

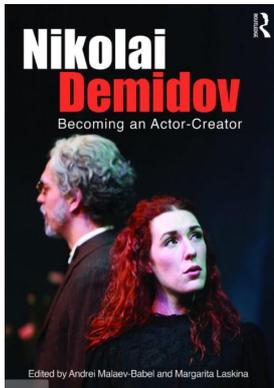
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Becoming an Actor-Creator

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Reasons for the Fall of the Art of the Actor

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Reasons for the Fall of the Art of the Actor

Enthusiasm for a Production

It must be that the path of any progress, especially the one in art, isn't a straight and simple path, but is winding, going up and down, with many possible losses and discoveries.

Let's speak about an art form that is more closely related with acting – singing.

In Greece, in Italy, there was always great singing. The climate predisposed people to it. They sang well, and they called it simply: singing – *canto*.

But, little by little, the maestros of vocal work came to the point when they started trying to achieve a certain kind of sound. A sound that is, put frankly, magical. A singer trained in this art would go onstage, sing a single note – some “A-a-a-a . . . !” and it immediately pierced the listener's very heart. It would instantly melt all the ice, unlock every secret chest or lockbox and, out of nowhere, tears would start flowing of their own volition.

The singer didn't sing about soul-rending suffering, he didn't tell an intricate tale of sorrow, longing, or happiness . . . he sang about something very simple or even less than that: he would just let out a single uncomplicated vocalization – “A” – and nobody was able not to dissolve in that sound. Nobody could hold back a flood of emotions and feelings, and the flood would come – unexpected, stormy, vivifying, and cleansing . . .

This amazing sound opened up all of the listener's depths as a result of some sort of specific resonance . . . It would give rise to delight and inspiration . . . from the depths of their souls, all of their best qualities would rise, clean, wholesome, and they would come up as tears, sighs, heightened senses, and a feeling of immense joy . . .

This sort of singing wasn't simply called *canto*, but *bel canto* – beautiful singing.

Now, when you watch old Italian operas of that time – you're seized by bewilderment, you don't know what to think.

Here “he” comes onstage, and, as it was done back then, stands right at the proscenium, facing the audience, incessantly sings about his love for “her.” The melody is primitive, the words even more so . . . He'll sing a little, sing some more, and leave. “She” comes out. Stands to face the audience in the exact same spot and incessantly sings the same thing about her own love for “him” . . . “He” comes out yet again, and now they sing together, but they're still facing

the audience (so that they're heard better), and, without looking at each other, sing about their love. "I love you, you love me, we love each other. . ." etc. 30–40 pages of this unoriginal and uncomplicated outpouring of love.

The audience used to melt from delight.

But . . . take a breath before making fun of them. Let's keep investigating.

Given the power of the vocal art, the singers didn't need to concern themselves with making the melody richer or more complex, especially since any such complications didn't reflect well on what was most important: the ease and perfection of *bel canto*. So, singers not only didn't look for new, richer melodies, but on the contrary, met any novelty with protests.

However, as beautiful as the singing may have been, music didn't stand in one spot, it developed. Impressive composers stepped out onto the field, like Glück [1714–1787], who demanded that singers perform more complex melodies, that librettists write more complex stories. This all got in the singers' way. Singers probably could have found a way to resolve their differences with composers and come to a consensus, but that would have taken too much effort. And what for? Their singing was still very popular and easily put bread on the table!

This is how the war between musicians and singers began. The musicians demanded that the music that they wrote be performed – the singers resisted. And if they performed new operas, then they performed them their own, more convenient, way. The war was heated and difficult for both sides. Music won. Progress won.

And *bel canto*, the magical *bel canto*, unable to keep pace with progress, was forced to cede its primacy to the new ruling force.

The fault lies not with singing itself, of course, but with the singers who were unable to adapt themselves to both art forms. And so, *bel canto* started to wither . . . Additionally, its masters – singers and vocal maestros – the "alchemists" of the art, were dying one by one, carrying their magical sounds with them into the grave.

Musicians weren't concerned in the least: now, singers performed all of their requests without complaints, and the music – complex, rich, sometimes genius music – ruled supreme.

Gradually, the theatrical structure of opera was also perfected, and it reached the heights of psychological musical dramas and comedies.

Now, it's become the norm that everything is SUNG in opera – phone conversations, business discussions, invitations to "have a seat," "take a walk," "see you later, alligator!" etc.

