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/ STANISLAVSKI

Stanislavski. New and Old Perspectives

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This article discusses the Polish edition of Maria Shevtsova's book *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* (Cambridge University Press, 2020) which has been published under the title *Stanisławski na nowo* (translated by Edyta Kubikowska, Instytut Grotowskiego, Wroclaw 2022). The critical part of the article is devoted to a polemic with the thesis put forward by Maria Shevtsova about the decisive role of the Orthodox religion in the formation of Stanislavski's worldview and its impact on his approach to acting and theatre in general. A number of biased or erroneous interpretations of some of the concepts of Stanislavski's 'system' are indicated, such as: 'Ja jesm' (I Am) or perevoploshchenie (trans-embodiment) identified by the author of the book with the religious notion of transubstantiation. The conclusion of this part of the article is as follows: while polemicising with the overly, in her view, materialist approach to 'the system', represented by Sharon M. Carnicke, and also with Sergei Cherkassky's overestimation of the importance of yoga to Stanislavsky, Maria Shevtsova interpreted Stanislavsky's attitude to acting in a one-sided manner, without identifying any sources in the artist's statements themselves that would support her argument. The following sections of the article outline the cognitive values of the book, such as a depiction of the vast cultural context in which Stanislavsky worked, a presentation of all the theatre studios he inspired, including the Opera Studio and the Opera-Dramatic Studio, an explanation of the importance of the Russian artist's discoveries for both dramatic theatre and opera directing, and finally, a brief discussion of the accomplishments of contemporary directors being Stanislavsky's heirs.

Keywords: Maria Shevtsova; Rediscovering Stanislavsky; Stanislavski's system; Eastern Orthodoxy

Maria Shevtsova, a British researcher, emeritus professor at Goldsmiths, University of London, author of numerous articles on the theatre of the second half of the 20th century, as well as monographs on Robert Wilson and Lev Dodin, has devoted her latest work to Konstantin Stanislavski. The book *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* (Cambridge University Press, 2019) found a Polish publisher quickly – by our standards – and in 2023 was published by the Jerzy Grotowski Institute, translated by Edyta Kubikowska, with a foreword by and under the academic supervision of Tomasz Kubikowski.[1] Both the English title and the Polish one, (*Stanisławski na nowo*), indicate the author's intention to present the achievements of the Russian artist from a new perspective – to present unexplored or poorly researched aspects of his work. The Russian origin of the Paris-born author, and at the same time her roots in the world of English-speaking cultures (the USA, Australia and, above all, Great Britain) are her great assets. Not all Western researchers who have studied Stanislavski have had the opportunity to study Russian sources in depth and not all have acquired sufficient knowledge of the cultural contexts in which the personality of the Russian creator was shaped. On the other hand, an outsider's look at a representative of another culture, assuming that this is a look armed with knowledge of the subject matter and unburdened by prejudice or resentment, sometimes allows them to see what escapes researchers accustomed to looking at their own heroes. We can therefore assume that a researcher who looks at Stanislavski from both these perspectives, taking into account both the Russian state of knowledge and Western research, will notice various distortions to which the legacy of the creator of the 'system' has been subjected on both sides, will shift emphasis, and will find original clues.

The book is not a biography of the artist; the facts from his life are not presented in chronological order; their mention serves to strengthen the

argument when the author focuses on individual issues important for Stanislavski's achievements. The first two of the five chapters are marked as 'contexts', while in the following ones the researcher addresses the most important issues for Stanislavski himself and his legacy, grouped into blocks: 'actor', 'studio', 'director'. The chapters are heterogeneous in nature. The first two, contextual, are encyclopaedic: dense with dates, names, terms, short descriptions of phenomena. On one page of the text, symbolism, futurism, and occultism coexist; Mikhail Vrubel, Marc Chagall, Vasily Kandinsky, Aleksandr Scriabin meet with futurist poets Aleksei Kruchonykh and Velimir Khlebnikov and the composer Mikhail Matyushin. One may get the impression that the author, who has experience as an academic lecturer, wanted the book to serve as a shortened compendium of knowledge about the theatre and art of Stanislavski's times.

