ON HIS 25 YEAR JUBILEE

A Tribute from the Soviet Journal "Zrelischa"
(Entertainments)
50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF SERGEI YESSENIN: December 25, 1975

For the 50th anniversary of the death of Sergei Yessenin there will be a special commemorative concert and recital at SIU, planned for November.

Yessenin is one of the greatest lyric poets of Russia, a poet of "old wooden Russia" he called himself. He lamented the destruction of old Russia, but at first, in his own words he tried to "hitch up his trousers and run with the Komsomols" (members of the Young Communist League). He wrote a very moving poem on Lenin and another poem of praise for the Bolsheviks (extracts I have translated here),

Naeba Kak Kolokol (Extract)

..."The moon like a clapper clangs. A bell booms the sky,
Motherland's mother, a Bolshevik I.
For world-wide brotherhood, righting of wrong,
Over your death rejoice I with song.
Strong and so powerful over your doom
The sky's bell of blue I beat with the moon." ...

Lenin (Extract)

..."For them no saying: Dead is Lenin.
Nor does grief their strength unman.
And still more stern and unrelenting
They consummate the work he planned." ...

But when he found he was required to give himself over body and soul to the Communist Party he refused, saying "I will give them everything but my lyre!" In his despair he began to drink more and more, and achieved notoriety in the West during his famous visit to the USA with the dancer Isadora Duncan. Then back in Soviet Russia he committed suicide by hanging in the Hotel Angletterre, cutting his wrists and writing his last poem in his own blood. Here are the last two lines:

"In this life to die is nothing new,
but of course to live is nothing newer."

Then Mayakovsky answered him, criticising his suicide, in his poem, To Sergei Yessenin* saying:

"Stop it, chuck it! Isn't it really absurd?
Allowing cheeks to flush with deathly hue?
You who could do such things with words,
That no one else on earth could do ..."

Though he admitted:

"These days are difficult for the pen.
But tell me you crooks and cripples wheezy,
What great ones ever chose—where and when?
A path already trodden smooth and easy? ..."

and ended up; paraphrasing Yessenin's last words:

"Our planet is poorly equipped for delight.
One must snatch gladness from the days that are.
In this life it's not difficult to die.
To make life is more difficult by far."


And then Mayakovsky, the Poet of the Revolution, five years later himself committed suicide.

The celebration of Yessenin's anniversary will include a performance of a cycle of his poems, set to music by a leading Soviet composer Georgi Sviridov entitled: Poem in Memory of Yessenin and a cycle of songs Old Wooden Russia.

This will be conducted and performed by Professor Dan Pressley and his SIU Chorale. Herbert Marshall will also recite his translations of the poet.

Sviridov was the outstanding pupil of Dmitri Shostakovich and now one of Russia's leading composers, winner of Lenin Prizes and a head of the Union of Soviet Composers. He commissioned Marshall to translate his Mayakovsky Oratorio and Poem in Memory of Yessenin, both of which were published by the Soviet Composers Publishing House with the Russian and English text. This will be the world premiere of this work outside the Soviet Union and it is hoped that the Composer himself will eventually visit SIU.

The British Premiere of Sviridov's Mayakovsky Oratorio was performed at the Royal Festival Hall, London, by the London Philharmonic Orchestra, under the conductorship of Maxim Shostakovich (son of the famous composer). The Composer was present and the press reported: "This was a magnificent performance to a packed house. The composer was present and he and the soloists and choir received a tremendous ovation." In the program was the full text translated by Herbert Marshall.

MEYERHOLD

by Marjorie L. Hoover
University of Massachusetts Press, 1974

The Center received this book for review in our Bulletin. This we would normally be very happy to do. As a pupil and disciple of Meyerhold nothing would please me more—except for one thing. On reading the acknowledgements in the preface, pages XIV–XV, I discovered that both the important contributions to this researcher and her book made by the Center and myself personally, had not been acknowledged. This was adding insult to injury. For originally, Mrs. Hoover contacted me saying I was the one person who had worked with Meyerhold and knew him well and that my archives contained important research material. I welcomed her to our Center, from the Department of German and Russian of Oberlin College.

