Caroline Peters and Sylvie Rohrer: European Actresses in Love with Language P44

EXCLUSIVE - David Lan (Young Vic) and Neil McPherson (Finborough Theatre) on Brexit P10

The Stanislavsky Electrotheatre in Moscow
John Freedman P48

Edinburgh International Theatre Festival Hugh Rorrison and Jeremy Malles P34

PLUS
FESTIVALS IN ITALY, NETHERLANDS, BRITAIN, CANADA, USA; REPORTS, PICTURES & LISTINGS
European Actresses in Love with Language
Caroline Peters and Sylvie Rohrer in conversation with Dana Rufolo about how their acting styles reflected the cultural messages in Bella Figura by Yasmina Reza at the Vienna Burgtheater’s Akademietheater.

Page 44

What Brexit Means to Two London Theatres
Interviews with Artistic Directors David Lan from the Young Vic and Neil McPherson from the Finborough Theatre on what Brexit means to them.

Page 10
A
fter twenty-one years of reporting from Moscow for _Plays International_ (and twenty-five years as the theatre critic of _The Moscow Times_), I found myself striking out on a new career in the fall of 2015. After a quarter of a century of compulsory impartiality towards all of Moscow’s theatres, I suddenly found myself advocating one: a revamped and renewed theatre that artistic director Boris Yukhananov calls the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre.

Formerly Stanislavsky Drama Theatre and one of Moscow’s finest venues in the 1950s and 1960s, Yukhananov renamed it the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre on 26 January 2015. In its turn, the Drama Theatre had been a direct successor of Konstantin Stanislavsky’s Opera and Drama Studio founded by the master in 1936, two years before he died. The remnants of the Opera and Drama Studio were eventually turned over to Mikhail Yanshin, one of Stanislavsky’s students; in 1950 it was reborn as a dramatic theatre without connections to opera: the Stanislavsky Drama Theatre. For nearly two decades it turned out many of Moscow’s top productions, providing a launching pad for directors, actors, and playwrights who went on to gain national and international fame.

Misfortune befell the theater in 1968. In the repressive atmosphere accompanying the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Stanislavsky Drama Theatre’s highly successful artistic director Boris Lvov-Anokhin was fired by the authorities. Many years ago he told me about the official conversation that led to his dismissal. Following a hugely successful production of Jean Anouilh’s _Antigone_ , Lvov-Anokhin planned to stage Anouilh’s _Medea_. The powers-that-were paid him a visit and asked him a pointed question: “Why do you keep staging foreign writers? Your theatre is named for a great Russian director. Can’t you stage Russians?” By the end of the conversation, the director was out of a job, and the theatre was plunged into a period of confusion that lasted, to one degree or another, into the 21st century. It had its occasional hits but never again rose to the level of sustained artistic quality that it knew in its first two decades.

Throughout my time in Moscow - I moved there in 1988 - the Stanislavsky Drama Theatre had the solid reputation of a deeply underachieving playhouse. In the thousands of articles, reviews, features, and essays that I wrote for various publications in the course of 25 years, only rarely did I cover events at this theatre. Just a few short years ago the idea of abandoning my life as a critic and contemporary historian in order to work at a single theatre, moreover the Stanislavsky Drama Theatre, would have struck me as bizarre. But history intervened. Beginning in 2013 a new theatre, the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre, began to enter my consciousness - slowly but with undeniable force.

