

**TWELFTH NIGHT OF 1917  
AND THE MOSCOW ART THEATRE**

**Arkady Ostrovsky**  
Russia

On 15 September, 1917, in a letter to Nemirovich-Danchenko, Stanislavsky renounced the stage of the Moscow Art Theatre:

I cannot think about any other roles, because I will never be able to do anything, at least in the Moscow Art Theatre. Maybe in some other area or some other place I will be able to rise. Of course I do not mean in other theatres, but in the studios. Othello — free!...<sup>1</sup>

After the tragedy Stanislavsky had endured with *Selo Stepanchikovo*, he threw himself into Studio work. He started rehearsing *Twelfth Night*, a play he had put on at the Society of Art and Literature in 1897.

The Studio production of *Twelfth Night* was played on 25 December 1917, two months to the day after the Revolution. A few months later, Nikolai Efros published a book about the First Studio. It was dedicated to *The Cricket on the Hearth* but the words Efros used to describe the atmosphere in which Dickens's production had opened were equally suitable for *Twelfth Night*: 'You remember what sort of days those were?

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what was in the air?'<sup>2</sup> In his opening passage, Efros referred to the events of 1914 but, by the time his book came out, it might easily have been read as a comment on the events of 1917: 'We were all sliding into an abyss, into destruction and brutality. . . . The floods of blood were rising higher every day.'<sup>3</sup>

The difference was that in 1914 the 'floods of blood' were rising on the front; by 1917 the blood was flooding the streets of Moscow. In order to appreciate the impact *Twelfth Night* had on the contemporary audience, it is important to understand the atmosphere in which Stanislavsky opened the production. The in-house journal, actors' private diaries, theatre notebooks and contemporary newspaper reports provide a good sense of what the actors of the Moscow Art Theatre lived through during those days. Put in chronological order, these testimonies themselves create the impression of a carefully-crafted history play.

The Bolshevik Revolution happened on 25 October 1917. The following day, on 26 October 1917, the Moscow Art Theatre had a performance scheduled at The Worker's Theatre—ironically it was *The Cherry Orchard*, a play about the disappearing world of the Russian intelligentsia. The 'sudden and distant sound of a breaking string' and the sound of Lopakhin's axe, which comes from the cherry orchard in the first post-revolutionary performance of the Moscow Art Theatre, mixed with the first gunshots outside the theatre. 'The performance ended with a tremendous ovation, and the spectators left the theatre in silence. . . . Soon shooting began. Looking for cover and with great difficulty, we made our way home after the performance.'<sup>4</sup>

A few months later, Aleksandr Kugel', one of the best critics of his time, published a front-page article called 'The Dying [of Russia]':

The dying process has begun. Everything that we see now is just part of the agony. And the only thought now is that the sooner it all ends the better. The feeling is dictated by compassion for Russia and pity for oneself. From the very

beginning I've taken the Bolshevik coup seriously. I never doubted that this was more than a two-or-three week episode. Bolshevism is the death of Russia. And a body the size of Russia cannot die in one hour. It groans.<sup>5</sup>

'The body of Russia has been cut into pieces and salted,' concluded the critic.

28 October 1917 was the last Saturday of the month and, as always on this day, the Moscow Art Theatre began to sell tickets for the next month. Ivan Moskvín, who was on duty that day, carefully entered into the journal:

The foyer is full of people. All the cashiers are in their places. There is shooting outside. . . . The telephones do not work. A line of soldiers with machine-guns has formed on the opposite side of the street from the theatre. The soldiers are nervously looking towards the Bolshaiá, Dmitrovka and Tverskaia. . . . Nobody knows whether they are on the government's or the Bolsheviks' side. A lot of the audience is outside. No sign of panic.<sup>6</sup>

The relative calmness inside the theatre might seem surprising, considering the 'shooting outside', but this was highly characteristic of the Moscow Art Theatre in those days. It was as if the walls of the theatre could protect those inside from danger and stop the events outside from intruding into a measured theatre life.

11:45 a.m. From the diary of Vasílii Luzhskii:

It is grey, dismal and gloomy. Again no newspapers. . . . Just heard a burst of machine-gun fire somewhere near and also some separate shots. Saw the dead students being carried out from a tea-shop near a bakery. Saw how the soldiers with their guts spilling out were carried to the Belostokskii

Hospital. . . . The streets are empty — horror. The First Studio is taken by the Bolsheviks.<sup>7</sup>

12:00 p.m. From the in-house journal:

VI. Iv. [Nemirovich-Danchenko] suggests that we cancel the performance. Many telephone calls come through, but there are no out-going calls. The shooting continues. (fol. 14<sup>r</sup>).

