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Ukrainian Theatre: With and Without Stanislavski

Український театр зі Станіславським і без

Abstract. The paper attempts to reconstruct the principles of leading theatre schools of Ukraine in the 19th–20th centuries, the stages of implementation of Stanislavski's ideas, of the aesthetics of his theatre, and his method in the Ukrainian theatrical culture. Despite the myths that since the very beginning of the Soviet rule total adherence to Stanislavski's system and his method was imposed, the paper reveals no less dramatic though different theatre history and the point of no return: August 22nd, 1950, when the campaign for the advanced and the in-depth study of the System by Ukrainian theatre and Ukrainian theatre pedagogy started. Despite the vast media campaign, the study of the System and the practice of stage art differed significantly: since the 1960s the System was taught by the masters who had some other basic education than theatrical. Thus, depending from this education and being rooted in some other methodology, these mentors distinguished the elements and techniques applicable to their personal experience within the System: for instance, the disciples of Les Kurbas (Mykhailo Verkhatskyi, Marian Krushelnytskyi, Volodymyr Skliarenko, and others) and Vsevolod Meyerhold (Volodymyr Nelli) predictably accentuated the method of physical action. The repertoire policy of Soviet authorities in Ukraine in general and in Ukrainian theaters, in particular, featured a combination of dominant music drama theaters and the traditions of the theatre schools of the 19th century (with the theatre school of Ukrainian Galicia tending to a synthetic actor, while the rest of Ukraine clearly preferred “gut acting”). This produced the acting styles that go beyond both the categories of Stanislavski (theatre of imitation / theatre of feeling) and the categories of Kurbas (theatre of accentuated influence / manifestation) or other masters. Being neither synthesis nor eclecticism, these styles were determined by the traits of a particular theatre director and the traditions of his theatre.

Keywords: theatre school in Ukraine, Stanislavski's “system,” Kurbas' system, method of working on a play, the science of theatre, actor's textbook.

Introduction. In the context of Russia–Ukraine war, the problem of international cultural relations, and in the narrow sense of relations in theatre, should be viewed not only in the general academic dimension but also in the geopolitical dimension, in the dimension of our overall existence. This defines the research value of the subject. Stanislavski, the aesthetics of his theatre, the System, and the method implemented by him were among the main theatre myths of the Post-Soviet theatre research discourse as evidenced by the lively discussions in Ukrainian and foreign theatre press in 2013, as well as by the international conferences that are about to start in the late 2022 and early 2023, commemorating the 160th anniversary of Stanislavski's birth and 65th anniversary of his death.

According to the myth prevailing in Ukrainian theatre culture and beyond, total implementation and mastering of Stanislavski's system and method started in Ukraine and other “brotherly” republics and states after the establishment of the Soviet power.

The aim of the paper is to outline the main stages of implementation of Stanislavski's ideas, of the aesthetics of his theatre, and his method in Ukrainian theatre culture.

Historiography of the issue includes numerous sources, both books and periodicals, that mention, sometimes just in one line, some aspects important for the promoting and glorification of the System.

Literature review on the subject covers mainly Ukrainian (from Galicia and Naddniproshchyna) and sometimes All-Soviet periodicals, as well as the theatre textbooks of the 1920s–1930s.

The methodology of the research includes reconstruction (how the System was promoted in Ukrainian theatre culture) and observation of the scenic practices of the members of Kurbas' theatre and their disciples.

Results and Discussion. The analysis of the relations of Stanislavski, of his theatre, and his system with the Ukrainian theatre culture, including the theatre

