1898 Moscow Art Theater Completes 50 Years of Service to People 1948

Wellspring of Inspiration and Vitality to World's Theaters

By IRINA KULIKOVA

NO OTHER 20th-century playhouse has exercised an influence on the world theater comparable to that of the Moscow Art Theater. This preeminence of the Art Theater springs from its close ties with the people, the genuine democracy of its principles, its constant collaboration with the greatest writers of its country, the profundity with which it penetrates to the ideological substance of the production, the perfection of its stage-craft and its fidelity to truth.

The ideals of the Moscow Art Theater and the methods of its work, widespread in the Russian theater, have exercised a strong influence on the leading playhouses of Europe and America. Theatrical people seeking to create a genuinely democratic theater in their countries invariably turn to the Art Theater's experience for guidance. For instance, the company of the American Group Theater, writing to K. Stanislavsky, one of the founders of the Moscow Art, in 1935 called the eminent master's system of acting their "lodestar."

An art that genuinely seeks to depict life truthfully and to draw broad social generalizations can only be a realistic art. The Moscow Art Theater championed the principles of realism in struggle against the decadent modernistic trends in the theatre that asserted themselves particularly during the years of reaction following the defeat of the 1905 Revolution in Russia. It was the realism and purposefulness of the Art Theater productions that first and foremost drew the attention of both the public and the critics during the theater's foreign tours. "The supremacy of the Moscow Art Theater... lies more securely in its perfection and thorough application of a dramatic principle, the principle of realism," an American critic, Saylor, once wrote.

RISE TO NEW HEIGHTS

Working on Soviet plays and depicting contemporary events and revolutionary heroism, the Art Theater has achieved new heights in penetrating to the spiritual world of man and portraying it through the medium of dramatic art. Its post-revolutionary productions have been marked by a higher level of mastery than ever, by even greater fidelity to life. "Never have we seen such perfection from the point of view of direction and acting," the "Le Soir" said in a review of Treniev's "Lyubov Yarovaya" as shown by the Art Theater in Paris in 1937. "We never saw a theater destroy fiction so completely and compel the spectator to think he was witnessing real life throughout the play."

The Moscow Art Theater has never staged a production with a view only to entertainment. Because of this its plays, responding to the spiritual needs of the people, captivate the spectator and stir him so profoundly, bringing out the best in him. "The finest tribute to the Moscow Art is that the impact of its art does not vanish when the curtain is rung down, but makes itself felt for a long time afterwards. During the Art Theater's tour in the United States, an American theater critic wrote that it required a day or two for one to come out of the atmosphere of "The Three Sisters" and even more to escape from the orbit of "The Cherry Orchard."

The Art Theater's European and American tours (1906, 1922-24 and 1937) proved its superiority over the finest of foreign theaters. Recognition of this fact was amply evidenced by press comment on the productions it staged. Foreign theatrical people compared the Art Theater with the theaters at home, and arrived at the conclusion that they had a great deal to learn from it.

"The first few performances given by the Art Theater made it clear that our theater had much to learn from it," wrote A. Antoine, the founder of the modern French theater, in 1922. "The perfection of the direction, the finish of the stage sets and costumes, all of which had been thought out to the last detail, the high level of the actors' skill, their selfless devotion to duty and their love for the theater compel us to feel particularly keenly how much we have to do in regard to the theater the place it has lost."

"The arrival in France of the Art Theater is an event of the greatest importance, and one that predetermines the future development of French theatrical art," a French critic wrote at the same time.

LASTING IMPRESSION

Prior to the arrival of the Art Theater in America, the playgoers of that country had seen many European first-class artists, but the latter had never introduced anything fundamentally new into American theatrical art. The Moscow playhouse, however, immediately made a profound impression. For one thing, this was a theater with its own thoroughly formulated system of work on plays (known as the Stanislavsky system, after its founder). Then it sharply differed from the American theaters in that it had a permanent company, a fact common enough in Russia but very rare in America. The audiences were greatly impressed by the ability of the actors to identify themselves with the characters they were playing, which too was something characteristic of the Russian theater as a whole. The theater critic of a New York newspaper who saw V. I. Kachalov, the eminent actor, in his dress up room between acts during a performance of Gorky's "Lower Depths" wrote at the time that throughout the interview he had to fight the impression that he was not talking with Kachalov but the baron whom the actor played in the production—so thoroughly had he identified himself with the character he was depicting.