12:20 p.m.

A lorry with the wounded pulls up outside the theatre. . . . New firing begins at the corner of Gazetny Pereulok and Tverskaia [across the street from the Moscow Art Theatre]. They say that the cadets sit firm there and that [the Bolsheviks] will take them by storm. The wounded ones are carried out in arms. Along the pavement, on the theatre's side, several people with abdominal wounds to the abdomen were carried out in arms. (I stood by the window in the large foyer). (fol. 14<sup>r</sup>).

1:15 p.m.

People came from the Belostokskii Hospital, asking us to let in a detachment of orderlies to rest and get organised. (fol. 14<sup>r</sup>).

1:20 p.m.

The foyer of the dress circle is occupied by students and nurses. . . . There is serious crossfire by the National Hotel. Apparently the 56th Bolshevik regiment took the hotel and is now shooting with explosive bullets. Stall [the public prosecutor] says that the pro-government troops are coming to Moscow from the front. . . . It is decided to leave four

guards at the theatre. The only problem is that there is no bread. Found some bread. The orderlies have left. Now there is shooting on Bolshaia Dmitrovka. On the corner of Kuznetskii Most a 10-year-old boy has just been killed. He was trying to cross the street. (fol. 14<sup>v</sup>).

On 3 November, in a specially started 'Register of actors and theatre personnel coming into the theatre on 3, 4, 5 November', the actor Nikolai Podgorny made the following record: 'On 29 October, B. M. Afonin, who lives with me, went to the Studio (dressed in a uniform) and still has not come back. 1 p.m., the theatre.'<sup>8</sup>

The actor, Boris Afonin, in fact went to the Studio on 28 October and was trapped there together with some other Studio members for six days, unable to leave the building until 4 November.<sup>9</sup> Skobelevskaia ploshchad', where the Studio was located, was occupied by the Bolsheviks and had been sealed off.<sup>10</sup> Sitting out the street fighting, Stanislavsky's pupils decided to finish the rehearsals of *Twelfth Night*—literally under the Bolsheviks' cannons.

Sof'ia Giatsintova, who played Maria in *Twelfth Night*, recalled the period:

We felt that something serious and important had happened but something which did not affect us directly. Therefore, we decided to continue working under the new 'given circumstances'; in other words, to try not to hear the shooting and to conduct the last technical rehearsals of *Twelfth Night* instead. We were conscientious and light of heart.<sup>11</sup>

Not all Studio members took the events so lightly. Mikhail Chekhov was badly affected by the shooting.

1 November. From the diary of Valentin Smyshliaev:

They say that Misha Chekhov writhes in hysterics and screams at every gun-shot. The firing is really intense where he lives.<sup>12</sup>

The day after the opening night of *Twelfth Night*, in an article called 'What the Christmas Chimes Sang', one critic wrote:

[Muscovites] will be shocked by the news that Mikhail Chekhov, the young actor, is mentally ill. Mikhail Chekhov became disturbed after experiencing the shock of our 'latest events'. You expected a Christmas story, but instead of joyful words you read about a cold and dull sense of despair. Well, this is what The Christmas Chimes of the dying year have told me. Happy holidays, dear comrades!<sup>13</sup>

From 27 October until 21 November, all performances in the theatre were cancelled.

The theatre journal is filled with entries along the following lines:

At 1:15 p.m. was alive. 3 November. Moskvín.  
Still alive on 3 November. Knipper-Chekhova.<sup>14</sup>

3 November. From the diary of Vasilii Luzhskii:

The shooting stopped last night. It feels as though something has happened. Yes. The Bolsheviks have victory. Nobody can think about rehearsals or productions. Everybody talks only about what they have lived through and how they did it.<sup>15</sup>

The only theatrical news which figured in the papers during those days was the vandalism of the Imperial Maly theatre.

