

Publish New Volume About Grand Old Man of the Stage

By G. ROVICH

MUCH has been written about People's Artist of the USSR Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, co-founder with the late Konstantin Stanislavsky of the Moscow Art Theater. Yet the interest of the reading public in his life and work seems insatiable. Now another work* has been added to the considerable collection of literature about this distinguished theatrical worker.

The latest book about Nemirovich-Danchenko, who has been regisseur and art director of the Art Theater for 42 years, is of considerable interest. The author, V. J. Vilenkin, has collected and systematized to a certain extent the voluminous biographical and critical material to be found scattered among various books, papers, articles and documents.

CLEANSING STORM

Vilenkin points out in his book that the social changes in Russia had the effect of a cleansing storm upon the work of Nemirovich-Danchenko and of the Art Theater in general. The beneficent influence of the Great October Socialist Revolution made itself felt more and more upon the activities of the old artist, who is now 83.

"There has scarcely been a more fruitful period in Nemirovich-Danchenko's artistic career than the past five or six years," the author remarks.

During this period the Moscow Art Theater has produced under his direction "Lyubov Yarovaya" by K. Trenov and "Polovchansky Gardens" by L. Leonov, two Soviet plays about the Civil War and contemporary life respectively; Alexander Ostrovsky's "The Storm;" Maxim Gorky's "Enemies;" a new staging of Leo Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina;" A. Griboyedov's "Wit Works Woe," and, last but not least, a revival of Anton Chekhov's "The Three Sisters." In addition to these productions, Nemirovich-Danchenko has staged Verdi's "Traviata" and Offenbach's "La Belle Helene" and also "In the Storm," a modern Soviet opera by T. Khrennikov, at the musical theater that bears his name. Add the two productions on which he is working at present for the Art Theater—Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and "Kremlin Chimes," a Soviet play by N. Pogodin—and the list is indeed impressive.

It is not so much a matter, however, of the number of productions or the range of themes. What is most important is that the veteran master of the Russian stage has never had such wide opportunities for realizing his aims and aspirations as in Soviet times.

DREAMS COME TRUE

Nemirovich-Danchenko has made no secret of the fact that the Revolution upset his equilibrium to some extent in the beginning. The new audience

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insistently demanded new repertoires and new productions of a higher ideological content. It was several years before the artist adapted himself to the new situation and realized that conditions—political, cultural and material—had never been so favorable for the development of his beloved theater.

Nemirovich-Danchenko often says, Vilenkin writes, that the October Revolution has armed him, the theatrical regisseur, with a special "searchlight," located, as it were, inside him, in his brain and heart. In its rays even old and familiar characters are seen in a new light.

Each one of his recent productions, the author points out, has helped Nemirovich-Danchenko to discard more and more of the old, worn-out methods and stereotyped forms that the theater had accumulated through the years. The Revolution, to quote Nemirovich-Danchenko himself, "deepened our understanding of art and made this art bolder and stronger."

Ceaseless searching and constant progress in step with the times—such are the traditions that Nemirovich-Danchenko has been instilling into the Art Theater for more than 40 years.

Perhaps this is the reason why the regisseur has occasionally made mistakes. As the author correctly points out, "he was often ready to open his theater to artistically imperfect plays if he thought he saw vital, contemporary life, questing and sharp modern thought in them."

TIES WITH GORKY

The Art Theater was always strongly attracted to Gorky because his plays, as Nemiro-

vich-Danchenko once put it, "teased and harassed the smug bourgeois soul." The affinity between the theater and Gorky lay in the latter's rebellious spirit, his protest against the rotting foundations of the old order.

For many years, however, they could not find a common language. More than once Gorky left the theater sorely troubled to see how it had blundered—the production of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's "Stavrogin," and so on. Although something of an understanding was reached at the time of the 1905 Revolution, when Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky staged Gorky's "Children of the Sun," a production in which one could hear the rumbling of the coming storm, it was not until Soviet times that the theater really understood the great writer and humanist, appreciating his tremendous optimism, his will to fight and his faith in victory.

The author tells us how Nemirovich-Danchenko has often spoken of the Art Theater in recent years as "Gorky's theater." It is with his name that the regisseur associates the conception of courageous simplicity that has been the main stimulus of his art for some time.

It is this that has helped Nemirovich-Danchenko to free himself from many of his former esthetic scruples. According to Vilenkin, the regisseur likens this change to being "suddenly relieved of an attachment to people with whom one has lived for many years but for whom one's affection has long since cooled."

"It is difficult," writes Vilenkin, "to mark the end of one phase of activity and the beginning of another in the life of Nemirovich-Danchenko with definite chronological landmarks."

Student, actor, pedagogue, regisseur, playwright, writer, journalist — Nemirovich-Danchenko has been all of these. These professions cannot be separated from one another in his career inasmuch as they were often practiced simultaneously, one merging in point of time with the next. Least of all has been written about Nemirovich-Danchenko as a journalist.

His newspaper work began in 1877, when, as a 19-year-old theatrical student, he made the acquaintance of the editor of "Russkaya Gazeta," which had just been founded, and became its stage critic. For the next ten years he worked as a journalist.

As is frequently the case, journalism stimulated his literary abilities and he wrote 11 plays in the subsequent years. Many of them were produced abroad.

The poverty of the theatrical repertoires he was called upon to review, the corroding theatrical routine and the conservatism with which no stage critic could hope to contend, hastened the formation of dreams of founding a new theater. Nemirovich-Danchenko "had finally to immerse himself completely in the theater in order to effect its regeneration."