

MODERN THEATRE IN RUSSIA

Tradition Building and
Transmission Processes

STEFAN AQUILINA

Modern Theatre in Russia

Related Titles

Russian Theatre in Practice: The Director's Guide

Edited by Amy Skinner

9781474284417

*The Sixth Sense of the Avant-Garde: Dance, Kinaesthesia and the Arts in
Revolutionary Russia*

Irina Sirotkina and Roger Smith

9781350087408

The Great European Stage Directors Set 1: Volumes 1–4: Pre-1950

Edited by Simon Shepherd

9781474254113

The Great European Stage Directors Set 2: Volumes 5–8: Post-1950

Edited by Simon Shepherd

9781474254168

Modern Theatre in Russia

Tradition Building and Transmission Processes

Stefan Aquilina

methuen | drama

LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

METHUEN DRAMA
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

BLOOMSBURY, METHUEN DRAMA and the Methuen Drama logo
are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2020

Copyright © Stefan Aquilina, 2020

Stefan Aquilina has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work.

For legal purposes the Acknowledgements on pp. viii-ix constitute
an extension of this copyright page.

Cover design by Louise Dugdale
Cover images © iStock / Shutterstock

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying,
recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without
prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc does not have any control over, or responsibility for,
any third-party websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given
in this book were correct at the time of going to press. The author and publisher
regret any inconvenience caused if addresses have changed or sites have
ceased to exist, but can accept no responsibility for any such changes.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3500-6608-3
ePDF: 978-1-3500-6610-6
eBook: 978-1-3500-6609-0

Typeset by Integra Software Service Pvt. Ltd.

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters.

Contents

List of illustrations	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
Translation credits and a note on transliteration	x
1 Introduction	1
Modern theatre and the problem of continuity	1
Lines of continuity in the Russian theatre tradition	5
Implications to tradition building	14
Milestone, stagnation and renewal	14
A concerted effort	16
Cultural transmission	17
Chapter summaries	21
Suggestions for practice	25
Note on the practical exercises	25
Transmission exercise and belts	25
2 Stanislavsky: Renewing tradition through transmission	29
Renewing theatre traditions	29
Scenic Transmission: The case of Ludwig Barnay	34
The First Studio: An example of Democratic Levelling	41
Rehearsal Transmission: Stanislavsky's work on <i>Artists and Admirers</i>	47
The international dimension of the Stanislavsky acting tradition	53
Conclusion	61
Suggestions for practice	61
The Gorky Method	61
3 Misinterpretation of theatre practice: Stanislavsky-Smyshlaev	63
Why cultural transmission?	63
Smyshlaev's diary: January–December 1917	66
Theatre references in Smyshlaev's diary	70
The Stanislavsky-Smyshlaev rift: Collective creation	74
The use of improvisation	80
Work processes in <i>The Technique to Process Stage Performance</i>	83

Conclusion	88
Suggestions for practice	89
From individual to group work	89
4 Amateur and proletarian theatre in post-revolutionary Russia	97
Aesthetics and theatricality on the amateur stage	97
Historiographical difficulties	105
Transmission point 1: Critical processing	113
Transmission point 2: Collective creation and independent action – from the studio to everyday life	118
<i>Insurrection</i> as an example of proletarian theatre	125
Conclusion	130
Suggestions for practice	132
Amateur aesthetics and collective practices	132
Political scenarios and improvisation	134
5 Meyerhold: Bias in transmission processes	135
Researching Meyerhold: From bias to myth-making	135
Recurrence and difference in Meyerhold's work	139
Meyerhold's rediscovery of past traditions	143
The Borodin Studio as an instance of Practice as Research	148
The Meyerhold Theatre's foreign tour of 1930	154
Meyerhold's internationalism discerned from Western newspapers	160
Suggestions for practice	167
Introducing Meyerhold's theatricality	167
'Expressing thoughts spatially'	169
6 Lesser-known names: Rediscovering female voices	171
The status of women in early Soviet Russia	171
Contributions of female artists	174
The case of Asja Lācis	180
Conclusion	190
Axioms about modern theatre in Russia	190
Organizational principles when running transmission workshops	192
Notes	194
References	209
Index	222

List of illustrations

1	Meyerhold with his actors after a performance of Ostrovsky's <i>The Forest</i> (1924).	13
2	Konstantin Stanislavsky in the 1920s.	30
3	Ludwig Barnay playing the title role in <i>Uriel Acosta</i> .	37
4	Vasily Kachalov in the role of Narokov, in the Moscow Art Theatre's production of Ostrovsky's <i>Artists and Admirers</i> , 1933.	48
5	Valentin Smyshlaev.	65
6	I. V. Lazarev in the role of Boss, in the First Studio production of <i>The Wreck of the Ship 'Hope'</i> , 1913.	72
7	A poster of the Blue Blouse.	101
8	Cover image of the journal <i>Rabochii i teatr</i> (<i>Worker and Theatre</i>).	131
9	Meyerhold with composer Sergey Prokofiev and painter and set designer Alexander Tyshler, during a rehearsal of Prokofiev's opera <i>Semyon Kotko</i> , 1939.	137
10	Meyerhold's actors training in the 1920s.	146
11	Vsevolod Meyerhold working with Zinaida Raikh during the rehearsals of <i>The Government Inspector</i> , 1926.	162
12	A scene from <i>The Magnanimous Cuckold</i> , directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold, set by Lyubov Popova, 1922.	180

