

**Jurij Alschitz**

## **Lectures on "Theatre in the 21st Century"**

I have been asked to speak about theatre in the 21st Century. But predictions about the theatre are always very complicated - in fact it's impossible to make predictions about the theatre. I recall a few prognoses about 20th Century theatre and doubt that any of these have actually come to pass. I'm under the impression that the theatre always knows more about itself than we can ever imagine.

Occasionally, I try to image the position from which the theatre looks at us, our lives, our conference, our teaching, our productions...no doubt with great irony at our attempts to look into the future. It gazes at us like a giant peering down on Lilliputians. How shall I go about venturing predictions about the 21st Century when we aren't even certain about what the 20th has really brought us. We have about 100 days until the end of the century, but no one is able to tell us what we have done in the 20th Century. It was a great century for theatre. Important trends, great transformations and revelations.

I am amazed at how many colleagues at this conference have mentioned the name Stanislavsky. As a scientist Stanislavsky often changed his mind. He never attempted to stick in his opinion forever. Young Stanislavsky's findings and the works at the end of his life are two totally different "Stanislavskies". But people grasp on to that which they understand and say "this is Stanislavsky". Like the young acting students who take one acting seminar and already think they know "this is theatre, this is the method" - this in glaring contrast to our in fact very limited knowledge of the theatre.

If I identify with certain positions of Stanislavsky's, then I have dedicated myself to only a very small part of the theatre. The theatre is huge, and as long as we don't understand what theatre is in a fundamental way, there is no sense in talking about it. We need to recognise that we are standing in front of a high mountain and have hardly begun to climb.

At our conference here in Rumania, we greet each other with "where are you from"? - from Germany, India, the USA and so on. I have difficulty with my answer, for while I am Russian - my culture is Russian and I was educated in Moscow - for the past eight years I have worked in different European countries and my family lives in Germany. In this sense it is very hard to say who I am, since the question, "where are you from?", has a lot to do with the question "who are you?" Then it is not so much a matter of whether I'm living in Germany or Sweden, but of the culture of the country and the theatre tradition of the country of my roots. A very simple question becomes a very serious question: "who are you?" I direct you to Pirandello's

Six Characters in Search of an Author. The father character asks the director: "who are you?" The director answers, "I'm the director!" - "No, who are YOU?" - "I'm the actor here!" And he asks once again "WHO ARE YOU?" This is the main question. We are not talking about positions or occupations, but about who you are as a director, as an actor, and above all as an artist.

"Who am I?" and "what is theatre?" Without these two questions there is no point in discussing theatre. I think that we encounter these questions quite often, at different times, primarily in times of personal crisis. When we are successful, we don't bother to ask what theatre is or to question who we are in the theatre. This question surprises us most often when we are alone and experiencing a crisis. Then it isn't long before the next extremely painful question comes along - "What does MY theatre look like?"

If I try to answer the question of my origins from this perspective, I don't have an answer.

"Where do I come from?" I can say, I'm from Russia, I'm from GITIS, from Russian culture. But I know that I have also been influenced by Japanese culture, European culture, Mexican culture.

We ought to pay more attention to our own cultural heritage, our own artistic origins. I have spent my entire life exploring the question of what my notion of theatre is, as a category. The teacher must also be understood as a category. Stanislavsky was not my teacher, but I can still say that I am sometimes a student of Stanislavsky.

I recommend to my students the following exercise, regardless of their age. I generally work with professional actors between the ages of 30 and 50. I bring their attention to the figure of Konstantin Treplev in the first act of Chechov's *The Seagull*. He says - I'm paraphrasing - "This is my theatre - first backdrop, second backdrop, and the empty room". I encourage the students to express their own vision of the theatre.

Unless this question is raised, it is pointless to begin working. I never talk about the answer. Only when students are conscious of this question are they prepared to continue life in the theatre. After that we can talk about acting technique, structure, composition and analysis. The task of the teacher is primarily to help students express what their concept of theatre really is - as actors, as directors, etc. I have changed my attitude often. Perhaps it will take me my whole life. I am thankful to all of my teachers who have helped me to arrive at this point. They never tried to tell me "this is theatre", they never asserted that something was valid for all eternity, they helped me to grasp the true dimensions of the question. They kept their answers to themselves. Answers contain no energy. Questions organise our lives. Without questions, we have no energy to understand.