10 November 1917. *Moskovskii Listok* printed an interview with one of the actors of the Maly:

When we walked into our dressing-rooms we faced a sight of pure vandalism. It was as if the place had been bombed. All the doors had been taken off their hinges, all the tables were broken, they had even destroyed the boxes containing the make-up. Of course these vandals did not need our make-up, but they destroyed it all the same. They threw it onto the floor and crushed it with their boots. These pirates took off their own clothes and put on our costumes. They defecated on both the Bolshoi and the Maly and befouled them.<sup>16</sup>

Stanislavsky sent a letter to Aleksandr Iuzhin, the artistic director of the Maly:

Dear Aleksandr Ivanovich . . . I feel anguish and an anger, as great as if they had raped my own mother and offended the sacred memory of our dear Mikhail Semenovich [Shchepkin]. I want to come and clean the dear theatre from the filth with my own hands; filth brought by the combination of natural calamity and human madness.<sup>17</sup>

The way Stanislavsky himself dealt with the 'natural calamity and madness' is best reflected in the record he made in the theatre journal on 18 December 1917, less than two months after the coup:

We must do something about the dirty foot-prints, which the public leave in the foyer. We must put huge, deep-pile door-mats down and politely ask the audience to wipe their feet on entrance. By the second act, the mats must be taken away. The stains make a very untidy impression. Although the area in front of the theatre gets cleaned of ice, it is still not perfect, especially the stairs leading to the theatre.<sup>18</sup>

It was not in Stanislavsky's power to prevent natural calamities, just as it was not in his power to stop the rain; but it was in his power to keep order inside his theatre. This was a form of resistance and survival.

In the American version of the *My Life in Art*, Stanislavsky described how, on the night of the coup, he came across a priest and thought: 'They are shooting there, and we are duty bound to go, he to the church, I to the theatre. He to pray, I to create for those who seek respite.'<sup>19</sup> Played in a hungry, cold Moscow on the brink of the civil war, the production of *Twelfth Night* provided just such a respite:

At the end of this terrible year, the horrors of which suppressed our ability to laugh and joke, we were suddenly given a few hours which took us away from menacing reality and gave us the feeling of happiness and joy which we have not experienced for the last few months.<sup>20</sup>

One critic captured the bizarre scene outside the Studio on the day of the first public performance of *Twelfth Night*:

There is a big crowd at the entrance to the Studio on the Skobelevskaia ploshchad': beaver-fur collars; ladies in expensive fur-coats—in other words, the bourgeoisie. Everybody is pushing and shouting, trying to squeeze through the narrow door. These people have come to rescue their money from the bank-safes [located in the same building as the Studio]. But there is another kind of public here as well—those who have come to see the dress-rehearsal of *Twelfth Night*. . . . In front of me I see the tall figure of Stanislavsky. 'Impossible to get in', he says turning to me. 'Let us look for another entrance'. . . . We all go through the back door and make our way into the small, familiar auditorium of the First Studio; leaving the buzzing bank-bound crowd with all their problems outside.<sup>21</sup>



The doors of the Studio shut out not only the ruined depositors, but everything that constituted Russian life in December 1917. In a sense, Moscow itself was left outside. Inside was another country, namely England.

Boris Sushkevich, the Studio director who had started the work on the play, remembered: 'I was given the task of making a light-hearted production about the Merry England of old, to celebrate Christmas time.'<sup>22</sup> The emphasis of the production was on the 'English scenes', while some of the lyrical scenes were simply cut out. The rehearsal journal shows that Stanislavsky spent most of his rehearsal time concentrating on the comic scenes and it was hardly surprising that they came out best in the production. Mikhail Kuzmin, a poet and translator, did not fail to notice that the balance of the play had been upset: 'The poetic part of the play was simply missing in the Studio production.'<sup>23</sup>

In Shakespeare's play, the two worlds, Sir Toby's and Olivia's, set each other off. The notion of a poetic Illyria, as a kind of Utopia, only works in contrast to the prosaic and ordinary world of the spectators, in Shakespeare's case, to Elizabethan England. In Stanislavsky's case, the ordinary world of the spectator was the 'grey and gloomy' Moscow, while England was a place of happiness and rescue. This made the notion of Illyria obsolete. In other words, to the Russian audience 'England' was exactly what 'Illyria' had been to the English spectators.

In 1934 Sushkevich told Leningrad theatre historians about a conversation with Stanislavsky that took place in 1915:

I brought Stanislavsky two plays, *The Snow Maiden* [by Aleksandr Ostrovsky] and *Twelfth Night*. . . . He said: 'In *The Good Hope* you showed people how to act 'drama', now show your ability for merry-making: make a light-hearted production.'<sup>24</sup>

The context, in which the title of Shakespeare's play appears, is significant.

*The Good Hope* by Herman Heijermans, a Dutch playwright, had been the first production of the Studio in 1913. The play told a grim story of several poor fishermen who are sent to sea in a flimsy boat called 'Good Hope' by a powerful ship-owner, and who die in a shipwreck during a storm. The sea-storm and ship-wreck were themes running through Russian art and poetry in the first decade of the twentieth century. They are also motifs that frequently appear in Stanislavsky's own work.