We haven't had the good fortune to hear *bel canto*, but imagine that today, in the middle of our dramatic vocal performance, i.e. operas, you'd hear the singer let out this hitherto unheard (by you), delightful sound – "Stop, stop!" you'd want to yell, "Stop moving around that furniture, doing whatever it is you're doing, and babbling on about your nonsense! I just heard something that made my heart flip . . . Do it again! Sing that sound again! It tore through the eternal darkness like a ray of light . . . Having heard it, I can't hear or see your previous gimmicks and showing off . . ."

That's what you would say.

And the ridiculous, empty librettos of old Italian operas instantly become understandable. And really, wouldn't a storyline, action, and psychological webs only take away from what's important?

Then, after you had gotten enough of this godly sound, maybe you would want to return to the best that exists in our operas today. But once you've heard *bel canto*, you can't do without it. You would want to combine that vocal wonder with today's best. But . . . it no longer exists. It

is lost. A miraculous art form is lost, and can we truly find it? We probably can. We just need to apply enough willpower and know how to search.

But for now, it's gone. The trace has gone cold. The greatest support for this assertion is that you can hear "*bel canto*" everywhere, third-rate singing teachers tell their students about *bel canto*. And why not? Nobody knows the true *bel canto*.

Everybody uses this term simply to describe a sound that is more or less beautiful. And they say: "now this is *bel canto*." Well, that's that then, time to reap laurels.

Now, let's ask ourselves a question: why *isn't* anyone looking for it? The *Italians*, after all, looked for it and found it. The answer to this question is simple: they found it because nothing was distracting them; they didn't have more interesting librettos, complex staging, all they had was singers and their singing. And the public loved the opera. And so, the restless souls that must search, must perfect everything that they touch – they accidentally started running into some specific, unprecedented, electric, calling sound – it would echo for a moment and be gone the next. What's the matter? They began experimenting, searching furiously. They observed it, overheard it from nature, and transformed it into a "technique."

But today, you won't even think about searching for something UNPRECEDENTED. Why bother? Our age asks for something different. Today, you need for the singers to produce a musical phrase, to relay a THOUGHT, to accurately convey the psychological pattern of an aria or romance; they have to "grasp" the personality of their "character." And, of course, they have to sing correctly and rhythmically, and possess a beautiful, strong, technically adept voice.

This is how, in search for the new, we get carried away, and lose our interest in the old, even if it's valid . . . This isn't true of everyone, of course. This "rule" only applies to average, not particularly capacious minds. It's possible that there might have been at some point a singer who was able to combine music, thought, character, and *bel canto* in one, but he died, and his miracle-doing died with him.

Now, let's get back to our own topic – dramatic theatre.

The same thing happened to it. Mochalov's brilliant flights, Yermolova's inspired acting, or Duse's boundless authenticity and depth – that is our dramatic theatrical magic. Our *bel canto*. It could be seen in our old theatres, and, apparently, it wasn't so rare. It was beautiful – true art, perfection of an actor's artistic powers. But everything that surrounded it was so tasteless, helpless, and detestable that there was only one way to bear it: try not to notice it. These amateur, talentless actors with whom the touring star would often have to share the stage, these extras, found on the street to play a crowd, these set pieces – three, four identical "box sets" for any show, and much, much more! . . . The audience forgave all this for the moments of delight that they got from the brilliant actors' performance. They were used to this strange interweaving of mediocrity with greatness, a den of iniquity – and a temple of art. They couldn't imagine it any other way.

But then, the Meiningen Company¹ showed up, and it became abundantly clear that the crowd had to act, that every man in the crowd is an actor, not a dead extra; that it would be better if the stage had set design that complemented each play and each act – set design that gave the impression of the place that was assumed by the author, not the omnipresent standard "box sets" and "forest landscapes"; that it would be better if a play were organized, according to the playwright's wishes, by a single person – the director – than if it were organized on the run, by whomever had an idea at the time.

However, the Meiningen Company made one grave mistake. Paying such great significance to the set, props, costumes, makeup, they turned the actors into . . . things. Necessary, important things, but still just things. For the director Chronegk, an actor was simply a medium, an executor of his will. For every actor, Chronegk and his assistants thought everything through to such an extent that the actors didn't have anything left to do – just go according to the director's plan and vision. Willingly or not, they gave themselves completely over to the director's will. Meanwhile, he, enthused by his new idea, trained and drilled them until they performed their roles exactly as he told them. In this manner, they turned into a mass of obedient marionettes. Creative freedom, live, spontaneous moments, explosions of passion that we've grown used to in our own actors – this was all out of the question.