The critics especially noted the ability of the actors to subordinate their particular roles to the general idea of the play, the fidelity to the soul of the play behind the parts, to the soul of the dramatist—in which and in which alone they live and move," as John Corbin put it. The theater will not put on a performance "until each member of the cast has absolutely identified himself with the manners and customs of the country in which the scene is laid," we read in "The World Magazine."

Following the performances given in the United States by the Art Theater, a great many admirers and imitators of the great playhouse appeared in that country. Directors and actors began to declare themselves proudly the pupils of Stanislavsky.

One of the major services performed by the Art Theater consists in the introduction of European and American theatrical people and theatergoers to the finest works of Russian dramaturgy. "We shall not forget that it was the Art Theater that revealed to us the greatness of Russian dramaturgy—Turgenev, Tolstoi, Chekhov, Gorky..." wrote the prominent figure in the theater world, Robert de Fleur, when the Art Theater left France.

Many Western theaters began staging Russian plays as a result of the impression made on them by the Art Theater. "The idea of staging this play occurred to me after your guest performances," read a letter sent to Stanislavsky by the head of the repertory department of the Prague National Theater in 1906 announcing that they were putting on "The Three Sisters" and asking his advice and assistance in staging it. A year later the Prague theater staged, with the aid of materials sent it by the Art Theater, the play "Bitter Fate," and in 1911 Stanislavsky personally assisted it to put on Leo Tolstoi's "The Living Corpse." To the very present the Art Theater has helped theaters in a great many countries that have turned to it for assistance and advice. This year, for instance, it sent staging directions for L. Leonov's "Polovchanski Gardens" to the Bristol Theater in Britain.

The influence of the Art Theater on the repertory of the European stage has not been limited to the assistance it has rendered in the staging of a number of Russian plays. It has also contributed to certain foreign theaters following the Art Theater's example and associating themselves with the best progressive playwrights of the time, and, in conformity with the latter's methods of work, producing ideologically profound plays of social significance.

The leading foreign theatrical figures have regarded the Art Theater as a wellspring of vitality and vigor capable of counteracting the general degeneration and degradation of the theater in the capitalist countries.

In a letter to Stanislavsky Gordon Craig declared that there was only one way of reforming the modern theater and that it was based on Stanislavsky's principles. "Personally I know of only one complete modern acting technique which seems wholly practical as a method for actors' training and actors' work, and that is the so-called Stanislavsky method," Harold Clurman, the American director, has declared.

Most present-day theaters abroad differ from the Moscow Art in that they lack permanent companies and repertories, and work on a purely business footing. Because of that it is difficult to apply the Stanislavsky system in full to them but even under the circumstances knowledge of the system and methods of the Moscow Art Theater is valuable indeed to the actors.

The world significance of the Moscow Art Theater is all the greater for the influence it exerts on leading theaters all over the world by sharing with them the experience it has accumulated in the course of the 50 years since its foundation. Progressive theaters the world over rightly regard the Art Theater as the beacon in their quests in art.

FOUNDERS OF MOSCOW ART THEATER. K. S. Stanislavsky (1863-1938) and V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858-1943)

'School of Life' Cherished by Spectators

By DMITRI KALM

THE POPULARITY of the Moscow Art Theater is not limited to any particular section of the population—it is universal. Its audiences include people of all age groups and all professions. The engineer and physician, army officer and teacher, worker and student all in equal measure find in its splendid art that which meets their spiritual requirements and ideological aspirations.

During the half century since its foundation, the Art Theater has staged 121 productions and given some 23,000 performances, attended by audiences totaling more than 20 million.

What the reaction of these audiences has been, I have sought to assess by interviewing some typical theatergoers. The first I saw was Academician Vladimir Obraztsov, the eminent scientist and railway transport expert. His son, Sergei Obraztsov, incidentally, received his training as an actor in the Art Theater company and now heads the Central Puppet Theater.

ADMIRER FOR 50 YEARS

"I had the good fortune to be among the first spectators to see the Art Theater perform," Academician Obraztsov told me, "when I came to Moscow as a young engineer after graduation at the Railway Institute in St. Petersburg 50 years ago. Each of the performances given by this theater from the very first days of its existence was more than entertainment; it amounted to a significant social and cultural event for all progressive-minded people.