The three subsequent chapters are of a different nature; the author returns – at different levels of reflection and in different constellations – to topics she considers key. Firstly, to the Russian Orthodox tradition, from which, in her opinion, Stanislavski's explorations arose; secondly, to the idea of teamwork, also founded on Orthodox culture, and at the same time influencing many areas of contemporary theatre to this day; thirdly and finally, to Stanislavski's role in creating the foundations of the art of directing, a role – in her opinion – not sufficiently appreciated by other researchers. In these chapters, certainly written primarily for people more deeply initiated into the issues raised, the author develops her thoughts, not avoiding polemics with other specialists.

In the introduction to the book, Maria Shevtsova emphasises that, contrary to the belief that everything is already known about Stanislavski, he needs to be rediscovered, 'or maybe even simply discovered' (p. 18).[2] However, her

approach does not stem from the currently widespread need to revise the past by applying contemporary criteria to it, both aesthetic and ethical. The latter, by the way, is much more common. Stanislavski emerges from the pages of this book as a giant who has influenced many areas of world theatre to this day.

When starting work on the book, the researcher probably had Western readers in mind, both students and researchers. And although they know quite a lot about the creator himself and his 'system' (the author consistently capitalises the word 'system' without quotation marks, contrary to the accepted tradition to date, including in Poland[3]), thanks to, among others, the translations of Jean Norman Benedetti (which she evaluates critically), the works of the American theatre scholar Sharon Marie Carnicke[4] (with whom she argues) and many other American and British researchers, scholars, and practitioners, this knowledge still has lacunae. Therefore, the author focuses on issues absent from Western works: primarily on the sources of Stanislavski's thinking about acting, which she discovers in Orthodox Christianity. According to her: 'Stanislavski's religious attitude shapes his worldview, and it includes the search for a natural actor-creator, with whom Stanislavski worked on his System until his death' (p. 19). The researcher lists the artist's other inspirations as the traditions of the Old Believers, the views of Leo Tolstoy, and the person of Lev Sulerzhitsky, about whom – as she writes – little is known (although the Polish reader may know a bit more – see Osińska, 2003).

The author also addresses the subject of the influence of Russian artistic circles on the formation of Stanislavski's personality before he founded the MChT. Thanks to this, the book contains information about the artist colony at Savva Morozov's estate, the famous Abramtsevo. About the Peredvizhniki

(Wanderers – in the translation proposed by the translator of the book)[5] and their successors, painters whose art shaped Stanislavski's aesthetic sensitivity, not to mention his later collaboration with some of them (such as Viktor Simov). About Russian patrons of art (apart from Morozov, another Savva – Mamontov – played an important role in Stanislavski's life), about the Russian Private Opera and the St Petersburg magazine *Mir iskusstva* (The World of Art), from which the set designers of the Russian Ballets came. In other words, about everything that constituted the Russian culture of the so-called Silver Age.

The presentation of the aforementioned figures and phenomena is accompanied by reflections on utopian communities, among which the author includes not only the Abramtsevo artist colony, but also the Old Believers (in addition to Morozov and Mamontov, the collector Pavel Tretyakov, founder of the famous Tretyakov Gallery, came from this religious denomination). The community, which the author defines through the prism of Orthodox culture, is linked to the idea of teamwork cultivated by Stanislavski. This theme forms a *leitmotif* throughout the book. The author has long been interested in this issue; in 2013, during a conference held in Moscow on the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Stanislavski's birth with the participation of many world-famous directors, actors and theatre researchers, it was Maria Shevtsova who emphasised the great importance of the idea of teamwork in Russian theatre. Hence, in *Rediscovering Stanislavski*, she develops anew the subject of studies emerging in the MChT circle, assuming that the idea of community has its sources in the Orthodox tradition, which is characterised by the word соборность [*sobornost*], usually not translated into other languages (although Andrzej Walicki uses the Polish variant *soborowość* – Walicki, 2002, p. 207 et al., which makes sense because in both Russian and Polish etymology its root is *sobór*). This

word, which in Old Russian literature is the equivalent of the Greek καθολικός in the meaning of 'universal', in Russian religious philosophy generally means a community of people based on voluntary principles and on ethical, Christian foundations. It was introduced into the language of religious philosophy by Alexey Khomyakov, one of the classics of Slavophilia, and thus the utopia of communion rooted in the concept of *соборность* essentially refers us to Orthodoxy, and at the same time to the conservative trend in Russian religious and philosophical thought, which was Slavophilia.

