study as much acting as an acting student because both are interpretive arts with the same fundamental principles. His conclusion is that, when it becomes necessary for a person to take emotions from somewhere and give them to another person, there and then a director is born. If not his biases, I value his definitions.

1 April

The GITIS

Our last day in Moscow is taken up with observation at the GITIS School for Drama and Music Theatre. We are welcomed by the chief administrator, Georgi Ansimov. He also heads the school's department of acting and is a director for the Bolshoi Theatre. Ansimov explains that the GITIS aims to combine the training of actors with that of directors over a five-year period. During their first two years, the student actors and directors are co-educating in acting, singing, stage movement, dance, speech and articulation, music theory, and instrument playing. What is important, Ansimov says, is that the students learn to think and communicate onstage as well as understand the doing of action. At the culmination of each year of training, the students create a workshop performance guided by a master teacher. In their fifth year, they themselves create a production.

After the first two years, the directing students are separated out, and their training is geared towards music theatre. These students are taught to relate to music and apprehend dramatic conflict by listening to music. They are given exercises; for example, several students will be assigned a piece of music to study and work on, and then be asked individually to develop a scene with movement from the music. We watch three student directors' sketches in movement, one distilled from Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition," and two from Prokofiev's "Moments."

We also see the work-in-progress of an experimental class of student actors who are following a music-theatre-only (and not drama theatre) track. Entitled *Ophelia, a Blues Opera,* based on *Hamlet* and composed by a Russian now living in Austria who was influenced by *Jesus Christ Superstar,* it is meant to reveal the composer's perspective on Ophelia; in particular, what is on Ophelia's mind just before her suicide. The cast includes Hamlet, Polonius, and Laertes, in addition to Ophelia. They perform in English to piano accompaniment, practically without scenery or theatrical costume. This experimental group, at the behest of their master teacher, is striving to generate a new form, what the GITIS is calling Modern Opera Theatre.

The last performance offered us is the effort of eight fourth-year students who descended on Moscow from the north of the USSR. Based on Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *The Snow Maiden,* itself based on a poetic play by Ostrovsky, which, in turn, was based on an old Russian fairy tale, their production is termed a literary-fantasy. The GITIS has invited an orchestra to accompany the students in their display of acting combined with movement and singing with dance. We are shown a segment of the production, a part exhibiting traditional Russian folk customs of the North. The piece is completely without a contemporary slant, and is, in fact, retrograde in its treatment of girl and boy falling in love. While pretty, the show is no more than that. While pleasant, the music is conventionally rendered and sleep-inducing.

We are blessed with a decent lunch at the hotel, transported to a Moscow bank which, amazingly, is open, and are liberated to buy postcards and stamps at an office in the back room of the bank building. A few of us try to acquire access to the Moscow Puppet Theatre Museum, but rules are indisputable and none of the staff will risk unlocking the doors. For a farewell fling, we are returned to Arbat Street.

I am packing for an overnight train when summoned to the hotel lobby by Frank. It seems the black market has come to us, a housecall. Outside are Oleg and Alex, the two young men we had met on the path to the Kremlin. They have bags of T-shirts and sweatshirts with university logos. A few of us take a walk up the road with Oleg and Alex to a deserted construction site and conduct some business. The guys have a taxi waiting for them and the cost of it must be worth the payoff in dollars. Everybody wins except the Soviet system, unless the black market is the Soviet system. Bound for Leningrad, we leave the eight million people of Moscow.

I turn back to Moscow with respect for its residents, for their eagerness to share, their preservation and reconstruction of buildings, their wide streets with far, far fewer cars than at home. I especially admire their appreciation of theatre: the diversity of ages, backgrounds, levels of education, and professions making up the theatre audience; how they shed their cares when entering the theatre, check their coats, remove their hats and comb their hair, men and women together, at the lobby mirrors; how at intermission they gather to eat cakes and drink coffee; how they are awake and alive to the production and how they applaud and applaud and applaud for minute after minute at the curtain call; how they love the actors of the Russian stage.

I turn back to Moscow and remove my sunglasses. It is perhaps the only city where the colors do not change with or without dark glasses.

***Joanna Rotté** is an Associate Professor and the Chair of Theatre at Villanova University. She specializes in performance training, based on study of the Stanislavski system with Stella Adler, professional work with Harold Clurman, and two years of movement training in Japan. She is interested in feminist theatre and has directed four plays by Caryl Churchill.*

TDReading

For more views on recent—or is it "former"?—Soviet theatre, see Konstantin Scherbakov, "Plays and Polemics on the Soviet Stage," vol. 33, no. 3 (T123), Fall 1989; and Rebecca Rovit, "Crossing Cultures: Aleksandr Galin's *The Roof* at Florida State University," vol. 34, no. 3 (T127), Fall 1990.