Acknowledgements

This book has been in gestation for about three years. Many have contributed in their own way to the project, offering advice and encouragement. Gratitude needs to be extended to the various institutions who have hosted my work in the last few years. First among these is the Department of Theatre Studies of the School of Performing Arts (University of Malta) where I work, and which I now call my second home. At this school I am fortunate to work with a fantastic group of colleagues, especially Vicki Ann Cremona, Frank Camilleri, Mario Frendo, Marco Galea and Lucía Piquero, whom I would like to thank for their support. The University of Malta has also supported this research by granting me sabbatical leave and by means of the various research grants it offers through its Research Grant Committee. I would also like to thank students in Malta with whom many of the exercises given here were attempted. Their feedback was valuable to fine-tune the exercises.

Other institutions that hosted my research were the School of Performance and Cultural Industries (University of Leeds), the Department of Music, Theatre and Performing Arts (University of Otago), through its Williams Evans Fellowship, The Oxford Research in the Humanities (University of Oxford), and the Moore Institute (National University of Ireland, Galway), through the Ros Dixon Fellowship. At these institutions Maria Kapsali, George Rodosthenous, Joslin McKinney, Susan Little, Stuart Young, Hilary Halba, Philip Bullock, Julie Curtis and Elizabeth Tilley have been particularly generous with their time and feedback. I remain particularly indebted to Jonathan Pitches, of the University of Leeds, and Paul Fryer, of the Stanislavsky Research Centre, for their continued support and friendship. I would also like to thank the team at Methuen Drama, especially Mark Dudgeon and Susan Furber, who immediately saw value in the project, and Lara Bateman for her meticulous work during production. I would also like to thank James Moffett, Franklyn Cauchi, Sergei Tcherkasski and Victoria Ysotskaya, for their various contributions to the project.

My thanks are also extended to Laurence Senelick, who delivered the keynote speech at the fourth edition of The S Word Stanislavsky Symposium held in Malta in April 2019. The symposium was co-convened by myself and Paul Fryer. Prof. Senelick was very generous in sharing several of the pictures printed here. For this and more, I thank him wholeheartedly.

Finally, this project would not have been possible without the love and support which my family unconditionally give me on a daily basis. This book is dedicated to them: to my wife Yulia, and our two boys, Matthew and Daniel.

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders of all copyright material in this book. Any omissions brought to my attention will be rectified in future editions.

Translation credits and a note on transliteration

Avatar Ltd.

Anrusenko, S. (2004; sections of); Kerzhentsev (1918a), (1918b), (1918c), (1918d), (1919a) (1919b), (1919c); Lunacharsky (1919); Pletnev (1919), (1924); Gorky (1955; sections of); Vinogradskaia (2000; sections of), (2003; sections of).

Maria Kabanova

Smyshlaev (1918), (1919); Stanislavskii (1958; sections of), (1959; sections of).

Natalia Fedorova

Picon-Vallin (1992); Smyshliaev (1922; sections of); Ilinsky (1962; sections of).

Larissa Dold

Barnay (1913; sections of); Lācis (1971; sections of).

All other translations, from Russian, Italian and French, are the author's. I would also like to thank Yulia Belozeroва for her assistance in checking some translation details.

Names have been translated in ways that are easily apprehended by an English-speaking reader. Therefore, the spelling of names already familiar in English (e.g. Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Chekhov) has been retained. Laurence Senelick's volume *Stanislavsky – A Life in Letters* (2014) was a useful source for transliterating names.

Introduction

Modern theatre and the problem of continuity

In a 1912 essay titled 'Russian Dramatists', theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold spoke about the central role which the repertoire plays in the creation of a theatre tradition. Using Spanish and French theatres as examples, he argued that a tradition of playwriting is formed when a large number of exponents, beyond, in these cases, the canonical names of Lope de Vega, Calderón and Molière, congregate together on shared aesthetical and ethical grounds:

We know the French theatre of the seventeenth century because it bequeathed us a splendid collection of texts by Molière.

This is not simply a matter of the talented abilities of the masters of drama I have cited [and reproduced above].

