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Stanislavski: A Biography by Jean Benedetti (review)

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JEAN BENEDETTI. *Stanislavski: A Biography*. New York: Routledge 1988. Pp. xi, 340, illustrated. \$25.00.

Near the end of *Stanislavski: A Biography*, Jean Benedetti describes the cult that formed around Stanislavski during the last decade of his life. It is this, I think, that makes Stanislavski difficult to discuss, and even to this day he enjoys an almost mythic status in Russia; for many Russians he remains the Master, the omnipotent guru of theatrical art. Indeed, striking similarities exist between Stanislavski in his last years and Grotowski in our own time. Like Grotowski, Stanislavski became obsessed with process rather than production and, in his last years, he isolated himself from the theatre and was surrounded primarily by a group of suitably reverential devotees.

Familiar facts about the origins of the Moscow Art Theatre – the famous conversation at the Slavianskii Bazaar, the relationship with Chekhov, the particulars of the "System" – are all in Benedetti's biography, and although these continue to interest, perhaps most fascinating is the author's account of the inner workings of the MAT, especially the strife between Stanislavski and Nemirovich, the petty jealousies that threatened to rip the theatre apart, and Stanislavski's ambiguous position within the organization. Casual students of theatre history inevitably link Stanislavski's name with the MAT, but, as Benedetti points out, as early as 1900, a schism began to form between the founders; eventually, careful maneuvering by Nemirovich resulted in Stanislavski being relegated to the periphery of the MAT. Partly by choice, partly by necessity, much of Stanislavski's "System" was conceived and developed outside the walls of the main theatre. Indeed, many older actors, especially Knipper, who stoically resisted his efforts to institute novel methods of training and preparation, dismissed him as an impractical eccentric – a talented actor, but a crank nonetheless. Given his reputation as a teacher, it is astonishing to learn that Stanislavski had no status in the Art Theatre School (his teaching was limited to private pupils) and that Nemirovich's hostility toward his old friend had grown to such proportions that in 1911 he launched a campaign to purge the theatre of "Stanislavskiiitis."

Although Benedetti does not entirely condemn Nemirovich, his sympathies are clearly with his subject: Stanislavski, the great artist and unjustly maligned victim; Nemirovich, the jealous, mediocre administrator who exploited the much more gifted Stanislavski for his own ends. It does not diminish Stanislavski, however, to point out that he was not entirely blameless; his idiosyncracies, which were legendary (particularly his need endlessly to explore acting processes during rehearsals), drove some students and colleagues to distraction. (Interested readers should see Alicia Koonen's *Stranitsi Zhizn* and Mikhail Bulgakov's *Black Snow*.) For this reason, it is tempting to suggest that Nemirovich's actions were not entirely unjustified.

In spite of initial resistance from colleagues to his work on the inner and outer life of the actor, it is the "System" upon which Stanislavski's fame rests and Benedetti does an admirable job of exploding long cherished myths about Stanislavski's theory and practice. That Lee Strasberg's "Method," which is still popular in the United States, is a much-distorted version of the "System," is well-known. Less familiar are

the stories of Stanislavski's relationship with his translator, Elizabeth Hapgood, and his American publishers, and how problems with both – along with Stanislavski's pressing need for quick money – contributed to misunderstandings about concepts central to the "System" (emotion memory, the method of physical action) that persist to this very day, especially among teachers of acting who've never gone beyond *An Actor Prepares*.

The portrait of Stanislavski that emerges from Benedetti's book is of an intensely private, unflaggingly patrician man whose single-minded devotion to the art of theatre revolutionized European and American actor training. Benedetti's biography should remind theatre scholars and practitioners that we still have much to learn from Stanislavski about discipline, craft, and fidelity to aesthetic ideals. The latter is particularly important to a fuller understanding of Stanislavski. One of the most moving parts of the book concerns the fortunes of the MAT after Stalin's rise to power. Like other theatres, the MAT was under considerable pressure to conform to the party line. Socialist realism replaced more sophisticated genres and the theatre, now producing as many as three plays per day, was forced into production practices antithetical to its most fundamental aesthetic principles. Although the MAT, apparently Stalin's favorite theatre, tried to travel the path of compromise and conciliation, and although Meierhold is still given much of the credit for challenging Zhdanov and the Socialist-Realist agenda, it was Stanislavski who, as early as 1931, spoke out loudly against the rising tide of oppressive, state-initiated arts policies and practices.

Whatever his personal idiosyncracies and eccentricities, Stanislavski never ceased to evolve as an artist nor did he betray his principles through years of struggle, first inside the Art Theatre itself and later with the Soviet state. Although Stanislavski seems to have been fundamentally apolitical, his defense of freedom of artistic expression should be noted by all theatre artists who find themselves in the uncomfortable position of squaring off with Jesse Helms and the new director of the NEA. Benedetti's book is well-written and researched; although more a biography of the artist than the individual, it will be of interest to the general public as well as Russian theatre historians.

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MACIEJ KARPINSKI. *The Theatre of Andrzej Wajda*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989. Pp. xviii + 135, illustrated. \$49.50.

In the West Wajda is far better known as a film director than as a theatre director. But in Poland his work in the two media has been equally important. Maciej Karpinski's chronology of Wajda's life work lists 23 feature films and 22 theatre productions. Part of the reason for his film work being better known is simply that film travels more easily; but it is no doubt also true that he has been somewhat eclipsed for us by his more famous compatriots Grotowski and Kantor. Unlike them, Wajda has never set