The progressive aspects of the Meiningen Company's art could not leave our directors uninterested, and a new stream poured into theatre. The directors' new main concern became the creation of a harmonious show.

The Meiningen Company brought with them something entirely new: the ensemble. Complete coordination between the actors.

Although, not all ensembles are made equal.

Having understood the value of an ensemble, our innovating directors couldn't fail to notice the Meiningen Company's main weakness: the mechanical style of their acting and its soullessness. In order to avoid making the same mistake, they started treating their actors differently. Together with the actors, they not only thought through every scene, every moment and every line of their role, or searched for and found the truest and most expressive actions. They also wanted the actor to be full of truth, so that he not only understood every moment of his role, but felt it too. So that he was as natural as in life. Special techniques were developed to this end. A whole system of techniques.

It seemed that everything was progressing along properly: both sides of the show and the roles, external and internal, were reaching the necessary heights. But the director's chief concern was still the creation of a show. And this concern (possibly subconsciously) created a hard line of action: everything was done for the show. The actor was only a single part of the show. Regardless of however much the directors helped him, how they supported him – in the end, he was still shut in and denied artistic freedom.

This sort of directorial custody, and more importantly: the compulsive fixation of anything that was found during rehearsals – however collaboratively – led to the actors' freedom being shackled. This killed their spontaneity. Everything is thought-through and pre-decided; all you have to do is repeat your actions and words in exactly the same way (with once and for all established intonations). What kind of *spontaneity and involuntariness*, i.e. what sort of *truth* is there to even speak of? To make everything *seem* like the truth – create the impression of the truth – that's possible. But that's it. That is, not the truth, but the appearance of truth. And that's what happened.

As for freedom of creativity and any sort of onstage "improvisations" on the part of the actor – that became not only unnecessary, but detrimental and dangerous. These improvisations might, accidentally, coincide with the director's pattern of the scene, but what if they don't? What if they break it? What will your partner do then? "Improvise" too? Where will that lead the show? And why did we have the tens and hundreds of rehearsals, then? Why did we have the hundreds and thousands of great ideas?

Even if actors were to act on inspiration, like Mochalov or Yermolova, little good would come of it – the higher they would rise, the more they'd ruin the show's structure with their flight.

This is how completely new demands began to arise for the actor, gradually and unnoticeably. And with them, came a new school. It demanded not the truth from the actor, not

freedom, not inspiration, but the ability to accurately and believably perform actions that were found in rehearsals beneath the watchful gaze of the director's vision; actions, blocking, a.k.a. *mise-en-scenes*, and even intonations.

And if we call the Meiningen Company's ensemble an ensemble of marionettes, then our ensemble became an ensemble of verisimilar actors.

What is this? Is this progress? Of course it's progress, without a doubt. The most important thing in the theatre should be the show – a holistic performance, not random, individual parts. In this respect, everything was developing correctly. At the same time, is it right to sit and watch the actors lose all their freedom to create in front of the audience; inspiration lose its place in theatre; authenticity and truth be replaced by verisimilitude; the actor forced to second and then third place with regards to importance, and turned into an executor of the director's will?

If this is how things will progress going forward, then it isn't long before our dramatic wonderworking sinks into oblivion, just like the magical Italian *bel canto*.

But how do we combine the harmonious, unified production with artistic freedom, even improvisation onstage?

The Director: His Excessive Power and Ignorance

There have been theatrical collectives that have successfully been formed by very strong actors who did not need the help of a director: they grasped the play and the roles very well on their own; additionally, they helped each other out with advice, and everything worked out. The director took on the roles of rehearsal administrator and general organizer.

There are examples of brilliant touring actor-directors. Like, for example, Ira Aldridge, who travelled across most of Russia's provinces [in the late 1850s and early 1860s], performing his roles alongside both professional Russian actors and amateurs. And the plays were such that they needed a director: *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, etc. He staged the shows himself, directed them, taught, patiently explained everything, and didn't give up. This was necessary for him, at least because, otherwise, the incompetent amateurs and actors would have gotten in his way onstage. Additionally, he knew, understood, and loved Shakespeare so much, that he couldn't allow for him to be played poorly and untruly.

Imagine a director so talented, enlightened, and charismatic, who is, on top of that, a brilliant, unsurpassed performer – appearing among actors and amateurs who long for art. It's easy to imagine the power his newfound troupe accords him.