The repertory came into being as an individual entity, an aggregation of plays united by a *common intellectual schema* and *common technical devices*. (in Senelick 1981: 200; emphasis added)

Meyerhold opens further on what these intellectual schemas and technical devices are, invoking in turn the performance pillars of content and form. In the case of Spain, for example, the content or 'ideological plane' was informed by nationalism, while its 'technical plane' displayed 'one task: to concentrate the rapidly unfolding action into *intrigue*' (201; emphasis in original). French theatre exhibited its own form and content, but beyond such contextual specificities, it is the evidence of recurrent elements in practices authored by different practitioners that Meyerhold signals as the first condition for tradition building.

That in this essay Meyerhold focused on tradition building should come as no surprise, considering how Russian theatre at the turn of the twentieth century was questioning the relative merits of theatre traditions in general and of its Russian manifestation in particular. My aim is to unpick

some of these questions and to use the modern critique of the Russian theatre tradition, of which Meyerhold was an integral part, to discuss how theatre traditions are established. Different to Meyerhold's 1912 emphasis on the repertoire, however, my focus will be on transmission approaches, i.e. the processes (including training, rehearsal, performance, documentation, diaries and newspaper reports) through which theatre and performance practices get transformed when they move between individuals and communities of theatre makers. The point that I will return to with some consistency is that there is a tight connection between tradition building and transmission processes because it is also through the latter that theatre traditions are formed and consolidated.

My focus therefore will be on Russian theatre during the first decades of the twentieth century, a period which is often referred to as an example of 'modern theatre' or 'modernism in the theatre'. This is a period when theatre practitioners were particularly aware of their position vis-à-vis past theatre traditions, in relation to which they articulated a position of either continuity or detachment and criticism. However, before I go any further, I would like to expand on what constitutes 'modern theatre' as this is a major through line that binds together the various case studies in the book. Issues of what 'modern' is and of 'modernism' remain, as Jane Milling and Graham Ley assert, 'critically fraught topics' (Milling and Ley 2001: vii), a result perhaps of an unfortunate whitewashing together of related but not analogous terms like 'modernism' itself, 'modernist' or even 'modernity'. Consequently, though practitioners and theoreticians like Meyerhold, Konstantin Stanislavsky, Antonin Artaud, Adolphe Appia, Rudolph Laban, Jacques Copeau and Bertolt Brecht are readily associated with turn-of-the-twentieth-century modernism, what modernism is remains problematic. Symptomatic of this confusion is the way that 'modern theatre' has entered non-specialized discourse to refer to the contemporary theatre scene; see, for example, how Robert Leach uses it to refer to 'the theatre of today' (Leach 2004: 1). A similar straightforward use is also evident in Robert Russell and Andrew Barratt's introduction to their edited volume on *Russian Theatre in the Age of Modernism* (1990), where 'modern' and 'modernist' are adopted as direct variations of 'modernism'. The book's use of 'the Age of Modernism' (emphasis added) in the title seems to give a temporal definition to modernism (the years between 1900 and 1940), and the term is then modified in the narrative to 'modern Russian theatre' and 'Russian modernist theatre' (Russell and Barratt 1990: vii and ix).

While nuanced definitions of modern and modernism are probably counterproductive to Russell and Barratt's multi-authored perspective and, therefore, possibly unnecessary, the terms 'modernity', 'modern' and 'modernism' are here central to underscore the role of *continuity* in tradition building.

Processes of continuity are startlingly present in modernity. Punctuated by the massive social, political, technological and philosophical upheavals associated with the end of feudalism, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, modernity indicates the protracted ‘process of transformation [...] which refers to a long historical process of becoming “modern”’ (Wallace 2011: 16). The term goes beyond culture and the arts to embrace the widest spectrum of human activities possible. Modernism, on the other hand, is more restrictive in its remit and collates the contributions made by the arts towards this process of becoming modern. It is a section or part of modernity (Jeff Wallace refers to it as an ‘episode’), one which can be located with some surety between the Romantic period and the Second World War and its aftermath.

Rather than focusing on the identification of precise start and end points, an alternative way to define modernism is by identifying recurrent characteristics across a wide tapestry of practices at the turn of the twentieth century. Many writers underline experimentation and anti-conservatism as defining features of modern art, with Bert Cardullo describing modernism as ‘a period of dramatic innovation [...] when the sense of a fundamental break with inherited means of representation and expression became acute’ (Cardullo 2013: 3).¹ Experimentation in both form and content of performance is certainly not unique to the early 1900s, but modernism indicates that the performing arts at the turn of the twentieth century were particularly experimental in nature. In underlining this experimental attitude modernism is invariably brought in conflict with an alternative but equally common way of articulating early twentieth-century theatre, that of the ‘avant-garde’. This is the appellation which Robert C. Williams (1977) uses to group together experimental Russian theatre of the 1905–1925 time frame. The material which Williams covers includes Meyerhold, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Sergei Eisenstein, Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin, artists which he frames around a definition of the avant-garde as a ‘conjunction of artistic innovation and revolutionary involvement’ (Williams 1977: 3). Notwithstanding his centrality to the scene, Stanislavsky’s name is absent from Williams’s study, hinting that his name is synonymous with modernism and modern theatre but not with the avant-garde.² In fact, while artistic innovation was clearly a driving force in Stanislavsky’s work (see Chapter 2), his revolutionary, read political, involvement remained, at best, peripheral. As will be made evident in the pages that follow, Stanislavsky’s role in the transmission of the Russian theatre tradition in the early twentieth century and beyond was a central one, and I therefore use the terms ‘modern theatre’ and ‘modernism’ over ‘avant-garde’ to weave Stanislavsky into this study.

