

AT THE HOUSE OF ANTON PAVLOVICH

Three studies in authenticity

Konstantin Stanislavski, the theatrical theorist and practitioner, author of *An Actor Prepares*, *Building A Character*, *Creating A Role* and *My Life in Art*, co-founded the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898, where he directed the first Moscow production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*.

It was Stanislavski who developed 'The System' (occasionally confused with 'The Method') which requires the actor to locate an 'Emotion Memory' and employ the 'Magic If' so that the correct feelings can be retrieved from the actor's life and replayed in his or her performance.

A particular play being staged at the Moscow Art Theatre included several scenes that were set out-of-doors. Stanislavski, a fierce advocate of authenticity, directed his actors to swat at imaginary mosquitoes at regular intervals.

On hearing this, Chekhov is said to have resolved at once to write a play in which the characters explicitly remark how very fortunate they are to live in a place where there are no mosquitoes.

There is, I believe, virtually no documentary proof to support either of these stories.

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1970. These are Cold War days and Moscow has little to offer the visitor from overseas.

I came here first in the spring. Three days by train from the Hook of Holland. The next day I sat — still queasy and rail-shaken — on a collapsed bench in *The Park of Culture & Rest* surveying a sad landscape of rusting ironwork and cracked concrete. Later, I rode the incongruously ornate Moscow subway, walked between the empty shelves of the GUM department store, watched the lines of patient, patriotic comrades in Red Square queuing to view the embalmed body of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov in the Lenin Mausoleum. After three nights eating *borscht* in the Hotel Metropol, I was pleased to be leaving for Tokyo.

Now, in the autumn, I am back again in Moscow. I am returning from Japan, where I have been teaching English to businessmen, housewives and television starlets. I have sailed from Yokohama to Nakhodka, taken a train from Nakhodka to Khabarovsk and flown across the shifting time zones from Khabarovsk to Moscow. I have no wish to stay here but my train will not leave until tomorrow morning.

I sit in my barely furnished hotel room, transitional and drifting. My eyes rest briefly on the dented tin suitcase that stands by the bedroom door but there is no need to unpack it. Soon I will be home. Very soon. Unless, that is, I am delayed in East Berlin. I lie down on the narrow bed — a brown blanket, a stained yellow pillow — and close my eyes.

I am dreaming. Half-dreaming ...

Steep stone steps leading to a damp wooden temple. Ranks of fir trees climbing up a mountainside. Tiled village roofs in the mist. And now Miss Hamamura — her figure an elegantly bending branch — leans down to lock the office door. She sees that I am watching her. She smiles sweetly, not lowering her eyes. Instead I lower mine. Both of us knowing that she is gently — oh so gently — teasing me.

Late afternoon and we have reached the summit of Mount Asama. We look down into the crater below us. Soon we will have to descend. A last look back. A thought that takes me by surprise. I will never stand here again. Can it be true? I am still young enough not quite to believe in 'never'.

Hampstead Heath in the sunshine. But she has turned away and will not look back at me. A girl with auburn hair. What colour are her eyes? What colour were her tears? I throw back the blanket. Sit up and stretch experimentally. Time to leave this room. Time to see more of Moscow. It seems likely that I will never come back.

In the lobby of the hotel, I find an Intourist leaflet from which I learn that Chekhov's house is situated at *Ulitsa Sadovaya-Kurdinskaya, 6*. I am an admirer of Anton Chekhov's plays and decide I will visit his Moscow home although I am realistic enough not to expect very much.

I walk past it three times before I locate the house. It is charmingly unimposing. I am asked to sign the visitors book which I do. I see that there have been no other visitors in the last six months. This does not surprise me. The rooms are small. They have no life remaining in them. The exhibits are almost touchingly inauthentic.

A pen of the type that might have been used

by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

A desk of the type that might have been used

by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

A bed of the type that might have been used

by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

They are reverently displayed but there are no false claims. Nothing here has ever belonged to Chekhov. I feel certain that this would have amused him.

I am joined beside the bed by the concierge, a formidable figure in her middle years who takes great pride in welcoming me warmly. We converse in French although her grasp of the language is even less certain than mine. She has, however, one phrase of English which she puts to frequent use.

—Anton Pavlovich, she says. He *love* the people ...

She leads me back to the first exhibit.

A pen of the type that might have been used

by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

—Anton Pavlovich, she says. He *love* the people ...

We move on.