The greatest contribution to building studiousness on community principles, deriving not so much from Orthodoxy as a faith, but from the utopia of a commune (i.e.: *obshchina*), not far from Slavophilia, was undoubtedly made by Leopold Sulerżycki – I wrote about this topic in *Monasteries and Laboratories* – a Pole by birth and a Catholic by upbringing, referring, like Leo Tolstoy, to the ethical guidelines of the Gospel. Regardless of the relations that connected Sulerżycki and Tolstoy with the official church (let me recall that in 1901 the Synod of the Orthodox Church separated Leo Tolstoy from the church community; this act was not equivalent to excommunication), due to the views they proclaimed, they commanded respect in Russian artistic circles, including in the circle of the Moscow Art Theatre. In her considerations, Shevtsova refers to a certain statement by Stanislavski himself, which is supposed to confirm not only his Orthodox roots, but also his perception of theatre in terms of holiness. However, there are problems with vocabulary here, which in Polish may be a result of the difficulties caused by double translation from Russian to English and then from English to Polish. The point is that some of the formulations quoted have been distorted in relation to the Russian originals, and they have a fundamental impact on how we interpret the author's intentions.

For Shevtsova, one argument in favour of Stanislavski's perception of theatre through the prism of Orthodoxy was his words from 1908 that function as an aphorism in Russia: that the theatre is a temple (храм), and the actor a priest (жрец). In the Polish translation of the book, these words refer to the Christian image of the world, because their author (Stanislavski) 'ponders the vital need for a "theatre-church"' and 'compares actors to priests' (pp. 32, 69). However, храм refers to a temple in the broad sense of the word (and therefore also a Christian temple), but in this case it is specified by the word *żriec*, or in its basic meaning – a priest, but a priest in the pagan world. In the figurative sense, a *żriec*can be a 'priest of art', but not a priest or other Christian clergyman. Therefore, when we read about the stage as a holy place and the actor-priest in Stanislavski's work, we do not have to look for religious content in these terms – contrary to what the author writes. Stanislavski, when he wrote about the temple of art and its priests, was motivated by something else, namely the desire to give theatre a high prestige – to recognise it as a domain of art rather than of entertainment (as theatre was commonly perceived at the end of the 19th century, especially in the landed gentry or merchant environment from which the director came). Stanislavski wanted to free stage art from triviality, to prove that it deserves the highest respect, and not to elevate theatre to the rank of religion. Besides, would he do this if he were as religious as the author wants? Especially when we consider that Orthodoxy has traditionally been distrustful of, and in some eras even hostile towards theatre and all kinds of performances (see Osińska, 2010).

Rediscovering Stanislavski – this is first and foremost Stanislavski the Orthodox, and not in the sense in which Russians are commonly thought of as Orthodox (or – more often – Poles as Catholics; such a cliché appears in Shevtsova's work in reference to Grotowski, about whom she writes that

Catholicism had entered his blood' – p. 236), but whom Stanislavski characterised as a 'pious man' (p. 91), 'religious by upbringing and habitus, but […] deeply religious in his blood and bones' (p. 89), and even 'a pious believer' (p. 110). Yet the author does not provide any sources that would attest to Stanislavski's piety. It is true that he was raised in Orthodox culture, but whether Orthodoxy was really the primary source from which he drew when practising, thinking and writing about acting – here I have my doubts.

The author devotes one of the subchapters to the formula *ja jesm* (which in Jerzy Czech's interpretation should be translated as: 'jam jest' (I am)– see Stanislavski, 2011, pp. 20–21). She writes:

> Stanislavski knew from church services, purification rites and other such religious observance, that 'ya yesm' means nothing less than 'I am in God and God in me' in spirit and body; and the attitude underpinning 'ya yesm' is 'I am attentive to my stated of oneness with God'. […] By saying (or thinking) 'ya yesm', the actor acknowledges his/her acceptance of the 'sacred task' of art […] (p. 101).