It was in late spring 2013 that the Moscow Culture Committee conducted an unprecedented search for a new artistic director at the Stanislavsky Drama Theatre. (This committee usually just hires candidates who are asked to present a plan to give a new look to this famous but now-neglected theatre on Moscow’s main thoroughfare in the geographical, cultural, and historical centre of the city.) To the surprise and delight of the progressive theatre community, Boris Yukhananov was declared the winner. It seemed an impossible turn of events. Yukhananov, a former student of two of Russia’s legendary directors -- Anatoly Vasilyev and Anatoly Efros -- had purposefully existed on the margins of the Russian theatrical process for well over two decades. He was a star of Russian underground culture, eschewing all but the most fleeting contact with anything official or mainstream. He developed independent theatres, mounted independent productions, created his own independent school of directing, and was a co-founder of the so-called parallel cinema movement which rejected the stylistics, finances, and locations that mainstream Russian film employed. He had a penchant for creating sprawling, challenging shows that ran three days or more. Yukhananov has never created bite-sized theatre. And never before had the Russian cultural establishment bestowed such an honor and responsibility on an artist who so proudly flew his own flag of independence.

Within days of being hired to run the Stanislavsky Drama Theatre, Yukhananov and his small team leaped into action. He announced that the theatre would close for a year or more while undergoing major reconstruction. He reclaimed thousands of square
meters that previous, often unscrupulous, managers at the theatre had leased to cafes, stores, and offices. He sent the entire company into an extended paid vacation and promised that by the time they returned in the fall they would have plenty of work to keep them busy, although there would be no public performances for at least a year. Indeed, in the summer of 2013, Yukhananov, supported primarily by a private backer who invested some $25 million into the reconstruction, outfitted six new rehearsal spaces, completely rebuilt and modernized the dressing rooms, and constructed a stylish and spacious new cafeteria. While actors began rehearsing a half dozen future shows in the fall, Yukhananov’s construction teams set about gutting the old building (carefully preserving historical architectural items) and turning it into a super-modern, multi-purpose structure that respectfully pays tribute to the past wherever possible.

One of the first major actions was to remove the old stage and rows of seats in order to create a new transformable box that could be shared any number of ways by performers and audiences. The old wooden stage was cut into small blocks of wood. Old-fashioned, over-sized high intensity lamps once used to light the premises were inserted into them and sent out as souvenirs to dozens of people in Moscow. I was among those who opened their doors one day to unexpectedly find a courier from the theatre bearing this unusual gift. Not knowing what else to do with it, I set the lamp on top of my computer tower where it seemed to keep an eye trained on me at all times. Little did I know, but I was already being drawn into the world of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre.

Displaying his customary wit and sophistication, Yukhananov declared he would change the name of the Stanislavsky Drama Theater to the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre. This was, in part, a nod to the fact that the original physical plant on Moscow’s central Tverskaya Street had been built in 1915 to house a new-fangled cinema. Movie theatres were called ‘electrotheatres’ in Russian at the time. But it was also a promise of sorts. Yukhananov proposed to take a struggling theatre and electrify it, hopefully electrifying the theatrical process in Moscow as well.

Throughout the year of 2014, I and many others watched the theatre change inside and out. When just weeks were left before the official reopening on 26 January 2015 I was treated to a tour of the completely renovated physical plant. Small dingy corners had been transformed into sparkling, wide open spaces. The cramped old stage and auditorium were opened up into a versatile, single, rectangular space that any director could employ in any way that he or she might see fit. A fish restaurant that used to occupy most of the two floors of the theatre’s entry had been replaced by a spectacular gallery, cafe, bookstore and foyer on the ground floor. There was a spacious wardrobe and film editing studio in the basement. One could sense the excitement of renewal buzzing in every nook and cranny.

For his opening season, Yukhananov broke with Russian tradition radically. Instead of turning the theatre into a factory for his own personal dreams – as is customary for Russian artistic directors – Yukhananov invited a plethora of talented directors to join him in creating the marquee for his first season. The theatre opened with Theodoros Terzopoulos’s production of Euripides’ The Bacchae. It was followed a month later by Yukhananov’s radical reworking of Maurice Maeterlinck’s The Blue Bird, a huge show running over a three-day period. This was followed by Alexander Ogaryov’s production of Nilo Cruz’s Anna in the Tropics, Romeo Castellucci’s Human Use of Human Beings, and Yukhananov’s Drillalians, a five-day opera series. In the fall the theatre unveiled Heiner Goebbels’ Max Black or 62 ways of supporting the head with a hand, and Yukhananov added his own The Constant Principle, modest at just two days running time, based on Calderon’s The Constant Prince and Alexander Pushkin’s A Feast in a Time of Plague.