schools, the scenic practice, and theatre pedagogy suggests investigating the nature of these relations. What was that: integration of Stanislavski in the Ukrainian cultural space, reception of Stanislavski by Ukrainian theatre culture, adaptation or integration of Ukrainian theatre culture into the culture of Russian theatre and in the very System of Stanislavski itself? An unbiased analysis of these relations is impeded, except of understandable and justifiable cultural tension of the present time, by the *myths of theatre research*, being the following: the myth of the forcible implementation of Stanislavski's system since the 1920s; the common discourse of the Soviet and Post-Soviet theatre studies discussing the phenomena of theatre culture (progressive / reactionary, outstanding, etc.) that disorients the researchers and channels the discourse either to appraisal or negation; the lack of interest and thus the poor knowledge of theatre studies regarding methodological issues (with Stanislavski's system being, first and foremost, a methodology); the lack of research on the methodology of working on a play or a role in Ukrainian theatre that complicates comparative analysis; the lack of clarity about the very concept of a "school" (in some cases used as a synonym of tradition, while in others—as an institution) and conceptual fluidity of Stanislavski's "system" and "method" (being sometimes equivalents and differing in other cases); many speculative studies stating that Kropyvnytskyi, Kurbas, and Stanislavski were headed in roughly the same direction eliminate the significant differences between their methods and theatre systems. Hence, a historian aiming to study the method of Stanislavski and of Ukrainian theatre school has to overcome a number of myths and do the research "from scratch."

By the time, when the press started mentioning the artistic success of Stanislavski, there were three main theatre schools in the ethnic territory of Ukraine (that reflected its political status): Galician school (which was at first Polish and afterwards Ukrainian), the school of Naddniproshchyna, Dnieper Ukraine (the Theatre of Coryphaei), and Russian. Obviously, these schools should not be rigidly delineated as the actors migrated between theaters, the cultures mutually influenced each other, etc.

The school in Lviv (1869) was the first one to be institutionalized. This was a Polish theatre school. Its curricula, the repertoire policy of the Polish theatre in the ethnic territory of Ukraine, and the press reviews give a general idea about the features of the educational process there. Based on these documents, the main principles of the Polish theatre school were: general erudition, Polish culture, and synthetic actor.

Sometime later, by the end of the 19th century, Russian music drama societies emerge in Ukraine, often supported by the Imperial Russian Music Society, along with the private music drama schools which focused on meeting the needs of the Russian theatre, music theatre in particular. In general, these two schools may be accurately described by the pejorative characteristics of their acting style that was at the time promoted by the Russian stage practice in Ukraine—*booksy* (*literaturschina*), *psychologilia* (*psiholozhestvo*), and, to a certain extent, *gut acting* (*shkola nutra*).

Establishment of the Theatre of Coryphaei in 1882 where actors learned during the very process of working on a role and on a play marked the start of the Ukrainian theatre school. In Les Kurbas' words, this theatre was predominantly empirical; hence, the learning process there was also empirical in nature. For instance, the work of Marko Kropyvnytskyi, the "father" and one of the coryphaei of Ukrainian theatre, was characterized with the techniques such as *reciting the role; presentation; exploitation of the type of roles and their characteristic techniques, including hand-wringing, wailing, blatter, exaggerations, hysterical outbursts on stage, etc.*

Still, the core difference of this theatre was in its repertoire limitations set by the Russian government: according to various directives and instructions, Ukrainian theatre was either banned or limited from performing in Ukrainian. Similarly, limitations regulated the thematic range of the pieces that, in turn, shaped a unique system of genres, types of roles, and acting techniques. In 1904, the Lysenko Music and Drama School was established. It was the first music drama school in Ukraine rooted mainly in the traditions of the Theatre of Coryphaei.

The Ukrainian press mentioned Stanislavski and his theatre during the first decade of the twentieth century. The press in Russian, by and large, wrote about the cobwebs of the intelligentsia's soul and about the decadent tea parties of the intelligentsia (philistines), with the lives ruined on the background. The press in Ukrainian had little interest in the decadent moods of the Russian philistines, focusing instead on the organizational and financial aspects that helped Stanislavski create a quality art product; also, Ukrainian press promoted organizational basics of his theatre as the exemplary for the Ukrainian theatre. On several occasions, there was information about the attempts to organize an art theatre in Kyiv, which many perceived to be an imitation of the Moscow Art Theatre, although, in fact, it had more to do with the general European movement of *art theatres* that was much older than the Moscow Art Theatre itself. The reviews on the Moscow Art Theatre plays during its tour in Kyiv were equally restrained and formal.