It is obvious that *ja jesm* references the Bible. However, Stanislavski left out one part of this formula, which was God's answer to Moses' question about His name (Book of Exodus, 3:14). This formula, in the Polish tradition, which reads: 'I am who I am', is written in the Orthodox Bible as *Ja jesm Suszczij*. This 'Sushchij' means *existing*, but also: *essential*, *true*. When written with a capital letter, it means the name of God. Stanislavski does not quote the biblical formula literally (in the case of a religious person, this would mean

at least an abuse). The issue of *ja jesm*, as understood by Stanislavski, was well explained by philosopher Oleg Aronson in an article devoted to *The Actor's Work on Himself* in the context of the relationship between the 'system' and cinema and film acting:

> When Stanislavski writes about the 'artificial stimulation of the periphery of the body,' this should be understood as introducing *randomness* into stage behaviour, in connection with which the randomness of the bodily reaction allows for the consolidation of a state *between* clichés. Consolidating this conditions the act of establishing one's own presence on stage as a real 'I am.' […] However, the problem is that the presence that Stanislavski captures in the words 'I am' and which constitutes a vehicle for the actor's emotion can be observed only with great difficulty even in life off stage. People generally do not pay attention to the 'ja jesm' moments in their everyday existence. In everyday life, our existence is subordinated to the mechanics of everyday activities, or to what Stanislavski calls 'trained habits' which practically eliminates the affectivity in the situation of presence. And it is affective precisely because it breaks the routine of standard actions, proceedings, judgments – of everything that is usually identified with life.
> The 'system' is a kind of school of mindfulness towards the weakest manifestations of presence in the world. In itself, this is as difficult as, for example, thought. And perhaps what Stanislavski means by mindfulness towards the everyday is precisely the proto-act of thinking, i.e. the provocation of the organism at the moment of inseparability of thought and feeling (Aronson, 2000).

Maria Shevtsova notes of the phrase ‘ya yesm’, that ‘its secularised usage in the acting profession was able then, as well as later, to maintain its religious connotations for those who recognised and accepted them, while acquiring the appearance of lay pieces of information, specifically tailored for actors […]’ (p. 101). The author suggests, therefore, the possibility of using this formula outside the religious context, in order to guide the actor on the path of stage presence – here and now. However, according to her, Stanislavski himself perceived the process of an actor working on a role as analogous to a religious experience.

In the author’s opinion, another term by Stanislavski, namely *pierevoploshchenye* (transformation), should also be considered in a religious context. In support of her diagnosis, she refers, among others, to the considerations of Anatoly Vasilyev:

> An Orthodox Christian himself, Vasilyev sees Orthodoxy in Stanislavsky’s very idea of ‘metamorphosis’ (Vasilyev’s word), that is, the transubstantiation of one substance into another, or, in the language of Stanislavsky’s theatre, that of an actor embodied in the not-oneself (which is a role) and of the role embodied in the actor. Embodiment (voploshcheniye) achieves transformation (perevoploshcheniye) when it crosses over – as indicated by the profix pere – into this highest form of actorly accomplishment. Pere, in Russian grammar, always indicates movement[6], which, in this case, signifies the action towards transformation as it is being accomplished. In other words, transformation is a process, not an end result. For Stanislavski, it is, indeed, part and parcel of the ‘creative process’ (p. 90).