"The Art Theater enlisted a new, realistic trend in the Russian theater. My friends young Moscow intellectuals, and myself were struck by the unusual simplicity and natural ease of the Art Theater actors on the stage, their sincere, true-to-life acting free of all artificiality.

"I recall that there were people at the beginning of the Revolution who were skeptical as regards the future of the Art Theater, thinking that it had outlived its time and would not find its place in the new, turbulent era of revolution. These prognostications proved utterly false.

"Since the Revolution the Art Theater—and I can say this as a regular theatergoer—has preserved its finest traditions and with the selfless support of the Soviet Government has developed into a great, interesting school of stagecraft which has played an outstanding role in the advancement of histrionic art both here and abroad."

Another admirer of the Art Theater who knew it long before the Revolution is Academician Alexei Shchusev, the eminent architect.

"A great part in the development of my appreciation of the fundamental principles and aspects of art was played not only by Art Theater productions and personal association with K. S. Stanislavsky, but also by his books 'My Life in Art' and 'The Actor's Work on Self-Perfection,'" he said. "I learned a great deal from these books that helped me to obtain the correct view on the graphic arts and architecture. For instance, there was a time when classicism, which I believe does not always correspond to the tasks and style of Soviet architecture, began to dominate the field. The pomposity of the style could not serve to convey the modern realistic image. Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theater which he and V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko founded played a great role in doing away with the artificiality and unreality that made themselves felt in art. This alone was a tremendous service, and it is to be hoped that the Moscow Art Theater will always uphold the principles of realistic art which is so near and dear to Soviet people."

Yevdokia Turchaninova, People's Artist of the USSR and one of the best actresses of the Moscow Art Theater, the country's oldest playhouse, had this to say:

"From the very beginning the Art Theater taught the audience of the time to respect the theater and honor the actors' efforts and the very name of the playhouse. Stanislavsky used to say that 'the theater begins with the cloakroom;' to me it seems that the Art Theater began at the entrance doors, so that as soon as the spectator stepped inside he found himself in an unusual atmosphere that made him particularly receptive to the message conveyed from the stage by the medium of theatrical art. Reverence for art and selfless devotion to the work at hand marked also the atmosphere behind the scenes, permeating the modest labors of the technical personnel as well. And had the Art Theater done nothing more than create this atmosphere its service nevertheless would have been tremendous."

Olga Leonova, eminent schoolteacher and deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, has the highest praise for the Art Theater not only as a spectator but also as an educator.

"The Moscow Art Theater," she says. "Is of signal educational significance as far as our young people are concerned. The Socialist Revolution and the Soviet system, which have remade our country, opened boundless opportunities to our rising generation. The Soviet youth now enjoys such opportunities for spiritual growth, mental development and professional training as were beyond the reach of my generation and as are beyond the reach of the young people of the capitalist countries today. But much is asked of those to whom much is given. Hence we are seeking to influence the young generation by all means at our disposal in order to help it grow up worthy of its country and its epoch. I believe that one of these educational means is the theater, and in particular the Art Theater with its carefully selected repertory and true-to-life treatment of dramatic roles.

"Even since its foundation, the Art Theater has rendered us educators great assistance in bringing the finest works of Russian literature to the young generation. The creative work of the Art Theater is inseparably bound up in our minds with the works of Chekhov, Gorky and Leo Tolstoi."

What Leonova had to say as a teacher about the educational value of Art Theater productions was borne out by Alexei Svishchov, fourth-year student at the physics department of the Moscow University.

"I first went to the Moscow Art Theater in 1938," he said. "I was in the fifth grade of grammar school at the time. The play was 'Ivar Fyodor Ivanovich,' and it made a tremendous impression on me. I was so captivated by the acting that I forgot I was in a theater. The sensation persisted for days afterwards.

"The theater helped me to understand and really feel the heroes of many of our classic literary works. I had the good fortune to see my favorite actor, V. I. Kachalov, in his superb role in Maxim Gorky's 'Lower Depths.' Neither shall I ever forget the splendid productions of Chekhov's 'The Three Sisters' and 'The Cherry Orchard.'

"I often went to the theater not for entertainment but in order to learn, and many of my school compositions were written under the impression of Art Theater productions.

"During the war I was in the army and hence I could not attend performances at the Art Theater. Because of that I was especially impressed by the first play I saw there after my return—K. Simonov's 'Days and Nights,' which made me live through once more the events I had witnessed myself so short a time before."