The use of ‘modernism’ and ‘modern’ over ‘avant-garde’ also helps me to start untangling my central theme of continuity. While Cardullo’s

words above speak of modernism as a fundamental break with the past, the fact remains that modern theatre in Russia developed on what I refer to as strong 'lines of continuity'. These lines connect the late 1920s to the years between the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 (also known as the Silver Age of Russian Theatre). They also hark back to the practices which started to develop, roughly speaking, during the mid-nineteenth century, an era in Russian theatre and the arts known as the Golden Age. This continuity contrasts with the supposed discontinuity postulated after the revolution by the most extreme voices of the avant-garde. Among those who proclaimed independence from past artistic practices were the Proletkult – a non-government organization formed on the eve of the October Revolution which tasked itself with the creation of proletarian culture (see Chapter 4) and the 'leftists', artists loyal to the revolution who placed faith in theatre's potential to rebuild everyday life on scientific and technological principles. Both boldly 'declared earlier art to be dead' (Kleberg 1993: 4). These extreme statements were, however, carefully articulated as radical declarations to provoke and garner attention. Writing in a very direct tone, avant-garde artists employed the rhetoric of short manifestos or newspaper articles that barred the development of reasoned argumentation.³ Their extreme voices for rupture with the past were, however, countered by a set of equally strong calls demanding continuity, made by individuals who in the artistic practices of the previous generations found much that was useful. Instead of consigning practices to the past, these voices – who included strong political leaders like Alexander Bogdanov⁴ and Vladimir Lenin – arbitrated for a process of transmission, i.e. the displacement of past theatre techniques and their assimilation within modern milieus. Strongest among these voices was Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first Soviet People's Commissar of Education who, in a direct criticism of the Proletkult, asserted the need for continuity with the past:

In the area of art, we must never, under any circumstance, let the proletariat be ignorant of all the wonderful products of human genius.

[But,] [t]here are people who believe that any distribution of 'old' science and 'old' art is an indulgence of bourgeois tastes, a cultural curse, and the contamination of the young socialist organism with the blood of rotting junk.

There are relatively few radical representatives of this delusion. However, the harm which they bring could be great. [...] No, I repeat for the thousandth time that the proletariat must be *armed with the entirety of human education*. The proletariat is a historical class. It must go forward because of its past.

To discard the science and art of the past because of their bourgeois roots is as absurd as dropping machines in the factories or railways because of the same reason. (Lunacharsky 1919: 2; emphasis in original)

In other words, voices of discontinuity were part of the modern scene without, however, defining it. They would ultimately be crushed, but this tug of war between continuity and discontinuity does point towards a crucial characteristic of modern theatre in Russia, namely that it defined its position in relation to the Russian theatre tradition and that it did so through the lines of continuity which I will discuss below. This is one of a tripartite of characteristics – the other two being the time frame (from 1898 to about 1932–4) and experimentation – that qualify modern theatre in Russia as understood here.

Lines of continuity in the Russian theatre tradition

Strictly speaking, my story starts with the opening of the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) and develops over the first three decades of the twentieth century. However, it is necessary to go beyond these time frames, at least in this Introduction, because modern theatre in Russia must be viewed against the backdrop of important trends that had been developing in Russia from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Names such as Nikolai Gogol, Alexander Ostrovsky and Mikhail Shchepkin far from disappeared from theatre consciousness, and modern practitioners like Stanislavsky and, perhaps surprisingly, even Meyerhold, Yevgeny Vakhtangov, Alexander Tairov, Fyodor (Theodore) Komissarzhevsky and others, appraised them in challenging and fresh ways. The lines of continuity, of perhaps different thicknesses and visibilities, which cut across the Russian theatre tradition, can be articulated as follows:

- dates and artists living across different historical eras;
- a moral dimension to theatre;
- a debate surrounding realism;
- the concept of authorship;
- modern staging of nineteenth-century texts.