The ‘transubstantiation’ cited by the author, summarising the artist’s statement, has its source in Catholic theology; in Orthodoxy, to which this concept came late, the emphasis falls on the mystery of the Eucharist. Vasilyev, as an artist, has the right to perceive the idea of the artist’s transformation into a character, or the act of transubstantiation in this way – in the terminology of the ‘system’.[7] I consider it excessive presuposition to ascribe this motivation to Stanislavski, following Vasilyev, without indicating the sources proving Stanislavski’s approach. After all, the author knows that similar symbolic transformations are present in various religions, and the idea of transformation, of becoming someone else, she gives – following Mircea Eliade – sacral connotations. However, it is hard to find convincing the claim that Stanislavski’s understanding of acting might be directly associated with transformation into the sacred in the Christian sense. In her opinion: ‘in a quasi-mystical and also sexual language, [Stanislavsky] speaks of that – to him rare – moment when an actor reaches that ganz andere which “shows itself” as “ecstasy”’ (p. 91). In the quoted fragment from Stanislavski’s writings, however, ‘ecstasy’ does not mean a state in which a mystical act of transfiguration occurs. Stanislavski writes about delight, about satisfaction caused by the beauty of one’s own creative act, i.e. about an aesthetic experience. An achievement thanks to ‘correct creative well-being’, the path to which leads through the activation of affective memory (Stanislavski, 1993, p. 346).

It is interesting that the author, when discussing issues related to acting, devotes little attention to affective memory; the word ‘psychology’ hardly appears in the book, let alone ‘psychological realism’. She mentions the discoveries of Théodule Ribot (as well as other scientific peers important to Stanislavski: William James, Ivan Sechenov, Ivan Pavlov – p. 93), but she places the ‘life of the human spirit’ above affective or emotional memory,

situating it, of course, in Russian Orthodoxy.

The references to Orthodoxy in light of the history of the MChT and its co-founder are not new; they were related to the departure – from the 1980s, and especially after the fall of the Soviet Union – from the materialist vision of the 'system' and to the renaissance of religious life in Russia. During the international symposium *Stanislavski in the Changing World* held in Moscow in 1989 with the participation of (for the first time so many) foreign guests, Inna Solovyova described the work of the early MChT as Orthodox (Solovyova, 1994, p. 56). As evidence, the researcher quoted words from a brochure distributed by Stanislavski at the beginning of the 20th century to students of theatre art, according to which the tasks of art should stem from a Christian vision of the world, based on the idea of brotherly (today we would add 'and sisterly') unity. The author of the brochure was Leo Tolstoy, and his considerations were reflected in the principles of coexistence in the team developed in the Art Theatre and in the studios; however, the context of the time – the end of the 20th century – meant that generalising conclusions about the overwhelming influence of Orthodoxy on Russian culture at the beginning of the 20th century became popular, similar to (over two decades later, already in the 21st century) the issue of the influence of yoga on the 'system'.

Stanislavski used vocabulary from various sources; he spent his whole life searching for an adequate language to express the complex processes in acting. Hence, in his dictionary, alongside the aforementioned 'jam jest' or 'life of the human spirit', there appear terms more related to Eastern philosophy and practices, including yoga, such as: 'circle of attention', 'concentration of thought', 'muscle relaxation', 'prana (life force)', 'rays of energy'. Shevtsova emphasises (rightly, in my opinion) that the discovery of

Stanislavski's interest in yoga (fashionable in Russia at the beginning of the last century) led to an overestimation of the influence of this tradition on the 'system'. While disputing with the most important populariser of this trend of thought, Sergei Cherkassky,[8] she also argues that the concepts Cherkassky derived from yoga (obshcheniye, 'attention', 'visualisation', 'jam jest') belong to 'deep Orthodoxy' (p. 109). In doing so, the vision of the religious Stanislavski created by the author in opposition to the distortions of Soviet interpreters or the overly – in her opinion – materialistic approach to the 'system' represented by Sharon M. Carnicke becomes equally one-sided.

Stanislavski's upbringing probably predisposed him to search for impulses in the spiritual sphere, as well as for words that would help him name his discoveries. And I am sure that in Orthodoxy, especially in its hermit and meditative traditions, one can find elements close to his searches – of that I am convinced. Hence, I read with interest the discussion of the Orthodox cosmology of Theophan the Recluse (p. 92); Shevtsova admits that there is no evidence that Stanislavski knew the teachings of this holy monk and theologian, which does not mean that one cannot find traces close to his discoveries in them. Incidentally, it is a pity that the author omitted another parallel between Stanislavski's searches and the spiritual school – one that was noticed by Sergei Eisenstein and discussed by him in an article on the closeness of Stanislavski's acting techniques to the spiritual practices of Ignatius of Loyola (Eisenstein, 2000).