In my mind the task of the teacher is to awaken questions in students. This isn't easy because teachers most often find themselves in the position of explaining. It is easy to slide into the role of the governess, who determines how something is to be done. Needless to

say, governesses don't enjoy very elevated positions. I am also grateful to many of my teachers for creating a special ethical and aesthetic space during training. It is of course necessary to talk about methodology and technique, but this is impossible without a special atmosphere. I can't tell students to be nice to each other, or be nice to yourself. Only a structured, exceptional environment, an aesthetic atmosphere, allows students and actors to grow. One has to create a spring-like atmosphere to make the flowers bud. That isn't easy. Teachers have a special status. In Russia it's the highest status. It's not a question of money. In the beginning I earned 40 rubles at GITIS, which wasn't enough to afford cigarettes, but I was extremely proud to have the honour of teaching people. It's a great vocation and responsibility. In Russia we have a tradition that students keep returning to their teachers throughout their lives to speak with them and to draw new reserves. It's like a large tree that sprouts new leaves every spring. The roots provide energy to live. It is impossible to tear out these roots.

In this sense I can refer to myself as a student of Stanislavsky. Just as I am a student of Pushkin and Dostoyevsky. I am anchored in this culture, just as all of us are anchored to our cultures. If I succeed in stimulating all of my students to become aware of their culture, then they join a school of theatre and not a method. A school. That is a continuum. Knowing that I come from a school whose history began 200 years ago and that has a future - this gives me energy for my entire life. I'm very proud when students at the Russian Theatre Institute say "yes, I belong to this school". In fact, today almost all actors are homeless actors. Transients.

This raises the question of one's personal beliefs. Most believe in their success. If a certain method is successful, they believe in this method. But the opposite ought to be true. I'm successful today, tomorrow it's over. That's our normal life. But it's a question that speaks to our own mistakes, it's not a question of the wrong method. If I say that I'm orthodox and I believe in this religion, then I live this path. How will they all look at me tomorrow if I change my religion - perhaps I'll be a Hindu tomorrow, or a Moslem, and a Buddhist the day after. There are different religions and I observe my own. I can't understand how people manage to keep jumping from this to that if only it means success. It's a dangerous situation to be in. I don't get annoyed with these students, because they don't belong to anyone. If they feel no strong connection to their origins, then they will just keep jumping from one thing to the next until they have nothing in the end. We don't just have a problem with the various "religions", we also speak different languages, different theatre languages. I have visited a number of workshops during this conference and haven't understood what was being discussed. The use of the word "energy", I have noticed, stands for "tension". "Tempo" and "rhythm" seem to signify the same thing. I have realised that, although the word "knowledge" was wielded, it was a question of "belief".

We have yet to come to an understanding about our language. We are living in Babylonian conditions. I prefer not to regard the myth of Babylon as God's punishment, however - on the contrary. Isn't it wonderful to speak different languages and to want to build a tower? These

people had a goal. They wanted to build a tower together in order to reach god. With regard to us, without a common language, without understanding and faith, we have a difficult path before us. There is only one path, namely the one that we travel together. Whether Peking-Opera or Stanislavsky, contemporary theatre can travel this path together. This method, that method...I have a method, but I prefer to say that I have none, for I find it boring and actually rather vulgar to say, I have a method. It is far more important to find one's identity as an artist. Then the question of making an actor out of an artist becomes superfluous. Maybe I don't even want to be an actor, just simply an artist. But being an actor without being an artist doesn't make any sense. One ought to begin with the author position. Authorship is closely related to individuality, with the responsibility for a work of art. In this sense I try to teach actors and directors in the same way. I try to elevate the position of the actor as high as possible. Many actors can be seen on the stage, good ones, but few artists. For me the stage works like an x-ray machine that shows everything clearly: here is an actor, just but an actor, there is an artist, not a great one, but an artist. Perhaps the technique is somewhat lacking, but here an artist nonetheless.

We start with Plato's dialogues with our students. Conversing with Ion, Socrates' first question is, "Where have you been, Ion?" Ion replies, "I am returning from a festival". This is a very modern situation. Astounded that the art of rhapsody can be grasped as a competitive event, Socrates asks, "And what prize did you win?" "First prize", says Ion. "Then let us hope that you have equal success in Athens at the next Festival!" To which Ion responds, "Yes, with god's help". That's the beginning of the dialogue, a very realistic rendering of the situation today. "Where have you been?" - "At a festival." This is our life. From festival to conference, from conference to festival. Our lives take place in the space between first and second prize - "with god's help". This reminds me of our discussion yesterday about training priorities - intellectual and spiritual versus technology and skill. Of course an artist must have talent, and talent is a gift of god. If I don't know how something works, then perhaps I have talent. The muses seize us, or they don't. And if they fail to visit us some day, what then? This is where the question of technique poses itself.