*Twelfth Night* offered the comedy version of these themes. For Stanislavsky, the starting point of the play proper was not Orsino's first scene, but the scene of Viola's rescue (1.2) which, in his production, was immediately followed by Sebastian's and Antonio's arrival (2.1). In *Twelfth Night*, Stanislavsky saw a happy resolution to terrible events. The fact that Viola, in the production, was saved on the shores of England, rather than Illiria, once again confirmed the mythological notion of England which existed in Russian culture during the time of political upheaval. A sense of close escape and relief was created by the proximity of fatal dangers.

The fact that Ostrovsky's *The Snow Maiden* figured next to *Twelfth Night* in the repertoire plans of the Studio is equally revealing. Both plays were in the repertoire of the early Moscow Art Theatre (*The Snow Maiden*, 1900; *Twelfth Night*, 1899). Both comedies draw on the traditional folk revelries which have their roots in pagan festivals. Anne Barton has observed that the celebration held on the Twelfth Night 'attracted to itself a good deal of the license and even the specific customs of the pagan Saturnalia'.<sup>25</sup> *The Snow Maiden*, a dramatised fairy-tale, is set at the time of *Maslenitsa* (Shrovetide), the Russian pagan carnival, during which people burnt the scarecrow of Winter, chasing away its dark forces and celebrating the beginning of Spring. In many respects, Stanislavsky's production of *Twelfth Night* had the same purpose: it was an attempt to chase away the dark forces and dispel the evil spirits

which possessed Russia in the winter of 1917. (His next production would be *Cain*, a play about the spirit of evil.)

### **The Change of Style**

There is a certain confusion over when the work on *Twelfth Night* actually began. Boris Sushkevich and Sof'ia Giatsintova recalled 1915 as the starting date. In 1934 Sushkevich reminisced:

Work on *Twelfth Night* began immediately after *The Cricket on the Hearth*, in January 1915. By the beginning of 1916 we had dress-rehearsals. After that Stanislavsky spent another year working on the production.<sup>26</sup>

The rehearsal diary suggests that the work did not start until August 1916 and that Stanislavsky came into the work only in August 1917. Even if Sushkevich has made a mistake, what is important is that, to the actors of the First Studio, *Twelfth Night* must have seemed like a sequel to *The Cricket on the Hearth*: The Christmas story was followed by *Twelfth Night* revels.

It was, therefore, hardly surprising that Sushkevich began to rehearse Shakespeare's comedy along the same lines he had utilised when he and Sulerzhitskii had worked on Dickens. Sof'ia Giatsintova wrote about this early stage of the rehearsals:

In *Twelfth Night*, Sushkevich continued the tradition of Sulerzhitskii—he was directing a production about good, merry, kind people. Independently, we were rehearsing a play in a lyric mode. Probably Shakespeare was too difficult for us and soon we became confused. After watching the results of our work, Stanislavsky razed everything to the ground and started rehearsing with us all over again. He demanded a 'waterfall of feelings and events'.<sup>27</sup>

Brought up on the tradition of psychological realism, 'behind the fourth wall', actors of the First Studio did not know how to deal with Shakespeare's comedy and slipped into what became their acting trademark: soft voices, un-theatrical gestures, subtle alterations of intonation and facial expression, long pauses, short bursts of laughter, intent looks, slow movements. These, supposed to give an impression of authentic life on stage, were turning into clichés.<sup>28</sup>

Stanislavsky warned about the danger of exploiting the 'sincerity' and 'ingenuousness' of Studio acting less than a year after the success of *The Cricket on the Hearth*. On 11 November 1915, Stanislavsky addressed the members of the Studio:

You must remember that on a small stage the success is always bigger than on the main stage. There is a secret in this. The Studio has got its own style and tone, its ingenuity and sincerity. In a small space these qualities are charming. But over the years the freshness disappears. I can already see small clichés and tricks; over time they will turn into big clichés; into crafted acting. . . . There is nothing more dangerous than temporary success.<sup>29</sup>

Stanislavsky distinguished two main problems in the Studio: weakness of directing and lack of good dramatic material.

*Twelfth Night* was the ideal play for Stanislavsky's purposes: it demanded open theatricality and resisted a pseudo-psychological manner of acting. Stanislavsky's 'objectives' were different in this work from what his students were used to. In *The Cricket on the Hearth*, Stanislavsky admired 'those deep and heartfelt notes of super-conscious feelings', 'elusive tones of voice, psychological pauses'—'invisible radiation', as he called it. In *Twelfth Night*, he was looking for visible action, pure comedy, improvisation and open theatricality.