She stayed for some time, having free access to all our material and numerous consultations with myself. It was then agreed the book would be issued under the auspices of the Center and I already found a willing publisher, who spoke to her personally to confirm this plan. Here is an extract placed in our Bulletin No. 2, Fall, 1969, which Mrs. Hoover saw and raised no question.

"At the opening of the Fall quarter, the Center was visited by Mrs. Marjorie Hoover, lecturer in Russian and German at Oberlin College, Ohio. Mrs. Hoover, in association with the Center, is writing a biographical study of the great Russian theater director, Vsevelod Meyerhold, which will be published by Praeger, USA, and Dobson, London, with an introduction by Herbert Marshall, who was a one time student assistant to Meyerhold in 1934–35.

"Mrs. Hoover came to consult with the Director and research the Center's archives on this theater pioneer, which include rare brochures, programs and books in Russian."
Only later we learned she had gone unilaterally to a publisher and now the book is out without even the proper credit any genuine academic scholar would give. I have protested to her and her publisher, but have received no reply.

Instead of a review, I print my own essay on Meyerhold, which will be included and expanded in my forthcoming book, Soviet Stars I Have Known: (Screen and Stage), to be published by Rutledge Kegan Paul Ltd., London, United Kingdom.

Herbert Marshall

VSEVELOD MEYERHOLD
A Belated Tribute to His 100th Anniversary

Everything in the present is influenced by the past and the best of what has been seen in the Soviet Theater during and since the period of the "thaw," is an attempt to resurrect many of the achievements and experiments of the past, including particularly the work of many of the men I happen to have either known or worked with. Here are eight of them: The Theater Directors; Vsevolod Meyerhold and Nikolai Okhlopkov; The Film Directors; Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Alexander Dowzhenko and Dziga Vertov; The Writer; Sergei Tretyakov; and The Actors; Nikolai Cherkassov and Boris Livcov.

They were among the leading artists of the world—but their peer was Vsevolod Meyerhold; an innovator and pioneer in many extraordinary ways. I would say that the whole of the modern revolutionary, political and artistic theater has been influenced by him: Piscator and Brecht in Germany, Burian in Czechoslovakia, Grotowski in Poland, and Peter Brook and myself in England. But in his own country Meyerhold's influence has been the most phenomenal.

As a regisseur, a director, Meyerhold probably produced more plays and certainly more classics than any other director in the history of world theater. More than any other director, he introduced what are now considered revolutionary innovations long before they became fashionable. At the same time, he probably was the greatest actor I have ever seen. I was present as an 'assistant-practica' during his rehearsals of The Lady of the Camellias and this was one of the most unforgettable experiences of my life, only confirming what Eisenstein taught us about the man he declared his Maestro. Let me quote what Eisenstein wrote in his Autobiography, which, at the time he wrote it, he thought would never be published in his lifetime. It was for himself, on the verge of death, and for posterity, that he wrote, and mind you he was writing at a time when Meyerhold was still a non-person whose work had been swept away forever. For Meyerhold had been murdered by the NKVD (Secret Police) on the orders of Stalin and hereafter he was never to be mentioned, his works had been expunged, his theater liquated and many of his disciples incarcerated in concentration camps and his wife brutally murdered. To write praise of him in Stalin's day was a supreme and brave gesture. Here is what Eisenstein wrote:

And I must say, of course, that I never loved, idolized, worshipped anyone as much as I did my teacher. Will one of my words say that about me one day? No. And the matter lies not in my pupils and me, but in me and my teacher. For I am unworthy to undo the straps on his sandals, though he wore felt boots in the unheated theater workshops on Novinsky Boulevard.

And to extreme old age I shall consider myself unworthy to kiss the dust from his feet, although his errors as a person have evidently swept away forever the footprints of the greatest master of our theater from the pages of our theatrical history.