The Blue Bird was Yukhananov’s attempt not only to reclaim the power and glory of the

Boris Yukhananov and Theodoros Terzopoulos. Courtesy of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre.
Vladimir Korenev, left, plays Tyltyl in *The Blue Bird*. Courtesy of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre.

A scene from *The Constant Principle*. Photo: John Freedman.
Stanislavsky at its best, also to create a portrait of the Russian and Soviet nation. He cast two of the company’s longest-serving actors in the roles of Maeterlinck’s pre-teen children who go in search of the blue bird of happiness. Aleftina Konstantinova-Mytyl had joined the theater in the late 1950s. Her husband Vladimir Korenev, one of the top sex symbols of the era thanks to his starring role in the cult film 《The Amphibian Man》, joined the company in 1960. He played Tyltyl.

Yukhananov put these two actors’ personal stories at the center of the tale. Prior to rehearsals he conducted long interviews with them about their lives and careers and he interwove many of their stories into the fabric of his production. As such, while Tyltyl and Mytyl engage in their journey of discovery on the stage of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre, they also recount the hard and harsh story of the Soviet Union from World War II on, while turning many of the scenes into historical excursions about the great actors, directors and playwrights who built the Stanislavsky’s reputation in the past. 《The Blue Bird》 has the feel of a celebratory, though not unquestioning, archaeological dig. It embraces the triumphs and failures of a shared past, suggesting that a successful future is always a possibility for those intent on achieving it.

《Drillalians》 is the tale of people who come from the “land of the drill”: Drillalia where everyone seems to get the screw as they live in the past, present, and future simultaneously. Opening June 2015, it was a ground-breaking effort in combining opera, literature, and spectacle on a grand scale. Yukhananov engaged the six contemporary composers Dmitry Kurlyandsky, Boris Filanovsky, Alexei Syumak, Sergei Nevsy, Vladimir Ranney, and Alexei Sysoyev to write the music for the five-day extravaganza. Each brings his own aesthetic and vision to his allotted segment. The move into opera was crucial for Yukhananov, for this reflected his desire to reach back to the origins of his theater in Stanislavsky’s Opera and Drama Studio. As in the case of 《The Blue Bird》 which premiered in 1908 at Stanislavsky’s Moscow Art Theatre, it was another example of the new artistic director turning to the past in search of creative impulses for the present and the future.

It was 《Drillalians》 that captured me in the orbit of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre. I was told Yukhananov wanted the performance to run with English-language supertitles. Could I help find someone to translate his own poetic libretto? I had admired Yukhananov’s work for decades and was profoundly impressed by what he was doing to recreate Stanislavsky’s theatre. I blithely put forth my own candidacy and two days later was fast at work translating the first stanzas of Yukhananov’s crazy, purposefully obtuse, often humorous and always poetic libretto for 《Drillalians》. We began in mid-May 2015 and were as ready as we could be for the opener of the first night of the first segment on the eighth of June.

Over the six intense weeks of collaboration on the translation and creation of supertitles, I was completely won over by Yukhananov, his manner of work, his goals, and his incredibly talented and dedicated team. In the fall of 2015, I quit my 25-year gig as the theatre critic of 《The Moscow Times》, an English-language daily newspaper, and accepted a position on the staff of Yukhananov’s Stanislavsky Electrotheatre. That old glass light bulb planted in a chunk of the Stanislavsky Drama Theatre’s famous old stage still stands on my computer tower, connecting my own present and future to the theatre’s long, ongoing history.

Editor’s note:
The trailer of 《The Constant Principle》 is available on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Be97_EBOV_0
The trailer for 《Drillalians》 is available on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGPWT1J2Wnc

John Freedman can be contacted at playsinternational@theatre-research-institute.eu