Stanislavsky edited Shakespeare's text, cutting everything that could slow down the action and obscure the development of the plot.

The play was reduced to 13 scenes (mostly at the expense of the lyrical parts of the play), the scenes in Olivia's house were reshuffled and all Toby Belch's and Maria's jokes were gathered into one act.

Shakespeare's poetic text was of secondary importance to the action; the text was just a script. Like a one-sheet scenario used in *commedia dell' arte*, it was reduced to the basic outline of events, upon which actors were supposed to improvise their own play. Stanislavsky had been dreaming of *commedia dell' arte* since 1914, when he and Aleksander Benois were working on Carlo Goldoni's *La Locandiera*. At that time, Stanislavsky suggested to Benois: 'Let us have a pantomime with improvisation *a la commedia dell' arte*. . . . To play *commedia dell' arte* is much easier than it seems.'<sup>30</sup> In 1917, reviving Goldoni's production and rehearsing *Twelfth Night* at the same time, Stanislavsky was determined to reach the lightness and mobility of *commedia dell' arte*, which he had not quite managed to achieve in the 1914 production.

Stanislavsky changed the rehearsal method: long preparatory talks gave way to improvisation and gymnastic classes. Actors had to start not with a 'feeling' but with a physical action. Giatsintova recalled how Stanislavsky made the actors run at the rehearsals:

Stanislavsky, being unsatisfied with Kolin (who played Malvolio), made him repeat the scene over and over again. Poor Kolin was completely exhausted and, as he began the scene once again, wheezed to us: 'can't take this any more: to hell with everything!' and jumped into a big bucket which was on the stage. At the same moment we heard Stanislavsky's laughter: 'This is great! Now empty the bucket onto the stairs!' We, Sir Andrew, Toby, the Fool and I, excited about the opportunity to torture Malvolio, dragged the bucket towards the stairs.<sup>31</sup>

This was the method of 'physical preparation'. The comic tricks were not arranged in advance as in slap-stick comedy, but were supposed to be improvised at the rehearsal and to arise naturally out of the stage circumstances. As often happens in the theatre, one godsend led to another.

Maria, who is tipsy from a pint of beer she has just drunk, is supposed to follow Malvolio up the stairs. I, being in a good mood, started laughing so hard, that I could not walk straight up the stairs. I got up one step and slipped down three; I tried to get up again but it was as if someone was pulling me down. In the end, completely exhausted, I just fell down and had an attack of laughter.

- Crawl down more! — said Stanislavsky.

- Konstantin Sergeevich, I've run out of steps.

- We must add more steps! — cried Stanislavsky.<sup>32</sup>

This new, more openly theatrical, style of acting required a different spatial arrangement. Trying to fit Shakespeare's comedy onto a small stage, Stanislavsky devised a system of moving curtains, as in a puppet or a fair-ground theatre, which allowed for fast scene-changes. Two curtains hung across the stage, from the front to the back, and divided it into two halves. While a scene was played on stage right, on stage left the next scene was being prepared behind a curtain. The scenery was reduced to a few objects which signalled the location of each scene. The sea was painted on the back-cloth. In an annotation to the production, Vladimir Vol'kenshtein, a playwright, and the dramaturg of the Studio, summarised the staging principle in *Twelfth Night*: 'The Studio made an attempt to move nearer to the Shakespearean theatre—a theatre without scenery.'<sup>33</sup> It is unlikely, however, that creating affinities with the Shakespearean stage was Stanislavsky's main task. This was not an exercise in reconstruction and stylisation. The unexpected association with Shakespearean conventions emerged as

a result of Stanislavsky's attentiveness to the requirements of the play. He might have been ruthless with Shakespeare's text as a form of literature but he was extremely attentive to Shakespeare's theatrical demands.

In many of the Studio productions, the stage world, in spite of its physical closeness to the auditorium, was divided from the audience by the 'fourth wall'. As Serafima Birman remarked about an early production in the Studio:

We were so occupied with our own feelings, that we forgot, or at least tried to forget, about the audience. . . . We were further away from 'Theatre' — and I mean that in a positive sense. . . . Being 'hermetically sealed' in your stage-role upsets the very nature of the theatre.<sup>34</sup>

Following the demands of the Shakespeare play, Stanislavsky broke down the 'fourth wall' and opened up the 'hermetically sealed' space of the Studio. The performance literally overflowed the boundaries of the stage itself. The fighting scene between Sir Andrew, Sir Toby and Sebastian (4.1) began in the refreshment room, next to the auditorium. 'The audience first heard the war-cries and then saw the actors, who went through the auditorium onto the stage, waving their hands, arguing and fighting.'<sup>35</sup>

The elimination of the 'fourth wall' liberated the actors from the necessity of justifying Shakespeare's comic situations from a perspective of life-like truth. The audience was constantly reminded that everything they were seeing was part of a theatrical performance. The new rules were best demonstrated in the scene about Maria's letter (2.5).<sup>36</sup> While Malvolio was sunk in his reading, Toby, Andrew, Maria and Fabian exchanged comments and laughed at him.