And such directors – lawmakers, leaders, and absolute monarchs – weren't the only ones of their kind. They existed when the theatre was headed by Garrick, Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, and Sulzerzhitsky (not well-known, but of the same category of directors). Under their leadership, the theatre would produce highly artistic works, full of harmony, and oneness of thought, power, and poetry.

The general level of these people's development and talent surpassed those of the troupe members to such an extent, that the actors felt themselves as no more than students in the hands of great artists. They unquestioningly heeded and obeyed, not because their "masters" demanded their obedience, but because they were enthralled and captivated by their directors' talents. And the wise, keen, and astute director – knowing what lies in an actors' souls – didn't abuse them, but artfully awakened the actors' dormant powers of creativity and fantasy . . . he didn't scare them, didn't break them, but inspired them and led them to the simple and true path (which, without such an intervention, would be difficult) – a path of stage playing.

To a lesser – to a significantly lesser – extent, some of their students, who inherited the greatest part of their skills and knowledge, did the same thing. The history of theatre will name other similar artists as well. It's not my job to list them all. Even though there haven't been that many. Their high culture and enormous creative strength gave these directors hitherto unheard of power. They became the absolute monarchs of theatre. Moreover, the power of their personalities, and the success of their work, were such that their influence expanded far beyond the walls of their personal theatres: they elevated the director's authority so high that the director is now, *without exception, considered the most important player* in any theatre.

He doesn't always elevate the theatre to great heights – not everybody can become a great person at will – but he always uses the *privileges* that come with the territory: he is a dictator, invested with absolute power, and a lawmaker.

But if he is weak in one respect or another, then his power and unlimited freedom lead to pitiful results. For the most part, these directors have powerful personalities. Maybe even aggressive ones. And the less they know, the less talent they possess, the more aggressive they happen to be.

On account of their insensitivity to the actors and lack of expertise, their demands of the performers are most often unnatural and evoke overt and silent protests on the parts of the actors. In order to preserve their dignity and authority, they are forced to use extreme measures: this is how it will be! No protests, discussion, or questions! . . . I'm the director, I know everything, and I *am* everything!

Given such leadership and directorial practices, there is no point in expecting the actors to act well. Which is exactly what comes to pass. The actors are occupied by executing various "assignments" which have been given to them by the director, and which are at severe odds with their own creative desires. Therefore, creativity, intuition, and freedom are all out of the question.

For the most part, these people pile on mistake after mistake with regards to staging and interpretation of a play. This happens because of a desire to make a show more flashy, sharp, and topical, and for other similar motives, which would never seduce a real artist. And so, the director starts employing various tricks, like mobile set pieces, deafening sound design, a thousand people onstage at a time, playing *Hamlet* in tuxedos, exploiting the audience's lesser instincts – feeding them pornography and vulgar farce, etc.

You might protest: how can this be? What about the public, the audience? They won't go to such a show. Of course they will! And they'll drag you along with them. They'll *enjoy* it.

Leisurely critics will say that there are new discoveries, brave artistic choices on the part of the director here . . . Only a true theatre expert sees the hopelessness of this kind of a show and its impeding effects on the development and growth of the art form. Others don't notice it. Especially since directors of this kind are very adept at perfecting a show's external attributes – the blocking, the opulence . . . Everything is clean, smooth, exact, like a clock, everything is without snags and so dynamic that there is no opportunity to even think. There is no room for an average audience member to evaluate whether it's good or bad.

Unless you come another time, once you already know the show, once you've seen all the tricks . . . then you might notice all the patches and thread and holes – it's not the same this time around! But their goal isn't to make the show good a second or especially a third time. It just has to be a success once.

The audience that comes to the theatre is always in a state that is advantageous for the director and actor.

They believe in advance. They already expect something wonderful, worthy of attention.

This state is supported by the theatre's atmosphere: hundreds of people have come together, leaving their business behind. They've all sat down, expectant . . .

And if the actors onstage are speaking in a certain artificial manner, not quite normally, if they're moving and gesturing somewhat strangely and unnaturally, then . . . maybe that's how it should be? There's no other way? Otherwise, it wouldn't be the theatre!?! And the audience tries to adapt itself to what's happening onstage.

Soon, the audience grows used to the unnaturalness, is drawn into it, and (if the text is written well) is taken by the play. Any blanks that are left are filled in by the audience, what's bad isn't picked up on. The play ends, and the audience is fully convinced that everything happened onstage exactly as it was supposed to. The audience is pleased.

