FOREWORD

What Thomas Hobbes Knows About Today's Russia

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When I was growing up in the theater more than a half-century ago, it was all Russia. Yes, we knew about Brecht, barely, and the drama—plays—was American and international; but the *theater*, that was Russian. Not purely Russian, but doubly filtered. Stanislavski was with us in translation, first *My Life in Art* and then *An Actor Prepares*. But more important, Stanislavski's deputies controlled the "serious" American theater (not the commercial side of Broadway). The Group Theatre people were vitally working—Harold Clurman, Elia Kazan, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner. And before that, in 1923, defectors from the Moscow Art Theater/USSR, Maria Ouspenskaya and Richard Boleslavsky, started the American Laboratory Theatre, bringing to the New World what they knew of Stanislavski, firsthand. The impact of Stanislavski then—and even now—cannot be overestimated, in the theater and then in the movies and on to television. A kind of realism, softened to be sure (as you will see when you read the book in your hands), but pedestrian enough in the way

that postmodern dance featured the way “people really moved.” The American Lab and the Group Theatre featured not so much behavior, the outside, but the inside—the way “people really felt.” At least that was the guiding principle.

And then came Lee Strasberg, another Group Theatre alumnus, who thought he knew Stanislavski better than the master knew himself. And maybe Strasberg was right. He took Stanislavski’s relatively early way of working by means of “affective/emotional memory” and developed it into The Method—mining the “real emotions” of actors and inserting these emotions into the onstage life of the characters. It was not so much building a character that is other as recollecting and abreacting one’s own emotions and then applying these to the role. In today’s lingo, it was a cut-and-paste job. To put it bluntly: the tears, delights, rages, sexual arousals, jealousies—the whole gamut of human feelings—had once really happened to the actors as people. And now they learned how to make them really happen again, and again. Strasberg taught actors how to access these very powerful personal emotions, repeat them, and skillfully embed them in the behavior of the characters. This kind of “really real” was new for the American stage. It worked even better on film, where editing, camera angle, close-ups, and miking brought movie audiences right into the emotional turmoil and triumph of the characters.

We—I and a bunch of others kind of like me (The Living Theatre, The Open Theatre, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, Mabou Mines, postmodern choreographer-dancers, Happeners) rebelled against all this. Who did we look to for guidance? Not Bertolt Brecht, who was in the United States from 1941 to 1947—too early to directly affect us. Somewhat to Brecht’s colleague, Erwin Piscator, who emigrated to New York in 1937 and ran his Dramatic Workshop from 1940 to 1951. Judith Malina, cofounder of The Living Theatre with Julian Beck, was one of Piscator’s students.

No, we took after Vsevolod Meyerhold, Yevgeny Vakhtangov, and Michael Chekhov—students, then colleagues, then rebels in relation to Stanislavski. Expressionism, biomechanics, and the “psychological gesture” replaced Stanislavski’s soft-tinted naturalism. For Meyerhold, the life of the collective mattered most: the emerging epoch of the machine, the factory worker, the utopian side of the Russian Revolution. All that was cut down by Stalin and his murderous regime and overtaken by “Socialist Realism,” a grotesque parody of both socialism and realism. Meyerhold was arrested and tortured by Stalin’s police in 1939, then murdered in 1940. In 1922, the year of his death, Vakhtangov directed Ansky’s *The Dybbuk* in Hebrew at the Moscow Art Theater. Four years later, Habima got away to Palestine where it became, in time, Israel’s national theater. Michael Chekhov came to America in 1938 and revitalized acting, offering a powerful alternative to The Method. What the avant-garde of the American ’60s took from these Russian émigrés, followers-then-not-followers of Stanislavski, was an intense dedication to both process and experimentation—always searching for the “authentic,” the “real,” even if these were not “naturalistic” in terms of current style. The range of outflow from Russia/USSR up to the 1930s was extraordinary.

But then came World War II and after that the Cold War. The Iron Curtain descended between Eastern and Western Europe, cutting off the exchange of culture and arts between the Soviet Union and the West. We on our side of the Curtain knew relatively little about what was going on in most Soviet theaters. What came over here before 1989 were productions designed as “cultural exchanges”: ersatz, politically optimistic, and designed to make everyone feel (a little) better. Worse, most American theater people didn’t care to know what was happening. We had our own Stanislavski canon; we had Michael Chekhov, too; we had the goods. When light came from the East again in the mid-1960s, the supernovae burst from Poland,

a restless Soviet satellite. Superstars Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor exploded in Western Europe and America. The glow lasted thirty years. Meanwhile, from farther East, new impulses came from India, Japan, Indonesia, and later China. At about the same time, and continuing to the present, came postmodern dance, performance art, and postdramatic theater. The events of 1989 didn't make much of a difference. Post-Soviet Russia shared the fate of Stalinist USSR: irrelevant to what was happening in the West.