Maria Shevtsova's book contains so many threads and topics that it is difficult to discuss them all in one review. It undoubtedly fills gaps in knowledge about Stanislavski not only for Western readers, but also for Polish ones. I mean here, for example, the artist's activity in both opera studios: after the revolution in the Studio of the Bolshoi Theatre and – in the

last years of his life – in the Opera-Dramatic Studio. Based on little-known sources, Shevtsova reconstructs both the artist's methods of working with opera singers and his attitude to opera. And it should be emphasised that Stanislavski's contribution to the reform of opera directing is an important and indeed neglected topic outside Russia. Even today, it is worth listening to Stanislavski's opinion that it is the music that carries the content contained in the opera, that the opera director must start with 'the score and what its music was "saying" instead of from the libretto and its story and content' (p. 170). Hence Stanislavski's sensitivity to the sung word, to the 'note-word', and not only in the aspect of working on diction. After all, work at the Opera-Dramatic Studio was the time when Stanislavski developed the so-called method of physical actions. Working with actors-singers, Stanislavski was convinced that speech, as well as singing, are actions; that action 'was not solely a matter of moving arms and legs' (p. 172). In Stanislavski's directing work, Shevtsova finds aspects that he examines with particular attention. She points to his desire to make actors co-creators of the performance. Discussing in detail his work in different periods of his life, especially in the studio, she comes to the conclusion that over the years he became increasingly convinced that an actor who reaches the heights of his profession becomes a master, and therefore needs less and less directing and thus participates more and more in the joint work.

This is another aspect of teamwork, which, according to the author, was inspiring for companies in the second half of the 20th century, such as Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil (which began in 1964 with 'collective directors made out of all the company actors in a collectivity of equals in all areas of their common enterprise'— p. 233), and even groups of young dancers in the 21st century.

In *Rediscovering Stanislavski* the political contexts in which Stanislavski had to live and work both before and after the revolution are not omitted, although of course the Soviet era, and especially the Stalinist period, posed an incomparably greater, and often deadly, challenge for anyone involved in public activity. Importantly, the author shows Stanislavski as a man fully aware of the situation in which he operated; making difficult decisions and having no illusions about the oppressive political reality. This lack of illusions was, among other things, the result of the artist's personal experiences, who after the revolution lost not only all his fortune, but also experienced family tragedies related to the arrests and sentencing of some of his family members.

The author tries to prove that Stanislavski's views, even during the Tsarist period, were reflected in his work. She cites, among others, Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (premiered in 1900). Stanislavski not only directed this play, but also played Doctor Stockmann, one of his most important roles. Shevtsova mentions Stanislavski's attitude, who sided with the democratic part of society in disputes with the authorities. During the play's performance in St Petersburg, there were student demonstrations against the new regulations, according to which rebels could not only be expelled from universities, but also conscripted into the army. When the students released from custody went to see the play, Stanislavski ordered them to be issued tickets (p. 162). One can assume that the issues he raised about freedom and justice were warmly received by the crowded young audience.

Shevtsova also sees the political potential of the plays Stanislavski worked on after the revolution. She proves that he was not incapable of dealing with political themes, but that he was opposed to theatre used as a clearly ideologised, political stage (p. 183). She recalls Beaumarchais's *The*