The audience members thank the actors, give them their curtain call, applaud them. Sometimes the actor deserves the applause, but how many times is it undeserved!!! The audience is applauding themselves! The audience was *doing half of the work for the actors*.

The Director: Time Pressures and Other Objective Reasons

Now let's imagine an honest and gifted director and theatre manager, a person of integrity. He's enthusiastic about his job, he loves it, lives for it . . . it would seem that that's all anyone really needs.

But he encounters his first obstacle, which turns out to be much more serious than it seemed from afar. This obstacle is the actor. The person who's supposed to supply the most pleasure and redemption is what turns out to be the main obstacle. Either the actor isn't prepared properly or experienced, and literally needs to be carried; or he's too experienced and has a wagonload of bad habits, bad taste, and is also so spoiled in terms of egotism that it's impossible to tear through all this trash; or the actor is simply talentless and ended up onstage as a result of a misunderstanding or pulled strings . . . In a word, the actor "doesn't get it," no matter how hard you work him!

Given the desire, it's possible to make an actor do wonders. It's possible to not just lead him along, but even completely remake him. Remake his whole acting apparatus. But for this, you need a combination of three exceptional conditions.

The first: the ability to do this.

Aside from tact and desire, in order to do this, you also need an appropriate "school" with a multitude of tried-and-true methods. But where is it? What you *have* learned has failed to be useful or has turned out to be fruitless theory, or, conversely, such an abusive practical approach that you had to abandon it. And so you're left with nothing. You won't get far with amateur work.

The second condition: you need energy. Fanatical levels of energy and patience. A painter applies the paints he needs, comes back to it another day – they're still there, he can just continue. But with a live person, with an actor, it's much more difficult: today, you manage to get him to where you need him, but tomorrow, nothing is left, all the "paint" has faded, slid off, gotten mixed together . . . The actor tries to evoke yesterday's emotions, but they're gone, and he's forced to hastily repeat rough external expressions of yesterday's feelings: yesterday's poses, gestures, smiles, intonations . . . i.e. starved, bloodless form.

And the third necessary condition: time.

In order to create something authentic and truly deserving of being called a "work of art," you typically need months upon months. Even if you're an experienced and skilled director and pedagogue. In order to make good theatre, you need whole years. A week, a month isn't enough to remake people or develop talent. But in this field – you're on a time crunch, the show must go up!

And so, all virtuous intentions are put off until "later," while in the meantime, you're forced to employ much more simple methods, all in order to not delay the show's premiere.

These simpler methods are well-known: *dressage*, giving line readings to the actor, “drilling,” and other atrocities, which have nothing in common with directing or pedagogy or art. If you don’t have a temperament – scream as loudly as you can, clench your fists, strain yourself until you turn red! Stomp your feet, punch the wall!

Are you emotionless and nothing affects you? So what! Don’t feel anything. Just smile, show your teeth and speak like this – delicately, drawlingly – repeat after me.

Not like that! Again!.. Again!.. Again!.. This is how an actor is trained, just like a canary is trained to sing like a nightingale.

They’ll train him, drill him, then dress him, and put him in make-up. Now fire away! Lay out what’s been knocked into you.

I’ve often talked with directors about this difficult situation. Many of them complain that while working this way from year to year, day to day, they lose their sense of the truth and artistic perfection. Despite all previous aspirations, they turn into craftsmen, production workers, and hacks, out of necessity and habit . . .

And that when they look at craftsmanly shows like the ones they make, they like them. Previously, they would disdainfully turn away from such “art,” but now . . . they’re used to it . . . and it’s no big deal . . . as if that’s how it should be.

“But what to do? What should be done?” they would ask. “Schedules . . . time crunches . . . the actors’ lack of readiness . . . their inertia . . . And my own lack of ability . . . and you sink lower and lower . . . on a daily basis! . . .”

There’s only one piece of advice to give here (which is what you do): under no conditions should you allow yourself to sink, you constantly have to support the artist in you. If you cannot bring your show to complete perfection, then take one or two scenes and bring them to the state of complete perfection. Spend as much time and strength as you can on them. Then the fire of creativity won’t die in you, despite the fact that all other work will be deadly for you. Maintain life in yourself all the time, don’t let your heart stop. Else you’ll die and not even notice it. There are many such cases. Sad cases.

The Director: Subjective Reasons (Dilettantism, Professional Craftsmanship, Charlatanism)

There probably isn’t and has never been a director who didn’t start with the highest of dreams, lofty speculations about art, creativity, truth, and perfection of form.