And it is impossible to live without loving, worshipping, being carried away by someone. He was an astounding person . . . .

Something of a similar Lucifer or Ahasuerus was in the rebellious figure of my teacher, an immeasurably greater genius than Constantine Stanislavsky, who was acclaimed and 'canonized' by all . . . .

Such was Eisenstein's evaluation of his teacher.

After the terrible tragic Stalinist era, Meyerhold, like Eisenstein and so many other geniuses, are now being re-recognized and written about by many Russian and other writers. Meyerhold's own articles, speeches, memoirs, and reminiscences are now being published. But only with the publication of Regisseur Meyerhold by K. Rudnitsky, of the Institute of the History of Art, Academy of Sciences, Moscow, have we for the first time a comprehensive survey of all his productions, described in fullest detail, with a survey of all contemporary reviews and criticisms and official reaction.

Here is shown that every modern and contemporary style, mise-en-scene, designing, gimmick and gag was used first by Meyerhold in one or other of his productions, i.e., the removing of tabs, curtains, wings and borders; the barring of the whole stage to its very brick walls; the use of naked lamps and projectors from all parts; the bringing of the auditorium into the action as part of the whole scene; the linking of actors and audiences not only architecturally by ramps, steps and gangways into the auditorium, but by audience participation, by actors in the audience, by entries from audience exits and asiles; the fusion of the production and reality, as when latest telegraphed bulletins from the front line during the Civil War were read from the stage by a dispatch rider; and when the Red Army achieved a victory, it was cheered by actors and audience alike.

In Masquerade by Lermontov, the stage was designed to continue the decor of the Baroque auditorium of the Alexandrinsky Theater so that stage and auditorium were one artistic whole. This production was the height of luxury and painstaking preparation, probably never excelled in theater history; its planning and production spread over five years; every single piece of furniture, tapestry, costume, prop and hand-prop, including dishes and candleabras, were specially made to the design of Golovin, Meyerhold's stage designer; he made 4,000 drawings for the whole production.

That was the last production in the Tsarist Theater, for during its premiere the February Revolution started, and it was known as "the swan of the Empire." Indeed the inedible artistry of Meyerhold here revealed itself in the finale, for the tragedy ended with a special "Requiem" written by Glazunov, as the final curtain came down—all black, with a wreath in the center.

Thus, Meyerhold was the last regisseur of Tsarist Russia, but he was also the first regisseur of Revolutionary Russia; for one year after the Revolution he produced the first Soviet revolutionary play, Mystery Bouge by the great poet Mayakovsky.

And a more radical contrast could not be imagined. The original designs were by the pioneer of abstract art Malevitch (although I discovered Eisenstein did some sketches), the design was constructivist; and for the first time actors, representing the Masses, were wearing clothes, overalls and jeans!

One could enumerate so many Meyerhold innovations: moving screens, double-revolves; cinema screens, films, subtitles, slides, projection of posters and photos; a real jazz

2. Published by Izdatelstvo Nauk, Moscow, 1969.
hand on the stage; as a contrast to the entirely theatrical props of *Masquerade* he introduced real props like a machine gun that fired blanks, ran a motor-cycle in the aisles and placed a motor-car on the stage; he modernized period plays, with actors who used no make-up, no wigs, no theatrical costumes; or else made a "circusization" of a straight play with acrobatics, tight-rope walking, somersaults, etc. Eisenstein (his pupil) was later to use this style in his Proletcult production of Ostrouhov's *Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man* and claim originality! 8 Further the "montage of attractions" that Eisenstein considered his innovation was clearly used in Mayakovsky's *Mystery Bouffe* five years earlier: including the breaking down of a three or five act play into cinematic episodes; use of cinema and circus and music hall treatment of a play. He bared the lights on the stage and in the auditorium; sometimes kept all the auditorium lights on—which Brecht did some fifty years later.