A desk of the type that might have been used

by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

—Anton Pavlovich, she says. He *love* the people ...

Now here we are at the bed again.

A bed of the type that might have been used

by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

—Anton Pavlovich, she says. He *love* the people ...

My guide is claiming Anton Chekhov for the cause of Socialism and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; it would be uncivil to dispute this with her.

We continue together amiably enough until we come to a room where a wall of photographs is on display. Celebrated actors and actresses in costume, scenes from famous past productions. We gaze at them solemnly. Then I see a scene I recognise: *Uncle Vanya*, the climax of Act Three when Vanya tries to shoot Serebryakov. I am excited to be able to make the connection. I begin to explain that recently I played the part of Serebryakov in a university production of *Uncle Vanya* and ... But the concierge doesn't understand me. I try again. She stares at me disapprovingly.

—Anton Pavlovich! she says harshly. He *love* the people!'

Does she believe that I am claiming some kind of kinship with the actor playing Serebryakov? Or — still more impiously — that I am attempting to wrest Anton Pavlovich from his proper place in the Soviet pantheon? I try again, pointing to Serebryakov and then to myself. She becomes more incensed. I mime the scene for her but it's futile and I abandon my attempt. Instead I nod and smile but it is now too late. The concierge is rigid, unmoved; she will not be appeased. She stands with her hand on the visitors book as if protecting it from me. We part frostily and I am back on the street.

The afternoon is spoiled. My mood has soured. I am feeling dislocated, melancholic, homesick. I return to the Hotel Leningradskaya, the smallest of Stalin's gothic skyscrapers, where the *babushka*, who sits in the shadows at the end of the corridor and guards the brass samovar, regards me with that mix of suspicion and contempt which the period and the part she plays dictate.

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My father, like most actors, has a fund of favourite theatre stories which he tells well and tells often. A year ago, hearing these stories repeated might have irritated me but this afternoon, sitting with him in the winter sunshine outside The Duke of St Albans, by Parliament Hill Fields, it pleases me to hear them again. The Duke of St Albans is his local pub where he drinks most evenings, until recently in the company of an agreeable Russian gentleman who is attached to the Russian Trade Delegation half-way up

Highgate West Hill. It's regrettable that, after ninety Soviet 'diplomats' are expelled from London, the Russian gentleman makes no further appearances at The Duke of St Albans.

—There's the story of Arthur Bourchier and Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, says my father. Renowned actor managers, both of them. Fierce rivals, too. Tree's productions were notable for their extravagant realism and frequently featured live animals: flocks of sheep, camels, donkeys and the rest. An aspiring actor, hoping to curry favour, gleefully tells Bourchier about an incident that has recently occurred when a horse urinates prodigiously on stage at a crucial moment in one of Tree's dramatic orations. "Wasn't that a terrible thing for the horse to do," says the young man. "Shocking," says Bourchier. "But what a critic!"

A pause. We drink our beer ...

—Then of course there's the famous story about the legendary actor, Sir Charles Henry Hawtrey, says my father. Hawtrey frequently found himself in a state of 'financial distress' and had the habit of cashing cheques at the box office. Cheques that frequently bounced. This infuriated the theatre manager so much that he finally gave the order that Hawtrey's cheques should no longer be honoured. The next day, Hawtrey — accompanied by the lady he'd invited to lunch — arrives at the box office to cash a cheque for ten pounds. "I'm sorry, Mr Hawtrey," says the box office clerk, "but I've been told not to cash any more of your cheques." Whereupon Hawtrey crosses the road to the local pawnbroker and arranges to pawn himself for ten pounds. After lunching his lady friend on the proceeds, he returns to the pawnbroker, seats himself in a comfortable armchair, lights a large cigar and says to the assistant: "Take this cheque to the box office and ask for it to be cashed. Tell them that I've pawned myself and that, if I'm not redeemed shortly, I shall be unable to play Serebryakov at the matinée."

Which sadly can't be true. Hawtrey never played Serebryakov in 'Uncle Vanya'. But a tedious fact mustn't be allowed to interfere with an entertaining anecdote. I go to the bar to return with two more pints.

—It's an old story but I think it's worth repeating, says my father. An actor approaches the Stage Manager and asks, a little loftily if at the beginning of Act One, he

could please be supplied with real whisky instead of the customary cold tea. "But of course," says the Stage Manager, "on condition that, at the end of Act Three, you don't mind drinking real poison."