Marriage of Figaro (premiered in 1927), in which Stanislavski did not omit the political aspects of the drama. 'Figaro's reputation as a forerunner of the 1789 French Revolution was not lost on Stanislavsky, who stressed that Figaro was, first and foremost, a man of the people" [narod] and "a democrat, protestor and rebel"' (p. 213). The author's argument is weakened by the fact that she refers to an unreliable witness: Nikolai Gorchakov, the author of *Stanislavski Directs* (also published in Polish in 1957), politicised Stanislavski, but in a Stalinist spirit (his book was published in the Soviet Union in 1950). It is hard to imagine that Stanislavski could have expressed his support for the people's revenge in the words quoted by Gorchakov; according to him, the director was supposed to have appealed to the actors to look for folklore and revolutionary elements in Beaumarchais's comedy: 'Of course, in the very content of the play we cannot show the people's uprising. The people who, after a few years, armed with pikes, rifles or simply with pitchforks and axes, will conquer the Bastille, demolish the castles of French aristocrats' (Gorchakov, 1957, p. 279). Apart from the style of this statement itself, which is very inconsistent with the image of Stanislavski that Maria Shevtsova tries to create in her book (including the Orthodox Stanislavski), Gorchakov's account is contradicted by descriptions of the performance penned by reviewers. 'The romanticism of love absorbed the MChT more than the social antagonisms that were evident here. The theatre replaced Beaumarchais – the poisonous pamphleteer – with the "Chevalier de France"!' (*Moskovsky Khudozhevnennyye teatr v russkoye teatralnoy kritikie*, 2009, p. 215), wrote the critic Samuil Margolin. And Nikolai Volkov reported after the premiere: 'The performance of *The Marriage of Figaro* has already provoked a number of protests in the press. The theatre is accused of failing to intensify the struggle of the "state" present in the text of the new staging of this once revolutionary comedy, and

of having removed from the stage the opposition between the France of the old regime and the democratic France' (ibid., p. 217). Thus, the image of Stanislavski as a politician in the sense of a supporter of leftist views has been greatly exaggerated, if not distorted. The author makes him – including because of the staging techniques he used, such as the dialogues conducted by the actors of the First Studio in the theatre aisles and at stage entrance – the patron of the 'radical political theatre of the 1960s and 1970s' (p. 161).

The 'primary task' that Maria Shevtsova sets for herself is to present Stanislavski as a forerunner, as an artist who had a strong influence on contemporary theatre. In the epilogue entitled 'Heritage' that closes the book, she discusses the influence of the artist and his 'system' on directors, teachers, actors in the United States, France, Great Britain, Germany, Poland (briefly), and also in Russia, focusing in particular on the achievements of Lev Dodin and Anatoly Vasilyev. Some of the historical transfers of the 'system' to other countries are better known (for example, its penetration through Ryszard Boleslawski and Maria Ouspenskaya to the United States), others less so, such as examples from Great Britain, in which the role of the intermediary between the MChT and the domestic theatre was played by Harley Granville Barker (pp. 207–208) – an unknown figure, at least in our country.

The pedestal of the monument that Maria Shevtsova erects to Stanislavski is suspiciously pristine, without scratches or signs of ageing. It is a pity that the author did not find an opportunity to show that the man Konstantin Sergeyevich was an ambiguous figure who was criticised even by his students and colleagues. For example, she does not mention, and therefore does not comment on, Yevgeny Vakhtangov's famous statement from 1921, who claimed that 'Stanislavski's theatre is dead and will never be reborn'

because ‘Stanislavski has no control over theatrical form in the full sense of the word. He is indeed a master of constructing scenes and intertwining unexpected connections between acting characters, but he is by no means a master of shaping a theatrical performance’ (Vakhtangov, 2008, p. 181).

Maria Shevtsova’s book has a dense texture: it contains a wealth of information and themes. Many of them are worthy of attention, if only because they are unknown in Poland, but are important for expanding knowledge about the ‘system’, about its creator, and also for understanding why Stanislavski still arouses interest not only among practitioners, but also among people writing about theatre. In the Polish literature, Juliusz Tyszka attempted to deal with the ‘system’ in his book *Metamorphoses of the ‘Stanislavski System’* (1995). The researcher focused on describing the ‘system’ within Stanislavski’s own worldview, on showing the sources of Stanislavski’s thought about acting, and finally on the reception of the ‘system’ in post-war Poland (he devoted his second book on the subject to this issue – *Tyszka*, 2001).