Furthermore, Meyerhold was an actor of genius and it was never more visible than during his rehearsals. In fact, I must admit, I fully understand the reasons why many of his leading actors eventually fought with him and left his theater, because he could do everything so much better than they. If he would show a lady how to walk across the stage, he walked the finest lady that ever walked across a stage, and the unfortunate lady actress that followed him appeared to be a poor imitation. At any moment he would bring out an apparently brilliant extemporized piece of mise-en-scene blocking or stage business. His fantasy was inexhaustible.

We know too that Meyerhold considered a theater production was not just for repeating dramatist's lines. In his later productions he called himself "the author of the spectacle." He was in fact the ideal of Gordon Craig on the stage.

It will be remembered that Craig dreamed of the super-marionette, because the supreme artist must have complete control over all his material. In every other art this is possible, except in the Performing Arts, where one has to deal with an organism, a living being called man, who is unpredictable, no matter how much you train him and discipline him, and that is why Craig dreamed of a super-marionette that would obey absolutely the laws of the supreme director, a dream which Eisenstein inherited!

So, for example, every episode of Meyerhold's productions was set to music. In other words, he was concerned with establishing the mood, rhythm and tempo of the episode, in a way far more precise than is generally attempted in the theater.

One of the things I think that is lost sight of today is the overall rhythm of a production, which is clearly set say, in a symphony. One will know immediately the difference when a Toscanini conducts a Verdi than when a rank and file conductor conducts. The whole secret is in the overall control and rhythm of the whole sway and swing of the symphony. So Meyerhold would clearly set down the episodic movement in a musical sense and the movement of the whole act, and of the whole production. He would also develop stage business that would be part of a pattern in the whole decorative composition of the production.

For example, in *The Lady of the Camelias* at the first meeting of Armand and Marguerite, in a gesture of love, Armand throws over her head petals from flowers he had brought her and they fall in a simmering shower over her.

Later, in the middle of the play, when he proposes that she should leave the courtesan's life and become his wife, he tears up pieces of paper and scatters them over her head like confetti, to symbolize their forthcoming wedding.

Then, in the end, when she decides, under pressure of his father and public opinion, to pretend that she was rejecting him for just another lover, he takes the money that he had won at the gambling table and from the staircase, throws it down so that it sprinkles as before, like showers of petals and paper, over the head of poor Marguerite. That in itself was worth the whole production and that was only one of many such imaginative touches of Meyerhold.

Another touch of genius: When the scene opens in Marguerite's boudoir, the usual bed (in which she eventually dies) is not there; it is off stage. At the back are great tall Gordon-Craig-like curtains and a window. On a great green armchair is seen a blob of black. Voices are heard, the Doctor comes out of the bed alcove and picks up the blob of black—it is his cloak. He throws it over his shoulders and exits. That is the foreshadowing.

In the last scene, the curtains cover the great windows. Marguerite enters very sick and with a last effort pulls back the curtain, a brilliant shaft of sunlight pours into the room and on her, she looks her last, lets it drop, and falls into the green armchair. The curtains slowly close and cut off the sunlight until the room grows dark with Marguerite's death. A natural fade-out and curtain.

The profound tribute Eisenstein paid to his Maestro Meyerhold was made, it must be remembered, during the worst Stalinist days of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. As Rudinitsky, the author of the latest work of Meyerhold, says in his preface, "After the closing of the Meyerhold Theater in 1938 and his destruction, 4 for more than fifteen years the name of the Regisseur was never mentioned in the Soviet press." 5

This of course, is an understatement made now, in the days of re-Stalinization. It is still not realized in the West how utterly ruthless the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was in wiping out every vestige of an alleged "enemy of the people." Mountains of evidence from their own sources, now show that everything and anything associated with such an "enemy" was destroyed. Not only his name removed at once from all reference books, encyclopedias, history books, text books, but all his own works were confiscated and withdrawn from every library in the Soviet Union and even in the satellite countries where the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had police control. An "enemy's" personal library and manuscripts and archives and photos and momentoes were all confiscated, some kept in the private archives of the Secret Police or the top Communist leaders (Molotov and Voroshilov like Himmler collected big private libraries) everything else was destroyed. Those writers, for example, who have survived the prison camps, privations and torture and been rehabilitated, have the greatest task in the world to find their own works, not only unpublished—that's impossible—but all their published works. Tsaikov's widow had this difficulty.