In a realistic setting, this scene had traditionally posed great difficulties to an actor who somehow had to justify the fact that Malvolio does not hear what the audience can hear perfectly well. Chekhov,

instead of hiding this, played on the absurdity of the situation. He not only 'heard', but also responded to the shouts coming from the bushes and the side curtain. The whole scene seems like a comic parody of Hamlet's discovery of Polonius:

Chekhov hears the noises, turns round but cannot see anyone. . . . After the third time Malvolio-Chekhov notices a motion behind the curtain. Malvolio, on the tips of his toes, quietly crosses the stage, pulls the curtain aside and, looking straight at Fabian, asks: 'Who's there?' Fabian audaciously looks at Malvolio, without batting an eyelid, and answers: 'There is no one here'. Malvolio, mechanically, repeats after Fabian: 'Ah, There is no one here? Alright then!', draws the curtain back and, quite content, goes back to his letter.<sup>37</sup>

Chekhov's rendering of this scene was dictated by a special, theatrical logic. The rigid, life-like 'truth' of *Twelfth Night* gave way to a new kind of truth: the one of the theatre.

Sometimes Chekhov played the same scene differently:

Malvolio took fright at the shouts coming from the bushes and, in a panic, he picked up the laps of his dressing-gown and the hem of his night-shirt. Claspng this lump to his bosom, he rushed about the stage. When the shouts ceased, he innocently told the audience: 'Now, when everything has calmed down, I will continue'...<sup>38</sup>

Mikhail Zharov noted in his memoirs that each of Chekhov's comic tricks was produced in accordance with the necessities of the role. 'It was not a 'borrowed' trick, it was born naturally, as a result of a unity between the internal and external life of an actor in his role.'<sup>39</sup> Walking in the garden and deliberating on the whims of fortune, Malvolio, like Khlestakov in *The Government Inspector*, rose so high in his dreams,



that he himself began to believe everything he was saying. He was getting so carried away, that he started to reply to the laughing comments of the jocular crowd, without thinking who he was replying to.

Having imagined that he is already married to the countess, Malvolio orders that Sir Toby be brought to him, and he imagines the following scene:

MALVOLIO      Seven of my people, with an obedient start, make out for him. I frown the while and perchance wind up my watch (*ridiculously makes a circle with his finger around his navel*), or play with my—some rich jewel (*tries to illustrate this as well*). Toby approaches...

SIR TOBY      (*showing his head from the bushes*) And does not Toby take you a blow o’ the lips?

MALVOLIO      No!... He curtsies there to me... And I say to him, I say (*cannot find the right words*) to him: ‘Oh-oh-oh, Sir Toby.’<sup>40</sup>

Chekhov’s powerful performance made Malvolio the central character in the production. The daughter of Fedor Chalyapin recalled: ‘Mikhail Chekhov as Malvolio made my father laugh so hard that he almost felt faint. He could not stop laughing, even when the performance was over. On the way home he went on and on about the pleasure it gave him.’<sup>41</sup>

Chekhov’s performance was almost grotesque but it was not caricatured. Malvolio’s vices were magnified but not exaggerated or over-acted. Sof’ia Giatsintova remembered Chekhov’s Malvolio as being ‘almost not a man, but a kind of mosquito with his thin legs in a skin-tight body stocking—he would sting and disappear, come back and bite again.’<sup>42</sup>

Misha played through the agonising thinking process of a goggle-eyed servant consumed by his passion for the

countess. . . . Every time he was asked a question he froze for a minute, and then gave irrelevant answers which he took to be full and witty.<sup>43</sup>

One of the definitive features of Chekhov's Malvolio was his erotic passion for Olivia. In 3.4, after Olivia's words, 'Wilt thou go to bed, Malvolio', Chekhov, unable to contain himself any longer, fell on his knees but without noticing a low prayer-bench with a Bible on it. Suddenly, he found himself in an extraordinary position, with a bench clenched between his legs. Olivia's comments made in his address were bringing him to a state of erotic frenzy. His knees convulsively gripped the bench and he could not move.