Tomasz Kubikowski, in turn, read Stanislavski’s writings anew (especially *The Actor’s Work on Himself*), adopting the perspective of a contemporary researcher, aware of the state of current research in those areas that can help to acknowledge the phenomenon of acting (Kubikowski, 2015). An important topic for him was the perception of a book of life in Stanislavski’s work: an attempt to capture life itself, as the author writes, and acting through it. This theme of the book was expressed, among other things, in its title: *Surviving on stage*. Kubikowski faced the task of describing the ‘system’ using tools provided by contemporary biological sciences. He referred primarily to the discoveries of the Nobel Prise winner, biologist and immunologist Gerald Edelman, to his concept of the functioning of

consciousness based on ‘neural Darwinism’, to the theory of natural selection. Another point of reference for Kubikowski was the research on the human mind conducted by the philosopher John Searle. Then, finally: concepts from the field of performance studies. Tomasz Kubikowski’s competences allowed him to describe the ‘system’ not, as had usually been done so far, from the point of view of the state of knowledge of the era in which Stanislavski worked (especially in the field of psychology), but from the perspective of contemporary neuropsychology, neurophysiology, philosophy of mind. As a result, he reached interesting conclusions, proving that Stanislavski’s discoveries in the field of acting are precursors to research conducted several decades later. In other words, according to Kubikowski, Stanislavski knew what today’s researchers know, but he lacked the language to precisely name his discoveries.

Maria Shevtsova has tried to balance two perspectives: the historical and the contemporary. Crossing the boundaries between them requires free movement in the vast material, which did not exclude minor mistakes that would probably be hard for most readers to spot.[9] I have voiced my own doubts about some of the author’s findings above. How much of the old Stanislavski is in the new, and how much of the new is in the old – let the readers decide.

Translated by Mark Hoogslag & Tim Brombley

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Footnotes

1. The author of a book important for a new perspective on Stanislavski's 'system' – see Kubikowski, 2015.
2. In brackets, I provide the page numbers of the publication in question.
3. The author explains her decision as follows: 'I write the word "System" with a capital letter to distinguish Stanislavski's system from all others, and also to distinguish it from the ironic, dismissive use of the word by critics in the early years of the MChT. Stanislavski himself wrote "system" in quotation marks when he quoted them or, more importantly, when he wanted to emphasise the provisionality of the term. […] Hence, "system" in quotation marks draws attention to the inadequacy of the term in relation to the constantly developing creative process that takes place in actors' (p. 23). One might wonder whether the author's decision to elevate the word "system" to the rank of proper names, to place it on a pedestal, as it were, does not contradict Stanislavski's own intentions. In this article, I will stick to the old spelling.
4. See Carnicke, 2009; 2023. The American researcher is also known in Poland, not only for her publications; in 2016 she was invited by the The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw to participate in the conference *Ryszard Bolesławski, his work and his times* (2016).
5. Peredvizhniki (Russian: Предвижники) is a proper name, untranslated into other languages, denoting a group of realist artists from the second half of the 19th century; the

full name of the group was the Society of Traveling Art Exhibitions.
6. Not always. It can also mean doing something incompletely, e.g. pieriekusit' (to take a bite).
7. This word comes from the verb pierivopłotit'sia, meaning to transform or incarnate – due to its origin from the word body (płot).
8. The Russian theatre director and teacher, also known in Poland, among others, thanks to the book *Stanislavski and Yoga* published in cooperation with the Grotowski Institute – see Tcherkasski, 2016.
9. Here are some of them: Sulerżycki was not himself a *Doukhobor*, as the author claims (p. 123), but only helped to transport members of the sect to Canada. Secondly, women in the First Studio of the MCHT did actually direct (see p. 131): Nadezhda Bromley and Lidiya Deikun put D'Annunzio's *The Daughter of Lorio*on the stage (1919). Furthermore, it was Vakhtangov who perceived the studio as a 'convent,' not Stanislavski (p. 126), and the Second MCHT was dissolved in 1936, so it could not have lost its seat in 1955 (p. 140). Finally, a funny mistake with a Polish element: Maria Shevtsova, reporting on the history of the Fourth Studio of the MChAT, discusses the play *Ziemia Obiecana* from 1922 by an unidentified (as she writes) author (p. 144). The translator, citing the author's opinion, adds that it was most likely an adaptation of Władysław Reymont's novel. Meanwhile, a glance at the old *Soviet Theatre Encyclopedia* allows us to determine that it concerns the drama *The Land of Promise* by William Somerset Maugham.

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