But it’s one thing to dream about a beautiful end result, and another to know the path there and have the strength to reach it.

The craftsman-professional knows that if he doesn’t meet some minimal expectations, then his “craft” “won’t sell.” This knowledge is not only useful, it’s *vital* for the artist as well.

For example, quiet, incomprehensible speech onstage, unbelievably long pauses – these are mistakes that are made by young and inexperienced actors, as well as talented ones. The craftsman-professional would be indignant. He’d say that an actor’s first job is to speak loudly. Everything must be heard, understood, and seen! And would he be wrong? He’ll be wrong with regards to something else. Volume for volume’s sake isn’t the answer – the true problem lies in *the actor’s improper creative state or in the wrong interpretation of the scene*. Fix this, and everything will be loud enough and understandable. If instead you require an actor to be loud – he might do as you ask, but this will consume all of his attention. He won’t have time to live in the circumstances of the character, and his chief concern will be only to speak louder.

Or here’s another example. An actor drags the show out, pauses, slows everything down . . . It’s necessary to get rid of the root of the problem, which is either in his incorrect

internal technique – his brakes, his **preoccupation** – or in the fact that he doesn't understand the scene's circumstances; fix this, and everything will be just fine. But a craftsman only knows one thing, he'll just keep yelling: "Faster, faster, don't slow down! Tempo, tempo! Rhythm, rhythm! Pulse, pulse!"

Craftsmanship and professionalism aren't bad because they require volume, clarity, expressivity, or speed and rhythm from an actor – they're bad because, first of all, they approach everything very primitively, and secondly, because they despise any kind of *pursuits*. Searching, testing, altering – in a word, everything that identifies a true, demanding artist, they commonly consider to be simply *lack of skill and inexperience*.

They're so used to following recipes and stencils that they don't ever have to search – they already know everything: everything is established by tradition. This is why a craftsman-professional can stage any play in a month or less. Searching for hidden depths or secrets in a play . . . Digging deep . . . refining the details of the characters' personalities . . . and on top of all of this, helping each actor find qualities that are necessary for his role . . . Why? What is all that for? It's all just fads and inventions . . . That's what happens when someone doesn't understand the "job." "In practice," everything is much easier and simpler, all you need is experience and skill! And what is there to do for more than a month, anyway?! Read the play, cast it, have a read-through, then "block" the actors (show them where to stand), and the job's done. For "deeper" work, you can show the actors what "intonations" to use when speaking their lines. Then everything is truly done, the job is over. If the actor plays poorly even then, then it means that the actor is bad: everything has been showed to him, explained – all that's left is to repeat it and that's it . . .

If this kind of director is given the opportunity to work on a show not for a month (as he's used to), but for a year, then he'll be faced with a dead end: he won't be able to do anything more! All that will be left is to endlessly repeat the same things over and over, mechanize it so that everything flies off the tongue.

These craftsmen-professionals are, for the most part, the ones who call for quick deadlines. An artist won't do this: he always needs more time. He always has more to do, because his ideal is always looming ahead of him.

There exists a more sophisticated kind of craftsmanship. You won't even immediately understand that it doesn't involve a drop of creative juices – just arithmetic and mechanics.

While acting in the finale of the first act of *Poverty Is No Vice*, a shoddy craftsman behaves very simply and primitively. Ostrovsky's [1917: 90] play says:

Mitya. (*Walks towards the door and takes the letter out of his pocket*) What can she have written? I'm frightened! – My hands tremble! – Well, what is to be will be – I'll read it. (*Reads*) "And I love you. Liubov Tortsova." (*Clutches his head and runs away.*)

And he does everything exactly as written: approaches the door, takes out the letter, makes his hands shake, says the words, skims over the letter, and, without properly reading what exactly is written in there, hastily tries to depict some superlatively powerful emotion on his face – be it horror or joy – grabs his head, and runs out of the door to some other unclear place for some unclear reason. This happens in less than 5–6 seconds.