Highly interesting was the reaction of a young textile worker, Anna Seryogina, of the Tryokhgurnaya Textile Mills in Moscow.

Maria Chekhova, sister of A. P. Chekhov, the great writer, who was so closely associated with the Moscow Art Theater during its early years, has sent the following telegram from Yalta:

"Most cordial congratulations on the 50th anniversary of the great theater. I am proud that the words which my brother wrote a half a century ago, that the Art Theater constitutes the best pages of the book of the modern Russian theater, have been confirmed. I sincerely wish further successes in the work of our beloved theater for the good of Soviet literature and culture as a whole. I heartily greet the three generations of the theater's company."

ESSENTIAL TO WORKERS

"The theater has become as essential to Soviet workers as books or the radio," she said. "And now that all working people in our country have an opportunity to spend their leisure time in cultural pursuits, they go to the theater, concerts and lectures frequently indeed.

"The Moscow Art Theater is particularly popular among us young workers. Brought up under Soviet conditions and taught to appreciate art already in school, The vital truth that permeates its productions and the power of its art make a deep impression on the playgoer.

"Thanks to the excellent staging and superb acting in the Art Theater, the heroes of the works of Chekhov, Tolstoi and Gorky become more understandable and more understandable to the working youth. The theater is incomparable art has helped us to appreciate Soviet reality fully. In the Soviet plays shown on the boards of the Art Theater we see people like ourselves; the events depicted are familiar to us and hence near. The stage portrayals of our heroic compatriots act as an example of service to the country and the people, and they serve to inculcate on the spectators sentiments of lofty patriotism. Art theater productions are not only good entertainment; they are also a school which all Soviet people highly appreciate."

These statements are a barometer of the opinion of the audiences that invariably flock to see the productions of the Moscow Art Theater, a measure of the heartfelt sentiments that mark the theater's 50th anniversary, an indication of the profound, unbreakable ties between the great playhouse and Soviet people in all walks of life.

Messages of Greetings

THE Moscow Art Theater has received a flood of messages of congratulations on the occasion of its 50th anniversary, officially observed tomorrow, from all parts of the USSR and many foreign countries. We give here some of the messages received from abroad:

POLAND

The Ministry of Culture and Arts of Poland joins the jubilation of a fraternal nation on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of your great theater and wishes further fruitful work to the company which has dedicated all its achievements and talents to the upbuilding of Socialist culture.

Stefan Dybowski,
Minister

The numerous other congratulatory messages from Poland include one from Julian Tuwim, the eminent poet, who calls the Moscow Art Theater "the guide not only of Russian, but of world art.

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BULGARIA

The Council of the Artists' Union of Bulgaria sends its best wishes to the Moscow Art Theater, the carrier of realistic traditions in art from which progressive workers in all fields of art derive inspiration for the cultural education of the people.

Stoyan Sotirov,
Chairman of the Council

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CHINA

We, workers in theatrical arts in the East, have assimilated the vast experience accumulated by the Moscow Art Theater and found it a discovery which has enabled us to forge forward. We wish to express our sincere desire to cooperate with the Moscow Art Theater and all other Soviet champions of successful peaceful post-war construction.

Signed by 130 actors and theatrical figures, as well as five well-known Chinese theatrical associations.

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GREAT BRITAIN

Warm greetings and congratulations on your 50th anniversary. Your productions are an inspiration and delight to every worker in the theater who sees them. I sincerely hope more people outside Russia may have the privilege of seeing and appreciating your great company.

J. B. Priestley

The annual congress of the Scottish-USSR Society attended by 423 delegates representing 1,750 organizations extend greetings and congratulations on your 50th anniversary.

Murray,
General Secretary

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FRANCE

The National Committee for the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Art Theater founded by Stanislavsky sends hearty congratulations and friendly and sincere wishes for the future progress of the Art Theater.

Pierre Renoir,
President

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UNITED STATES

We convey to the Moscow Art Theater salutations upon your 50th glorious anniversary. Your world-renowned achievements will live forever, embodying the true creativeness of the theater.

Joseph Weed,
President, American-Russian Cultural Association

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NORWAY

Our salutations on the 50th anniversary in deep admiration.

Det Norske Theatre,
Hans Jacob Nilsen