Since the First World War, and even more so after the revolution, the interest in the Moscow Art Theatre visibly fades away in Ukraine, even in the Russian-language press. Specialized literature of the early 1920s, even the study by Alexander Zagarov, trained in the Moscow Art Theatre, pays little attention to Stanislavski, listing the latter only as one of many. Instead, the difference between the Russian and Ukrainian theatre schools was clearly defined. The other theatre figures of Ukraine preserved similar evocative silence. This trend becomes even more visible in regard to the influence of Les Kurbas and his generation on the theatre life in Ukraine.

To meet the objectives of this paper, Kurbas' creative legacy is conventionally divided into two periods: the first one being the period of apprenticeship, Sturm und Drang that was the time of creative experiments in regard to the method; while the second period starts with the establishment of the Artistic Organization Berezil' (1922–1933) that was

not only an educational and research institution and a creative laboratory, where, in Kurbas' words, *the science of theatre, the science of directing, the science of stage* were created.

Undoubtedly, there was a substantial ground for development of such trend, as the academic works on the methodology of theatre were published in Ukraine since the 19th century: e. g., the fragments of Gustav Freytag's *Technique of the Drama* (1866) were issued in Ukrainian earlier than in Russian, as well as the *Director* (1909) by Carl Hagemann that profoundly influenced Stanislavski as a director, and the *Lectures on the theory of drama art* (1907) by P. Bohdanov. Since 1920, a number of publications in Ukraine focused on the issues of methodology and on working on a play or a role: *Objectives of a Director* (1920) by Valentyn Haievskiy, *Introduction to Mime Theatre* (1920) by Vladimir Sladkopeztsev, *The Theory of Dramatic Art* (1920) by Mykhailo Rozdolskiy, *Amateur Theatre* (1921) by Anko, *The Compendium of Drama Theory and Technique* (1930) by Leonid Krasovskiy, *Director's Textbook* (1930) by Alfred Budzynovskiy, *My Work on a Role* (1937) by Panas Saksahansky, *The Technique of Theatre Art* (1938) by Yevhen Melnyk, etc.

However, the inclination towards research and methodology of theatre was not the only difference of Kurbas' school from the other Ukrainian schools and Stanislavski's school.

What was in common between all the schools, including the ones of Kurbas and Stanislavski, was their positioning as the national schools. In regard to Stanislavski, this is often omitted, while he emphasized that, "... to influence directly the living spirit of the viewer with the organically living life of the human spirit. This feature of *Russian drama theatre* only seems to be a revelation" (Stanislavski, 1988, p. 516); "we will pursue *the path of God-seeking that has always been and will be the basis of life of the Russian people*" (Stanislavski, 1988, p. 389); "the art of feeling, the craft, and exploitation of art are mixed in the existence on stage. ... For example, Germans are skilled in conventional actors' emotions, coupled with great proficiency. Frenchmen are good in the art of presentation with a touch of good skill. *For Russians it is the art of feeling*" (Stanislavski, 1988, p. 441); "*our* actors and *our* art is in *feeling*" (Stanislavski, 1953a, p. 215).

Equally, Les Kurbas with his practices strove to achieve national theatre of a European scale. However, the national differences were perceived differently by Kurbas and Stanislavski. Unlike Stanislavski, who after the revolution, when Ukraine fought for its independence, wrote that: "*our blood brothers were taken away from us. We do not believe that they rejected us. God willing, this is only a temporary eclipse, and our family of peoples will be soon reunited*" (Stanislavski, 1999, p. 12), Kurbas did not have any sentiment for the "brothers." On the contrary, he repeatedly underlined the differences between the Russian and Ukrainian cultures (which is overall more common for Ukrainians whose reactions on this subject were much more acute, while Russians often did not bother to take notice of these differences from their conscious imperial perspective).

This distancing was one of the reasons why Kurbas repudiated psychologism and psychological theatre viewing the latter as the sign of decay of theatre. Unlike Stanislavski, who at first lacked consistency as an actor and thus started his work on the System originally for himself, Kurbas was quick to set his priorities. In his Berezil theatre he shifted away from the acting practice and concentrated on directing instead, perceiving it as an art of holistic composition.