Yesterday it seemed to me to be a good sign for the 21st Century that the Russian professor spoke about technology and the American about "spirit and heart". I had always thought that the premises were precisely the opposite. But I think it is a mistake to separate these things. They belong together. It would be wrong to tell students, "Today we are going to train your bodies, next week we'll work on your souls". One doesn't raise children by giving them physical exercise for the first three years and then moving on to Pushkin and Goethe at five. These things belong together.

In ancient Greece there was a very beautiful custom. A pregnant woman was surrounded by beautiful things. One brought her sculptures, paintings, music, and hoped that this beauty

would pass through her eyes and ears and to the child. In educating, we must not separate the senses, reason and technology. Finally, I would like to speak to another issue. There is the widespread opinion that school and theatre are two very different things. I believe that this is not only false, but that this attitude poses a great problem. When we think about Stanislavsky, we generally think of him as a teacher. He was an actor. He was a director; sometimes a good one, sometimes not. He was certainly a teacher. His teachings and his method have always changed.

His students that have become famous decided for themselves that they knew everything that was necessary to be successful. Stanislavsky continued teaching them, but they were bored with being eternal students and made fun of him. I heard many things from my teacher, who was old enough to have been taught by Stanislavsky. They played tricks on him, as he is supposed to have been very naive - naive in a positive sense. "Mr. Ivanov, relax this finger, concentrate on one leg - and? "Yes, that helps". This was written down and published... He continued to keep working with young people. After four or five years they took their leave in the belief that they were finished. But he himself never stopped searching for new methods.

My teacher told me that when Stanislavsky was old and sick and couldn't go to the theatre anymore, he called in to have two or three actors come to his home to rehearse. All of the actors were not very excited and drew straws to see who would go. Long or short matches - and they came and went again as soon as possible. "Sorry, we have to get to rehearsal, but were a real help!" How tragic. At the end of his life he had no students left and the doctor ordered him to go to bed at nine o'clock. He and his wife Liliana had separate bedrooms, but when they were sure that the doctor was asleep, they sat on the corner of the bed by candlelight whispering: "see, if the actor relaxes his left leg and combines this with his voice, that could help"...and this was written down...That is the end of one of the great teachers of this century and I'm am very sad about this, but it is probably the fate of all teachers.

I was very surprised two days ago when a colleague told me that he didn't earn enough as an actor and this was why he'd begun teaching. This caused me to ask myself, why do we become teachers, what characterises us as teachers. What energy drives me to teach? It's the questions! I need students to talk to, or else I get sick. Perhaps it is my loneliness, maybe it's human instinct to want to pass on knowledge, to be immortal - to found a school. What an expenditure of energy, terrible and beautiful, giving, giving, giving.

Last night I dreamed about a great room, like this conference room, in the middle of a forest with wide-open doors and windows, and we were all sitting in this room. It was very bright, blinding light, and dark outside. It was a very beautiful atmosphere. It was understood that

the house was waiting for students. I thought to myself, if we attend to this beautiful and serious atmosphere, then the students will come to us. If a school has no light, no open windows or doors, no one will come to us. I hope that each of us can create such a home, and the students help us to do so. My vision of the theatre of the 21st Century is closely tied to this image.

I am also convinced that teachers should work in theatres. This is not too common in theatres in the West. Anatoli Vassilyev's theatre, where I worked for a long time, carried the title, "School of Dramatic Art". Two important words are united in this appellation: "school" and "theatre". This was Stanislavsky's dream, as it was Grotovsky's. I assure you that it was the dream of many interesting theatre people of the 20th Century to unite school and theatre. School was to be in the theatre. It is the perfect mediator between actor and director. Actors are more open with teachers. In the class situation actors have the opportunity to make mistakes. They don't have this opportunity on the stage. There shouldn't be any border between theatre and school, school and theatre, teacher and director, rehearsal and performance. If we can succeed in uniting these things, I am sure that this will change the face of theatre in the 21st Century.

Edited by Christine Schmalor, Mario Schneider (Akt-Zent)