So Meyerhold's name was systematically removed from every conceivable place—and his name was legion! A specially illustrated edition of his superb production of Lermontov's *Masquerade* was published, with designs by Golovin. But his name was never mentioned. The designs for the theater he conceived on the site of his old theater in Mayakovsky Square, Moscow, were published, but his name was removed from every plan! To this day his theater is still called the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall.

Yet, by a miracle his archives survived. I wondered how. And learned they were hidden by Eisenstein! That was a brave thing to do in the days of Stalin and Beria. Rudinitsky writes, "When Eisenstein wrote these words (in praise of Meyerhold in his autobiography—HM) the name of Meyer-

4. It is interesting to note the author uses the Russian word *gibel* = CATASTROPHE, ruin, destruction. A euphemism for execution, murder.
5. Ibid.
hold was not even uttered. The vast archives of Meyerhold, now available to all, carefully sorted, catalogued, and microfilmed, was secretly kept in custody in the country cottage of the director of Battleship Potemkin, the pupil of Meyerhold." 6

The pupils of Meyerhold were among the most talented names in Soviet culture, but they could not utter a word in his defense. These include the actors; Igor Ilyinsky, Martynov, Sverdiin, Babanova, Orlov, Zharov, Garin, the directors; Okhlopkov, Pyrev, Elk, Yutkevich, Zakhava, Pluchek and Eisenstein. Yet, I was told that Meyerhold, during the long period of his influence, interceded with the Party for numerous comrades who were in trouble or arrested and fought for them to the very top.

Only Stanislavsky helped Meyerhold when his theater was liquidated. Offering him a post as Regisseur in his own Musical Theater. Rudnitsky writes, "The nobility and beauty of that act is impossible to overrate." 7 And yet it was Meyerhold who attacked the Moscow Art Theater and Stanislavsky throughout all the years of his Soviet career and stardom. Stanislavsky never once hit back.

During all the months in which I was a student-practicing at Meyerhold’s rehearsals of Le Dame aux Camelias he treated me like a son. Like Eisenstein, I found his inventiveness and brilliance unique, as an actor he surpassed everyone in his company. He was the greatest actor I have ever seen and the greatest director. And in my day I have seen Eisenstein, Okhlopkov, Tairov, Simonov, Rheinhardt, Buryan, Brecht, Guthrie, Brook, etc., but not one of them could equal Meyerhold in inventiveness, fantasy, improvisation, structural composition of the whole production, or in acting, when he wished to show an actor what he wanted. That of course, being the opposite of the Stanislavsky method. He came from the outside in, and Stanislavsky from inside out. Towards the end of their lives, they began to re-unite again; Stanislavsky to start from physical action and not psychoanalysis, and Meyerhold to greater psychological realism.

Meyerhold in fact wanted to be, in the very title he often gave himself, "author of the spectacle." Re-writing the original scripts, often turning it inside out, comedy into tragedy and vice-versa; designing not only the scenery, the lighting, the coloring, the tempo, the mise-en-scene, the style, the acting, but also the tiniest gestures and mimicry of the individual actors. The great classic Chinese actor, Mei-Lan-Fang, who played only female parts, was the only actor I ever saw approach the grace and delicacy of Meyerhold showing an actress how he wanted her to move or gesticulate or mimic.

I remember us saying, during a rehearsal of Meyerhold, "If only he could play all the parts!"

Vakhtangov, who attempted to synthesize the schools of Meyerhold and Stanislavsky said, "Meyerhold provided the roots of the theater of the future. The future will reward him."