As opposed to Stanislavski's formulas "me in the given circumstances" and "life of the human spirit," Kurbas put working on a form of the play and a role in the center of attention. Instead of turning to memories and life experiences, he aimed for the transformation of image: transformed movement, transformed plasticity, transformed intonation, etc., i. e. *constructing a role and a play*.

According to Stanislavski's formula, Kurbas' theatre was a "theatre of imitation," while Stanislavski's theatre, according to Kurbas' formula (who differentiated the "theatre of accentuated influence" and "theatre of accentuated manifestation") was a theatre of manifestation. (Kurbas positioned his own theatre first as a "theatre of accentuated influence" and later, in the second half of the 1920s, due to the socio-political situation, re-oriented it towards "accentuated manifestation").

These are the core, basic differences that lost their relevance after the Kurbas' 1933 arrested and further execution. Even after rehabilitation, the state ideologists emphasized that it was Kurbas' rehabilitation as an individual, not a rehabilitation of his creative ideas.

Meanwhile, Stanislavski published his book *My Life in Art* which launched a number of discussions in the Soviet cultural environment as its author was accused in the worst sins of the era: bourgeois idealism and Freudism, and the theatre itself was described as a museum of the bygone era, of the bourgeois past.

The situation changes dramatically around the 1930s, not long before Stanislavski's death, when the process of his glorification starts. However, traditionally to most of the Soviet campaigns, it had little to do with implementing Stanislavski's system in theatre practice.

Though some authors (Abram Drak, Hnat Yura, Vasyl Vasylo, etc.) mention the Stanislavski's system being implemented in Ukrainian theatre allegedly during the 1930s or even 1920s, these testimonies do not seem credible for at least two reasons: first, there were no System teachers; second, the System was not yet documented, as the first works on it were published only in 1938 and in Ukraine the first publications that outlined the System at least in general (Boris Zakhava, Konstantin Mironov, Iosif Rapoport) emerge in 1937–1939, while the Ukrainian translation of Stanislavski's single work was published in 1953 (Stanislavski, 1953b).

Nevertheless, a significant aspect of relations of the theatre community and Stanislavski was the discussion "In-depth study of Stanislavski's legacy" initiated by the *Sovetskoye iskusstvo* (Soviet Art) newspaper in 1950. The discussion lasted for half a year with the prominent figures of Soviet stage participating, mostly Stanislavski's disciples: Mikhail Kedrov,

Maria Knebel, Vasiliy Toporkov, Georgy Tovstonogov, etc. The newspaper published the “Diary of discussion” that was intended to demonstrate not only the “advanced” but an “in-depth” analysis of Stanislavski’s oeuvre. As a result of the discussion, the leading masters asserted their loyalty to realism and to Stanislavski, while his legacy was proclaimed to be the pride and joy of Russian and Soviet culture.

However, aside from the Soviet ritual of public debates, the subject of discussion was the *method of physical action*, with Maria Knebel as the key opponent from one side (who probably initiated the whole discussion) and Mikhail Kedrov and Vasiliy Toporkov from the other side. They contemplated on what was indeed the “core” of Stanislavski’s system: the method of etudes and verbal action or the method of physical action. This subject was investigated amid the struggle against cosmopolitanism and attempts to blame Stanislavski for the publication of his first works in the United States and not in Russia. Hence, the aim of the discussion was to win Stanislavski back from the bourgeoisie, and to refute bourgeois interpretations that defined the method of physical action as the central element of The System. On the other hand, similar discussion between the followers of early Stanislavski and adherents of the *method of physical action* took place in the United States (Benedetti, 2008, p. XX), where due to translation issues Stanislavski’s image differed significantly in regard to methodology (Benedetti, 2004).