The plays in this book, and the productions of them, will change that. Not, I think, by introducing something new to those who are conversant with Sarah Kane, Annie Sprinkle, or any of the thousands of porn and violence sites available online at the click of a mouse. What's shocking in the plays published here is not the language, the numbingly drab and repetitious dramaturgy, the unappealing characters, or the xenophobia and violence, but the impression they give of contemporary Russian society and outlook, especially the outlook of youth. A subtext of the plays is that both the authors and the texts' inhabitants and speakers (hardly "characters" in the dramaturgical sense) are lost, bitter, and sometimes funny. To these beings, the world beyond Russia exists only via the internet—tantalizing, but as far away and as impossible to reach as Alpha Centauri. Still, there is a resonance with Western European and American nihilism. Where do the speakers in the plays in this book live? In provincial cities, maybe even in Moscow. It hardly matters: wherever their physical bodies reside, the speakers are floating in the never-never land of the internet. Anton Chekhov's three sisters yearned, "To Moscow! Moscow! Moscow!" More than a century later, their successors have arrived in the capital. Now what?

For me, the most scathing work is Teatr.doc's *September.doc*—verbatim transcriptions of blogs, chats, and forum posts after Chechen rebels took about 1,200 people hostage in a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, in 2004. On September 3, Russian troops stormed the

school; 334 died, 186 of them children. Killed by whom? The rebels, the liberators? Horrible. The rawness of the not-made-for-the-stage speech acts that is *September.doc* made me wonder how Stanislavski, Meyerhold, or Vakhtangov might stage such . . . documents.

Stanislavski would reject the texts outright. “This is not drama!” he would say. Vakhtangov, also, would condemn the crudity and lack of “imagination.” Meyerhold might put *September.doc* onstage. He might distribute some of the texts to spectators. He might form a chorus of *shahids* (martyrs), project footage of the Beslan siege on giant screens, and have a flock of birds (made from paper, Japanese style) fly across the proscenium and out into the auditorium to illustrate the lines, “When our brothers died, Allah placed their souls inside the green birds that fly to the rivers of paradise, eat the fruit of paradise, and rest in the golden lanterns in the shadow of the heavenly canopy.” But of course this is not Teatr.doc’s intention. This would “elevate” the text, transform it, make theater from it. For Teatr.doc—and I take its values as representative of the plays in this book—the idea is to show as plainly as possible the difference between the fantasy of a *shahid* and the brutal “real words”: “Fucking Chechens took a school hostage! Shouldn’t have started shit with them! Shoulda just bombed the fuck out of Chechnya and not fucked around, but they dragged their feet. The whole thing is fucked. Completely. . . . Fucking monkeys.”

Or like the characters in *Plasticine*, “They are silent, their faces empty.” Or again from *Plasticine*, “They should shoot them at birth! Or before birth! Who has kids like that, anyway?” This is Russia today, or at least some of Russia: its anomic intellectuals, its younger artists, its bourgeois-manqué. The Russia of oligarchs is not represented, and the myriad poor barely so. These are plays expressing a postapocalyptic situation without specifying what the apocalypse was. Is it USSR nostalgia? Not on the surface. But maybe underneath, it is a yearning for at least the rituals of forced communist

optimism—combined with the realization that post-Soviet society isn't going anywhere. And also, to some degree, it is an indulgence of the coarse, the nihilistic, the pruriently adolescent. Like some quasi-porn comic books and violent video games, or twenty-first-century renditions of Warhol.

Taken as a unit, these playwrights have for the most part surrendered to Putin's grotesque post-Soviet dry rot. They don't advocate, or hope. These plays are short on Brechtian irony, Ibsenian outrage, or Milleresque sentimentality. I think I get it: for these writers, life in Moscow, or life in Chechnya, or Belarus—all over urban Russia and its sphere of influence and hostility, both metropolis and hinterland—is, to quote Thomas Hobbes, "No arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death: and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (*The Leviathan*, chap. 12).