Olivia, frightened to death, ordered him to get up but the outburst of passions . . . paralysed his body. He tried to get rid of the bench but it was stuck. All his attempts to free himself of the bench ended in vain. Malvolio then grabbed a big book [the Bible] and desperately knocked himself free of it.<sup>44</sup>

Chekhov's Malvolio was hideous, funny and pitiful at the same time. He lisped slightly and added extra letters to words in an attempt to make them sound more significant. He spoke to himself and seemed genuinely mad. Sof'ia Giatsintova remarked that, for Chekhov, the key for the letter scene was Maria's phrase, 'He has been yonder i' the sun practising behaviour to his own shadow.' (2.5). 'Malvolio really walked in a state of oblivion. He, condescendingly, bowed to the left and right; some imaginary people he greeted more warmly, to others he gave more severe looks.'<sup>45</sup>

Like Caleb, who created his own reality, Chekhov-Malvolio lived in his own dream-world. And when this dream-world broke, his Malvolio suddenly seemed as tormented as his Caleb. Viktor Gromov, Chekhov's biographer and a member of the Studio, remembered how Chekhov worked on the part:

He had just returned home from a rehearsal of *Twelfth Night* in the Studio. Behind my back I could hear Chekhov walking in the room mumbling something, sometimes laughing quietly and repeating the same phrase over and over again: 'Madam, you have done me wrong, Notorious wrong'. . . . His laughter was extremely funny: happy and stupid at the same time. It was the laughter of a man who is madly in love and is anticipating a fantastic success. . . . Yet every now and then it was interrupted by those final words to his part.<sup>46</sup>

In the actual performance of the last scene (5.1.), Malvolio, who appeared with a letter in his hands, seemed 'shocked and distraught'. 'Chekhov's famous final line 'Madam, you have done me wrong. Notorious wrong' sounded almost like sobbing. . . . Suddenly, something deep and human showed through the image of this ridiculous crank.'<sup>47</sup>

This sudden change of tone, which brought tragic overtones to the part of Malvolio, was suggested as much by Shakespeare's text as by Chekhov's understanding of the role. Pavel Markov wrote that the part of Malvolio, as it sounded in the Studio production, 'was created by Chekhov and Shakespeare jointly'.<sup>48</sup> It is common to talk about a Russian Hamlet, it is less common to talk about a Russian Malvolio but Chekhov's Malvolio certainly had Russian roots.

Pavel Markov perceptively noticed that all Chekhov's stage-characters are possessed by a single 'fixed idea'—whatever it might be.

His characters are wondering people and they often lose the 'idea' that is the only true guideline of their lives. Obsessed and stung by their fixed idea, they lose connection with the outside world; the idea possesses them, shuts them off from the outside world, it stops them from comprehending reality; they begin to pursue a double life. [...] Confused, they vainly try to re-establish the unity of life they once had.<sup>49</sup>

The example Markov offers is Malvolio, who 'is puzzled when, after all his erotic dreams are blown up, he tries to come back to reality'.<sup>50</sup> Chekhov's tragic overtones in the last scene of *Twelfth Night* came from this notion of a split personality and the sudden disturbance of the sense of one's own reality. This theme was only too familiar to Chekhov himself and to many in the audience in the first years after the Revolution.

### Abbreviations

- KS            K. S. Stanislavsky, *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh*, ed. by A. M. Smelianskii and others, 9 vols (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1988 –)
- Ss            K. S. Stanislavsky, *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh*, ed. by M. N. Kedrov, 8 vols (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1954–61)
- MLIA        Constantin Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, trans. by J. J. Robbins (London: Bles, 1962)
- Letopis'*    I. N. Vinogradskaia, *Zhizn' i tvorchestvo K. S. Stanislavskogo: Letopis'*, 4 vols (Moscow: VTO, 1971–76)

All quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. by G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

### Notes

- 1 Ss, VII, 643.
- 2 Efros, 'Sverchok na pechi', p. 5.
- 3 Efros, 'Sverchok na pechi', p. 5.
- 4 KS, I, 459.