An actor who works by the truth – one who is immersed in the play's circumstances – does everything differently. Starting with the fact that he won't immediately grab the letter. Liubim Tortsov is in the room – if not for him, the letter would have been read long ago. Finally, the guest finishes his didactic tales and falls asleep. But you have to check whether he's really fallen asleep – otherwise, you might take out the letter, and he'll see you. And for some time, Mitya

will cautiously observe the guest and check on his breathing. Meanwhile, his hand seems to be reaching for the letter of its own volition . . . it's in the pocket . . . the breast pocket. He's asleep! Tip-toeing, so as not to make any noise, not to wake him up, but quickly – he goes to the door, farther away from Liubim and closer to “her” – after all, she called, she sent an invitation to go upstairs. Mitya rips the letter from his pocket and suddenly stops, afraid of something: “What could she have written?” He twirls the letter (or rather, the note) in his hand, investigates it from outside: “I'm frightened!” But he cannot wait – his hands have begun to unfold the paper and, from excitement, do not heed him. Without granting it any significance, consumed by the anticipation of what's in the letter, he blurts out: “My hands tremble!” It's obvious that he's not expecting anything good, probably thinks that it's a rejection. The letter is opened.

His hand gives a jerk as if to hold the letter up, but suddenly it recoils! And his head too suddenly leans back from the letter. It turns away, afraid that it might read something awful. He stands for a second or two, refusing to read it, but then he makes up his mind: “Well, what is to be will be – I'll read it.” He brings the letter to his face and leans forward to better grasp its content.

The same agitation that froze his hands as they unfolded the letter, now clouds his eyes, as they struggle to make out the words. And his lips mechanically speak: “And I . . . love . . . you . . . Liubov . . . Tortsova . . .” He reads it . . . He freezes . . . doesn't understand anything . . . Looks at it again . . . something clicks . . . he understands, and in his surprise, he feels fear – horrible fear!

Even his hand jerks away from the letter, as if burned! Ow! A man stands there with widened eyes, and is seemingly not thinking at all – he's frozen in horror . . . Then he gradually calms . . . slowly holds up the letter, his face lightens up . . . reads it again . . . now he understands everything in its entirety . . . his expression is unclear: he might be about to laugh, or maybe cry . . . he grabs his head (one hand still holding the letter), squeezes it, but his eyes are staring forward, not seeing anything. Then . . . the thought of “her” – she's upstairs . . . he looks up and flies to her.

A craftsman of verisimilitude will do everything in practically the same way: he'll observe, and listen to Liubim to check that he's really fallen asleep, after which he'll tip-toe to the door, and hesitate in exactly the same manner and order: should he or shouldn't he read the letter? He'll make up his mind, read it, not understand it at first, then start to think . . . first, he'll be afraid – there's something too big about it – it doesn't fit, then he'll digest it, and finally believe his luck . . .

Everything will be the same. At least, the movements are identical. Identical to how things would look in life: the same “logic and sequence,” everything is accurate. But one thing will be missing: authentic emotion and some imperceptible subtle movements of the face, eyes, hands, the whole body . . . the thing that you can't fake and which is so enthralling in the art of the actor.

But . . . for an audience that isn't too demanding, this is enough. And people will say: “He's so realistic! He's experiencing the emotions so truly!!” And if the whole show is so assiduously staged as well, and there is such coherence between the rest of the theatre workers (the set and costume designer, the composer, the sound designer, etc.), and everything is surrounded by an opulent exterior, as if by an astounding, blinding, golden frame that can cause the painting itself to start shining like the real thing (unless you take a good look at it) . . .

If, on top of all of this, there is also a dazzling advertising campaign, then success is guaranteed. And the director is triumphant.

You can employ whatever praise you will when talking about these people: practical, realistic doers, deft, inventive, and whatever else you want.

From the point of view of the progress of art, theatre leaders who support this approach destroy what's most important in theatre.

They make imitation, forgery – a cornerstone. No matter what significant results they achieve, they are mere charlatans. When it comes to art – they are demolishers; they destroy its very foundation.

Some of their names might even pop up in the annals of theatre history . . . not for long, of course, but still, it's possible – life is a great comedy.

What conclusion can we draw from all of this? That the director is *bad* for theatre? Is that it?

The theatre needs an incorruptible artist, a good, talented director who is well-versed in his job – as we need oxygen. And the actor needs him like oxygen too. He's the leader, the inspiring force, the soul of a show. But a bad director, mediocre, ungifted, a usurper, a dilettante, a charlatan is harmful. Harmful for theatre, harmful for the audience (encouraging a bad taste), and most of all, harmful for the actor.

He's the one whom theatre has to thank that the art of the actor is dwindling, that the actor's significance and position have shrunk to the level of a pitiful marionette. This is the beginning. If a proper school of directing isn't established soon, then the actor will be completely murdered. The only people who will take the stage will be those who respond well to *dressage*. Obedient puppets.