On the simplest of levels, a degree of continuity emerges from a quick survey of the dates. A lot is sometimes made of the fact, for example, that Stanislavsky was born in the same year that Shchepkin died (1863).⁵ Stanislavsky's connection to Shchepkin is easy to discern, and it is on

this connection that one link between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries rests. Stanislavsky himself articulated on several occasions his position vis-à-vis Shchepkin's heritage, especially during various MAT anniversaries (e.g. see Whyman 2008: 30). Beyond the polite statements characteristic of such celebrations, Stanislavsky made Shchepkin's tenet of living rather than representing the role the foundation of his System.⁶ In his correspondence with P. V. Annenkov, Shchepkin voraciously emphasized the need to back up one's intuition and natural talent with study and hard work (in Schumacher 1998: 195–6). It is this balance that Stanislavsky strove to achieve through his 'from the conscious to the unconscious' dictum. Less known but equally compelling are the positive appraisals of modern practitioners who, though far removed from Shchepkin's aesthetics, still felt the need to go back to his teachings and treat these as the basics. For example, Laurence Senelick says that Vakhtangov 'prescribed Shchepkin's habits of working on a role to his students' (Senelick 1984: 251). Little acknowledged is Fyodor Komissarzhevsky's debt to Shchepkin. This he himself articulated in a 1913 essay in which he asserted the similarity between his approaches and Stanislavsky's, both of which 'are to a greater or lesser extent derived from Mikhail Shchepkin' (Komissarzhevsky quoted in Borovsky 2001: 277). Meyerhold, on his part, drew a line from his production of *The Government Inspector* (1926) back to Shchepkin's work, adding that he consciously followed the path suggested by the great actor (Malcovati 1977: 263). Gogol proved another reference point, and *The Government Inspector* kept its position as a key performance text.⁷ Ultimately, the government made direct links with the past a matter of ideological importance, through its 'Return to Ostrovsky' policy (1923), which encouraged theatre artists to adopt the playwright's critical disposition towards social realities (Rudnitsky 1988: 116–18).⁸ Against the background of such political appropriation, Meyerhold's statement linking his work to Shchepkin and Gogol was laden with artistic significance but also transformed into a political defence mechanism.

A further level of continuity is provided by a number of practitioners who lived long enough to experience different historical eras and who remembered, for example, the coronation of Tsar Nicholas II (1896). They often juxtaposed that era to the war with Japan, the revolution of 1905, the First World War, the February and October Revolutions, the Civil War years, the NEP years, and the late 1920s and early 1930s. Stanislavsky described these decades as a transition from serfdom to Bolshevism and Communism (Stanislavski 2008a: 3). Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko similarly juxtaposed the two eras of pre- and post-revolutionary Russia and underwrites, by accident more than by design, how such transitional moments exhibit a tension between

structure and repetition on one side and improvisation and change on the other. Taking Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths* as an example, he argues that

[i]n the same theatre, between the same walls, the same play would be played; even the majority of the actors would be the same [...] while the decorations and the *mise en scène* would also remain the same, untouched by the quarter-of-a century evolution of theatrical art; in a word, the performance would not show the slightest change. Only the audience would change – unrecognizably. It would become wholly new. (Nemirovich-Danchenko 1936: 244)

Other prominent practitioners who bridged the two eras included Meyerhold, who needed little persuasion to update his practices with a new, industrial terminology, and symbolists like Vyacheslav Ivanov and Andrei Bely, who also 'sought to place their [pre-1917] theories at the service of the revolution' (Worrall 2008: 8). A further example is that of Nikolai Evreinov, who did emigrate to the West in 1925 but not before building on his earlier experiments in retrospectivism and monodrama by staging in 1920 the mass spectacle *The Storming of the Winter Palace*.⁹ More than discarding their pre-revolutionary findings, these practitioners sought to adapt to a different context, a different audience and, in many cases, different collaborators coming from the young generation spawned by the revolution.

A recurrent concern for a moral dimension to theatre provided a strong line of continuity within the Russian theatre tradition. As Lars Kleberg says (1993: 4), the idea of art for art's sake never had any real footing in Russia, as practitioners and theoreticians consistently underlined the enriching and developmental potential of theatre. Sure, what 'enriching' and 'developmental' meant changed from generation to generation and even from one individual to the next, but it is clear that theatre in Russia was consistently treated not only as a form of amusement and entertainment but also as an influential means of education. Victor Borovsky refers to the developmental role of theatre as 'a ceaseless effort to enlighten [...] audiences' (Borovsky in Leach and Borovsky 1999: 10), while Nick Worrall refers to theatre as a 'high-minded, moral and educative cultural form' (Worrall 2008: 1). Jean Benedetti, on his part, described the Russian stage as 'a moral instrument, whose function is to civilise, to increase sensitivity, to heighten perception' (Benedetti 1989: 11). Theatre practice in Russia, therefore, was not a frivolous activity, meaning that all-too-clear business ventures that aimed at profit-making were consistently seen with suspicion. To people like Gogol, Ostrovsky and Shchepkin, but also Ivanov, Meyerhold, Stanislavsky, Lunacharsky, Platon Kerzhentsev and the Proletkultists,

theatre was a serious art form that needed to be treated with the required attention, in the writing of its plays, the acting and production processes developed, the theories composed, and also in the audience's reception.