With a slight delay, this discussion reached Ukraine, with the renowned theatre figures participating: Amvrosy Buchma, Mykhailo Verkhatskyi, Vladimir Vilner, Victor Dovbyshchenko, Abram Drak, Yukhym Lishanskyi, Leonid Oliinyk, Semen Tkachenko, Konstantin Khokhlov, etc. If one will make a judgment based on a sweet flow of words that prove the full trust to the System, than it may be assumed that the system was indeed implemented both in the practice of Ukrainian theatre and in the educational process since the second half of the 1950s or at least since the early 1960s.

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Still, a careful analysis of the participants of the polemic and their texts shows the opposite picture. In Ukrainian theatre, Stanislavski’s system since the 1960s was implemented and taught by masters who were based on other methodologies. Hence, according to their original educational background, they distinguished within the system the elements and techniques applicable to their experience: for instance, disciples of Les Kurbas (Vasyl Vasylo, Mykhailo Verkhatskyi, Marian Krushelnytskyi, Volodymyr Skliarenko, Roman Cherkashyn, and others) and Vsevolod Meyerhold (Volodymyr Nelli), as could be expected, accentuated the method of physical action. This did not annul but only legitimized the skills obtained by them while learning from their mentors.

Conclusions. Despite the vast media campaign, the study of the System and the practice of stage art differed: since the 1960s the System was taught by the masters who had some other basic education than theatrical. Thus, depending from this education and being rooted in some other methodology, these mentors distinguished within the System the elements and techniques applicable to their personal experience: for instance, the disciples of Les Kurbas (Mykhailo Verkhatskyi, Marian Krushelnytskyi, Volodymyr Skliarenko, and others) and Vsevolod Meyerhold (Volodymyr Nelli) predictably accentuated the method of physical action. The features of the authorities’ repertoire policy in Ukraine in general and in Ukrainian theaters in particular in combination with the dominance of the music drama theaters, as well as of the traditions of the theatre schools of the 19th century (theatre school of Ukrainian Galicia tending to a synthetic actor, while the area of Dnieper Ukraine clearly preferred “gut acting”) produced the acting styles that go beyond both the categories of Stanislavski (theatre of imitation / theatre of feeling) and the categories of Kurbas (theatre of accentuated influence / manifestation) or other masters. Being neither synthesis nor eclecticism, these styles were determined by the traits of a particular theatre director and the traditions of his theatre.

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Клековкін О.

Український театр зі Станіславським і без

Анотація. Здійснено спробу реконструювати принципи основних театральних шкіл України XIX–XX століть та етапи впровадження ідей Станіславського, естетики очолюваного ним театру та його методу в українську театральну культуру. Всупереч міфам про тотальне нав'язування системи Станіславського та його методу ледь не від початків радянської влади, виявлено не менш драматичну, однак відмінну історію і точку неповернення — 22 серпня 1950 року, дату початку кампанії з глибокого, а згодом і поглибленого вивчення «системи» українським театром та українською театальною педагогікою. Незважаючи на гучну медійну кампанію, вивчення «системи» і практика сценічного мистецтва розбіглися в різні боки: від 1960-х років «систему» викладали майстри, котрі отримали іншу базову освіту, отже, й спиралися на іншу методологію і, залежно від отриманої освіти, виокремлювали у «системі» придатні для їхнього досвіду елементи і прийоми: вихованці Леся Курбаса (М. Верхацький, М. Крушельницький, В. Склярєнко та ін.) і Всеволода Мейєрхольда (В. Неллі) передбачувано акцентували метод фізичних дій. Особливості репертуарної політики влади в Україні і в українських театрах зокрема у поєднанні з домінуванням театрів музично-драматичного типу, а також традицій театральних шкіл XIX століття (галицька театральна школа — синтетичний актор, наддніпрянська — нутро) витворили акторські стилі, що не вписуються ні у категорії Станіславського (театр удавання / переживання), ні у категорії Курбаса (театр акцентованого впливу / вияву), ні у категорії інших майстрів. Не будучи ні синтезом, ні еkleктикою, ці стилі було зумовлено особливостями конкретного художнього керівника і традиціями очолюваного ним театру.

Ключові слова: театральна школа в Україні, «система» Станіславського, система Курбаса, метод роботи над виставою, наука театру, підручник (навчальний посібник) актора.

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