- 5 Aleksandr Kugel', *Novoe Slovo*, 2 (1918), p. 1. Surprisingly the Bolsheviks did not close all of the old newspapers until 1918. Some newspapers simply began to come out under new names. Thus, for example, *Russkoe Slovo* (Russian Word) became *Novoe Slovo* (The New Word) suggesting a more revolutionary orientation.
- 6 In-house journal of duty members of the Moscow Art Theatre, 9 October 1917 – February 10[23] 1918, Moscow MKhAT Museum, Stanislavsky Archive, MS K.S. 4108/1–2, fol. 13<sup>v</sup>.
- 7 V. V. Luzhskii, Diary, 1917, Moscow, MKhAT Museum, Luzhskii Archive, MS A. 5086, not foliated.
- 8 Moscow, MKhAT Museum, Archive of the Internal Life of the Theatre, MS V. Zh. 29, fol. 3<sup>r</sup>.
- 9 On 4 November Afonin returned to the theatre and made a note: 'On 28 October went to the Studio and happily sat there until the morning of 4 November.' (fol. 5<sup>v</sup>).
- 10 On 8 November 1917, *Moskovskii Listok* reported: 'Skobelevskaia plochshad' is still filled with the guns, which, only a few days ago, sowed death and destruction.' p. 3.
- 11 Giatsintova, p. 165.
- 12 Mikhail Chekhov, II, 462.
- 13 *Teatr*, 26<sup>th</sup> December 1917, p. 3.
- 14 *Letopis'*, III, 79.
- 15 Luzhskii, Diary, MKhAT, MS A. 5086, not foliated.
- 16 M., 'Dela teatral'nye', *Moskovskii Listok*, 10 November 1917, p. 4.
- 17 Published in *Russkoe Slovo*, 10 November 1917, p. 3. For obvious reasons, this letter has never been reprinted in the Soviet editions of Stanislavsky's letters.
- 18 *Letopis'*, III, 87.
- 19 *MLIA*, p. 554.

- 20 Iu. Sobolev, 'Kogda tsvetet molodoe vino', *Rampa i Zhizn'*, 2–3 (1918), 8–10 (p. 8).
- 21 Rodia, [n. t], *Teatr*, 30 December 1917, p. 3.
- 22 Verbatim records of B. M. Suskhevich's meeting with Leningrad theatre historians, 20 March 1934, St. Petersburg, Theatral'naia biblioteka imeni A. V. Lunacharskogo, MS R3/546, fol. 23.
- 23 Mikhail Kuzmin, 'Dvenadtsataia noch', *Zhizn' Iskusstva*, 13 May 1919, p. 1.
- 24 Verbatim records of B. M. Suskhevich's meeting with Leningrad theatre historians, MS R3/546, fol. 23.
- 25 See Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, p. 404.
- 26 Verbatim records of B. M. Suskhevich's meeting with Leningrad theatre historians, MS R3/546, fol. 23.
- 27 Giatsintova, p. 159.
- 28 See Markov, I, 408.
- 29 K. S. Stanislavsky, Address to the members of the First Studio, 11 November 1915, Moscow, MKhAT Museum, Stanislavsky Archive, MS K.S. 13772, fol. 3.
- 30 *Letopis'*, II, 398.
- 31 Giatsintova, 160.
- 32 Giatsintova, p. 161.
- 33 V. Vol'kenshtein, 'Dvenadtsataia noch' ili 'Kak vam budet ugodno', *Kul'tura teatra*, 1(1921), p. 43.
- 34 *Letopis'*, II, 412; Birman, *Put' Aktrisy*, 126.
- 35 Giatsintova, p. 169.
- 36 Originally, the part of Malvolio was given to Vakhtangov. Later, Stanislavsky substituted him with Nikolai Kolin, who played Malvolio on the opening night. Mihail Chekhov first played Malvolio on 1 August 1920. The impression Chekhov's

acting made on his contemporaries was so strong that it ousted the memory of the way the role was played by Kolin. Practically all memoirs describe Malvolio-Chekhov and no materials about Kolin's performance are available. Although I shall base my argument on the descriptions on Chekhov's performance of Malvolio, it is worth remembering that the general interpretation of Malvolio's scenes was created in Stanislavsky's work with Kolin.

- 37 Mikhail Zharov, *Zhizn', Teatr, Kino: Vospominaniia* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1967), p. 79.
- 38 V. Gromov, *Mikhail Chekhov* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1970), p. 72.
- 39 Zharov, p. 78.
- 40 Gromov, pp. 71–72.
- 41 Mikhail Chekhov, II, 469.
- 42 Giatsintova, p. 162.
- 43 Giatsintova, p. 162.
- 44 Gromov, p. 73.
- 45 Giatsintova, pp. 163–64.
- 46 Gromov, p. 67. These, of course, are not Malvolio's final words in the play. I have not been able to find a copy of the performance text, and so cannot say whether, in Chekhov's performance, these were Malvolio's final words.
- 47 Gromov, pp. 73–74.
- 48 Markov, I, 404.
- 49 Markov, I, 401–2.
- 50 Markov, I, 402.

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(1921), p. 43