What the moral dimension of theatre amounted to was intimately linked with the surrounding sociopolitical context. The political upheavals of the nineteenth century – which included the Napoleonic Wars, the lost Crimean War in 1856, the 1861 emancipation of the serfs and the 1881 assassination of Alexander II – led to a considerable amount of inward-looking examination by the Russian intelligentsia, who became preoccupied with Russia's roots and its contemporary moral fibre, what Cynthia Marsh refers to as 'Russianness'. Consequently, nineteenth-century authors like Aleksei Potekhin, Aleksei Pisemsky and Lev Tolstoy were concerned with 'an examination of Russian society, her history, her customs, and her people' (Marsh in Borovsky and Leach 1999: 146; see also 148). Senelick uses the word *narodnost'*, a term coined as early as the late eighteenth century by the critic Pyotr Plavilshchikov to refer to a sense of 'national quality' to which 'all serious Russian writing about drama addresses itself in one way or another throughout the nineteenth century' (Senelick 1981: xvii).

The emphasis on 'what it means to be Russian' is also evident in Murray Frame's analysis of nineteenth-century society and theatre. Frame identifies the rise of civil societies – formal but independent institutions like learned societies, theatres and printing circles set up to provide opportunities for cultural growth – as an important catalyst in the 'efforts to define and assert Russian national identity as a means of binding society together' (Frame 2006: 6). Parallel to the national line, however, Frame also notices a more 'individualist' articulation of theatre's moral dimension, one which drew from the rise of a strong middle class and the value it placed not on birth but on personal achievement. Instead of focusing on general and all-encompassing issues of Russianness, this line focused more on the question of 'what it means to be an individual human being'. It is within such questioning that Anton Chekhov can, for example, be situated. Incorporated within this second line of moral theatre is a person's intricate relationships with the world and people around him.

A concern with how human beings relate to each other and the world around them lends a strong ethical undercurrent to theatre practice, especially when one treats ethics as *communal ethics*, i.e. 'how we organise the ways in which we live with one another' (Ridout 2009: 12). This 'communal organisation' took a more mystical tone during the Silver Age, when the developmental potential of theatre was seen an opportunity to put 'the audience of nonartists in touch with the higher realm' (Senelick 1981: xl). Ivanov was the main theorist for this theatre. His conception of a

communal theatre that brings performers and spectators together in ecstatic involvement proved to be infectious both to the Symbolists of the Silver Age and to the communal fervour sparked by the revolution, effectively creating a continuous link between the two periods. As mentioned above, Ivanov's theories were not immediately forgotten. He went on to work at the TEO (theatre) section of the Narkompros (Commissariat of Education; see Fischer-Lichte 2005: 99). Meyerhold himself spoke positively in 1920 of Ivanov's condemnation of the proscenium (Malcovati 1977: 192), while even Lunacharsky addressed favourably his theories (Senelick 1981: xl).¹⁰

It has always been tempting to treat the first post-revolutionary decade or so as a homogenous block, fuelled by the totalitarianism that would become synonymous with Soviet Russia and the well-documented attempts by the party 'to expand Communist control over economy, education, and culture [with the aim of] [...] recasting the entire society' (Brovkin 1998: 21). Cultural recasting after the revolution, especially during the more open and eclectic 1920s, was, however, far from a homogenous process. This allowed the scene to diversify itself. The developmental potential of theatre after 1917 was reasserted. It took a more political underpinning to extol the revolutionary spirit of the working classes. However, it was also diversified, as 'the avant-gardists, the Proletkult activists, and the few Bolsheviks interested in art were in reality associated with different cultural contexts which automatically guaranteed various decodings of their sometimes almost identical phraseology' (Kleberg 1993: ix). Cultural nuance gave rise to different readings of the theatre's role. These included advancing the Bolshevik Party's 'right' to lead the class struggle, bringing classic literature to a wider audience, providing opportunities of theatre production to the workers as a means of class emancipation, the exemplification of correct everyday behaviour (e.g. hygiene) and instilling belief in the victorious denouement of the revolution. The instructive potential of theatre was, however, upheld as a continued characteristic of the Russian theatre tradition.

In Russian theatre the moral and developmental use of theatre forms part of a broader discussion about the relative merits of realism. The debate surrounding realism fuelled further the continuity of the Russian theatre tradition because despite the modernist critique, realism's position was ultimately consolidated in the politically reworked approach of socialist realism. Realism's foregrounding of 'authorship' and the role of the 'author' also cuts through the phases in question. The term 'author' is conventionally linked to the exercise of authority; etymologically, 'author' shares the same root as 'authority' and 'authoritarian' (Partridge 1966: 178–9). Realism in Russian theatre, however, appraised positively the processes associated with the figure of the author, by distancing the term from issues of authority and

bringing it closer to the skills associated with the construction or composition of an artefact. This knowledge is reflected in the 'how' one carries his or her endeavours, invoking in turn issues of professional specialization.