On the Actor's Responsibility and Heroism

You think the director is the only one guilty of the professional craftsmanship? What about the actor?

The actor is where this all begins. Although the director is now everything, he's a relative newcomer. Before him, the actor was everything. The actor is the one who first noticed (he couldn't help noticing) this advantageous quality of the theatrical stage – the ability to enthrall the audience, to stoke their imagination, their creativity, and eclipse their critical gaze. He noticed it and immediately took advantage of this intriguing mechanism. The director is simply his worthy heir and successor.

Say what they will about the “good ol' days,” praise them or degrade them as they may, we can say only one thing with total conviction: back then, actors weren't blocked off or embellished (as they are now) by directors' magic tricks, the “ensemble,” and staging. Even the sets were very primitive: an interior room, the woods, a hut – they were only useful insofar as to let the audience understand more or less where everything was happening (“in a house,” “in the woods,” “in a palace”) and not be confused. The heart of the matter was the acting. Which is why its good qualities, as well as its shortcomings, were more evident. An actor's strengths and weaknesses weren't dimmed by anything. And, willingly or not, he had to show everything he was capable of. He was the crux of theatre. He was what people came to see.

He knew this and thought: I am the show! He saw that, in practice, that was the truth, and decided: I am the theatre!

Responsibility caused him to rise up, which turned him into a hero . . . And if his soul hid the fire of talent, then it was stoked. If the actor's soul was exceptionally deep, then the fire raged like a forest fire, like an indomitable storm.

And, seeing these flares, the audience of the “good ol' days” understood: this is art!

Audiences that had seen such actors had very clear criteria: what is “real” and what is fake.

Today, the actor is put in calmer and more comfortable conditions. He doesn't come out “one on one” against the whole audience. Now, he is only a part of a great and complex theatrical machine, just a single soldier out of the full forces. Pretty often, he doesn't even know

what his commander – the director – has in store for him, and simply does what he’s told. And the audience has grown used to this as well, no longer watching just the actor, but the whole show – the “staging,” the general ensemble of acting, attained by the “director’s” assiduous work . . . Everything is put together, everything is hitched very well . . . The actor is, of course, a part of it, but only as a single ingredient. Sometimes, not even the main one.

This new way of things has completely changed the actor’s psychology. He no longer takes responsibility for the show (to say nothing of responsibility for theatre or for art!). He has become calmer . . . there is no longer a need for flares . . . and talent, whose little fire is quietly moldering in his soul’s depths, will molder all the way to the grave. What need is there to flare up? Who needs saving?!

Not to mention that an actor might get himself into trouble by performing heroic fits. A show is now so tightly regulated that if you step over your bounds, you might botch the most important thing – the director’s cunningly woven “pattern.”

The audience has grown used to such shows and has lost the old criteria of judging acting (“real” and “fake,” great and small), they’ve acquired new criteria: “an interesting show,” “a boring show,” useful, harmful, properly reflecting the author, improperly – distorting him.

This is how the demands of the audience and experts have changed.

There is one more circumstance in the actor’s life and work that has drastically changed when compared with the “good ol’ days” and has had enormous consequences.

The thing is that there used to be very few theatres; they survived entirely on the box office proceeds, nobody helped them. Nobody respected actors, people considered them to be outcasts, freeloaders, buffoons . . . There was little that was attractive about the profession. Only those who had an enormous desire to go there would ultimately go into theatre. People would go there to test themselves, as if to a trial. They would go there after throwing caution to the winds. These people’s whole lives were a constant feat. A feat and a battle. A battle against the poverty, barbarism, and mediocrity of the crowd, against the vices of their unworthy colleagues, and, finally, against their own lack of skill. Many couldn’t take it, stepped out; many fell, crushed by vices and life.

This is how, through natural selection, talents and heroes were chosen! Of course they were heroes! One man goes out, alone against hundreds of audience members . . . Alone, respected by none, despised, he goes out . . . Armed with what? Only with his bared heart. And he conquers them all in this battle. If you don’t emerge victorious – pack your bags and off with you to another town.

How much love, endurance, and heroism was necessary in order to live like this? And how much fire and talent did you need to constantly emerge as the victor!

Note

- 1 A German theatrical company, formed in the late 1860s by Georg II, Duke of Saxe–Meiningen. It was directed by Ludwig Chronegk (1837–1891), and it toured extensively in Europe, and in Russia (in 1885 and 1890).