Such a compositional accent relates to the selection and organization of artistic material, and it is at the heart of realism in a way that differentiates it from naturalism. While Stanislavsky's first historical productions at the MAT underscored naturalism's resolve to create the externals of daily life, in retrospect he was particularly careful to articulate his position within the tradition of realism's selective and organizational processes, as Benedetti makes clear:

It is important to define what Stanislavski understood by the term Realism and to distinguish it from Naturalism, a word which he normally employed in a purely pejorative sense. Naturalism, for him, implied the indiscriminate reproduction of the surface of life. Realism, on the other hand, while taking its material from the real world and from direct observation, selected only those elements which revealed the relations and tendencies lying under the surface. The rest was discarded. (Benedetti 1989: 11–12)

This penchant for selection is evident in the criticism given to a production of the play *A Bitter Fate* (1863), written in 1859 by Aleksei Pisemsky. Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, the critic in question, admonished Pisemsky over his full depiction of peasant life, including the reproduction of the coarse language associated with that class. Realism, the critic argued, 'should always carry a notion of the ideal, should indicate a healthy *authorial* point of view, and [recalling the discourse on the moral dimension of theatre] should serve to "remind man of its humanity"' (Marsh in Leach and Borovsky 1999: 150; emphasis added).¹¹ The artist, therefore, must 'make' his own work, even in those cases when he derives his material from history or from the observation of life. In selecting material for representation he invariably organizes and constructs his work so that what develops is an artistic piece and not a straight copy of an existing phenomenon. Gogol also underlined how processes of selection are characteristic of realism and strongly refuted claims that he was only an imitator of life. He argued that a dramatic work loses significance when the author 'is a mere describer of the scenes that pass before him, without arranging them in proof of something that must be said to the world' (Gogol quoted in Senelick 1981: xxv–xxvi).

Authorial realism transcended playwriting to also impact on acting and directorial processes. The understanding that the actor is an author who composes his roles can be traced back to Shchepkin himself who, dissatisfied

with the limiting range of character types or *emploi* that he inherited, injected a healthier dose of personal interpretation into his stage personas. Borovsky says that the actors of Shchepkin's generation 'assumed the role of co-author, creating characters and producing ideas that went far beyond the limits of the written text' (Borovsky in Leach and Borovsky 1999: 19). Modern theatre, in Russia and abroad, similarly advanced the figure of the director as the author of productions, especially through the establishment of the *mise-en-scène* as the specialized process that leads to the staging of a play. The contributions made in this field by Stanislavsky, Tairov, Vakhtangov and Meyerhold are of course paramount, and together they became responsible for the rise of the figure of the director-auteur who arranges the stage materials from his own point of view by creating montages of visual and sound elements, acting, text work and other elements.

If anything, modernism further foregrounded authorial processes by proudly proclaiming these are performance material and by shifting them from the rehearsal or workshop spaces to the stage. Wallace identifies the staging of work processes, what he calls '[a]esthetic self-consciousness or reflexivity' (2011: 15), as a characteristic feature of modernism, one that finds manifestation, for example, in Meyerhold's creation of a peephole in *DE* (1924) to show off Erast Garin's skill in costume change and character transformation (Braun 1998: 196) or in Vakhtangov's actors during *Turandot* festively dressing on the stage, after which they were 'introduced to the audience as *actors about to perform the play*' (Malaev-Babel 2013: 222; emphasis in original). Instead of hiding it, the actor's compositional transformation into the role is something to behold, as Meyerhold explains in the following extract:

[In] this production [*DE*] we have given each actor the interpretation of more than one role. We did this not because the Theatre has fewer actors than the number of roles but because our aim in this production is the principle of transformation. Transformation in the theatre has seldom been used before: for the first time, we make use of it in large quantities. The director usually resorted to transformation as a means to diminish the number of interpreters. Moreover, he often sought to hide this practice from the audience. On the contrary, we inform the spectator of this practice from the posters. We invite the spectator to come and watch the actor's talent in his skilled transformations. (Malcovati 1977: 204)

The bridge between the practices of Meyerhold and Vakhtangov in the 1920s and the nineteenth-century concept of authorship is the Silver Age practice of *uslovnost'*, variously translated as stylization, theatricality or

conventionalism (see Chapter 5). This practice had in Valery Bryusov one of its main spokesperson and theoretician. In 1902 Bryusov had already called for alternative forms to realism in his seminal essay 'The Unnecessary Truth'. He emphasized the actor's primary position within theatre production, calling him 'a creator (read *poet*) in the theater, whose raw material consists of voice, pantomime, gesture and physical being as well as the words, action, characters and ideas in the drama performed' (Senelick 1981: xlvii; emphasis in original). The theatrical school also believed in the spectator's imagination to concretize the details suggested by a *mise-en-scène*. Starting from the premise that the recreation of reality on stage is impossible, stylized theatre postulated minimalism or the use of only those objects that are strictly necessary by the stage action. The action is fleshed further by what the actor does with these objects; for example, see Meyerhold's creation of a garden in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922) through the way that one actor handled a single flower (Gorchakov 1957: 200). It is on purpose that I make reference to Meyerhold's *The Magnanimous Cuckold* when discussing turn of the twentieth-century theatricality, to underline further the continuity between the practices of the Silver Age and those of the early post-revolutionary epoch.

A final sense of continuity is discerned from the productions staged after the revolution of nineteenth-century texts. These texts were processed using inherently modern techniques. Meyerhold's productions of Ostrovsky's *The Forest* (1924) and Gogol's *The Government Inspector* (1926) were two typical examples. In the former Meyerhold was also responding to the aforementioned 'Return to Ostrovsky' policy, though he made sure that this return was as forward looking as possible. Thus, instead of following the Act/Scenes composition, he divided the play into thirty-three episodes¹² and rearranged the text 'according to the principles of cinematic montage' (Braun 1998: 209). He can be seen to have created a startling realism-modernism hybrid, by updating the content for the twentieth century and encapsulating it in a sharp theatrical form. In the process he created a tight union between the two, where the form itself spoke about the content and the other way round.

The way that Meyerhold updated *The Forest* to the twentieth century emerges from a juxtaposition of two speeches which he delivered about the production, one in February 1924 when it had just opened and the other marking the production's tenth anniversary in January 1934. In the former speech Meyerhold spoke about the *mise-en-scène* and its aesthetics and explained that as a director he had searched his models in the Spanish Siglo d'Oro. This explained the playing of the guitar, the singing, the presence of techniques associated with the Spanish type of the *gracioso*, and the shifts



Figure 1 Meyerhold with his actors after a performance of Ostrovsky's *The Forest* (1924). The play became a veritable battleground between the modernists and the traditionalists. Courtesy Sputnik Images.

between the comic and the dramatic, which he also saw in Shakespeare (Malcovati 1977: 201–2). At a time when artistic experimentation in Russia was reaching its apex, Meyerhold advised against a literal interpretation of Ostrovsky or of any other classic text because while the playwright ‘had been imprisoned by the stage technique of his time, we have developed this markedly’ (201). Continuity with past theatre tradition is, on the other hand, much more foregrounded in the 1934 speech. In this speech Meyerhold reflected back on the 1924 version of the production and argued that he had then followed Lenin’s words that a proletarian culture could only be created on the knowledge and elaboration of the culture of the past. He argued further that the production had re-elaborated a masterpiece of the past without obliterating its political, class-oriented content. In his eyes it had actually provided a sharper revelation of this content:

We left the main roots of the work intact, but strengthened their expression. [...]

We only underlined the political element in Ostrovsky, something which he could not do, even though he was aware that the spectator

would have received a certain message from the stage. In the text there already is a juxtaposition between two classes, and all we did was to further evidence it.

[...]

Through a rereading of the roles and their characteristics, the social motive of this comedy has acquired a more consistent relief. (Malcovati 1977: 202–3)

These were necessary concessions from Meyerhold, seeing how by the mid-1930s his theatre had come under a barrage of political attacks. Emphasizing his continuity with the practices of the Russian theatre tradition had therefore become one of Meyerhold most important defence mechanisms. It is against this background, therefore, that his statement about how his approach to characterization had always been realistic needs to be understood (Braun 1998: 290).

Implications to tradition building

Milestone, stagnation and renewal

What does a study of Russian theatre as it developed across the Golden Age, Silver Age and modernism tell us about how theatre traditions are formed? One suggestion made is that the three stages of milestone, stagnation and renewal are a helpful framework to study tradition building. In this process peak moments see the establishment of canonical names whose practices and outputs become synonymous with the tradition in question. These moments are often followed by a period of crises or indecision, where creativity is seen to dwindle. This is the phase typified by imitation rather than development. More than bringing a sense of closure, however, this second stage of stagnation instigates the experimentation of the third stage, that of renewal.

The pattern of milestone, stagnation and renewal is clear in the Russian theatre tradition. The paradigm shifts of Gogol, Ostrovsky, Shchepkin and their Golden Age counterparts did not immediately generate a line of successors that could build on their achievements. In fact, experimentation and independent creativity were subdued, and instead of socially relevant plays, European boulevard drama, what the writer Oliver M. Sayler referred to as 'made-over plays from the French' (Sayler 1920: 132), dominated the scene. These dramas became synonymous with a phase of stagnation in Russian theatre history, a 'torpid inertia', as Senelick described it (1981: xxxviii), which characterized the latter decades of the nineteenth century.