But though there is still no commemorative plaque on the theater he designed in Mayakovski Square, called the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall, or the theater he worked in on Gorky Street, his influence is now clearly expressed by numerous Soviet theaters, from the avant-garde theater on Taganka Square to the Maly—the oldest theater in Russia—not to mention leading theaters and directors in the rest of the world—where his name and fame was never blacked out.

**GRADUATE RESEARCH ASSISTANTSHIP AVAILABLE:**

A graduate assistant working for their MA or her Ph.D. is required at the Center for Soviet and East European Studies. Qualifications are: an interest in the Performing Arts and a thorough knowledge of either Yiddish and English or Russian and English or both. This will be basically for work on "The World History of the Jewish Theater" that Professor Herbert Marshall is now engaged in with a graduate assistant, Ina Burko from Israel. The assistantship will commence with the new educational year, August, 1975. The assistantship carries with it the obligation to work for 20 hours a week at the Center and receiving a monthly stipend of approximately $300 and a waiver of tuition. Apply immediately to the above, sending curriculum vitae and any further details, or telephone 618-549-4569, or 618-543-5174.

**CORRESPONDENCE EXTRACTS**

From Norman Cousins, editor of the Saturday Review.

"Dear Herbert Marshall:

I am sorry about the missed opportunity to visit the Center and am glad to have the materials you sent. I plan to hand them on to our Artsletter editor when I've had a chance to do them justice. Southern Illinois is obviously hospitable to fresh approaches and creativity. Congratulations."

From Professor Lariisa M. L. Onyshekevych, Rutgers University Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures.

"Dear Professor Marshall,

First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate you on the tremendous work which you are doing at the Center. For the last several years I read your Bulletin with great interest and—admire your diverse projects, most of all in the realm of theater and drama."

From Professor Jeremy R. Azrael, Professor of Political Science; Chairman of the Committee on Slavic Area Studies, The University of Chicago.

"Dear Professor Marshall:

Thank you so much for sending me your Bulletins. They represent an important contribution to understanding the non-Russian nationalities of the USSR and deserve a wide audience."

6. Ibid., p. 259.
7. Ibid., p. 486.
OBITUARIES

B. Z. Goldberg 1907-1974
Rabbi A. J. Heschel 1909-1974

I was very upset to hear within a short time of each other that two wonderful men I knew had died. One was B. Z. Goldberg, a writer and journalist who for more than 50 years wrote a column for The Day, the Jewish morning journal which was the last Yiddish language newspaper in the States until it ended a year ago. We had a good deal in common, in so far as he was a specialist on Jewish life in the Soviet Union, had written a book about it and we had consulted with each other from time to time on the current problems of Soviet Jewry and he encouraged me to persist with my translations of Russian Jewish poets and he was most enthusiastic about my project for a World History of the Jewish Theater, particularly, as his wife is the daughter of the famous Shalom Aleichem.

In 1964, B. Z. played a major role in the building of the Beit Shalom Aleichem building in Israel that today houses more than 300 manuscripts and memorabilia of Shalom Aleichem. We shall miss his friendship and his expertise.

And then not long afterwards another extraordinary Jewish colleague died, Rabbi Abraham Joshu Heschel. He too had given me full support for my proposed History of the Jewish Theater. Rabbi Heschel is another example of the extraordinary talents that emerged from the East European ghettos. He came from Warsaw, started to write Yiddish poems, studied at the University of Berlin and began the first of a dozen books on religion. In 1940, he escaped from the Nazis to the haven of the USA. But he didn’t remain just a desk or pulpit scholar. He actively participated in the Civil Rights struggle. He remarked once: “When I marched with Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama, I felt my legs were praying.”

He was a militant mystic like the prophets of his ancestors. He joined in the group of Clergy Concerned about Viet Nam, appeared at meetings and demonstrations on behalf of the Israel and latterly for the Jews of Russia. Perhaps the climactic event of his life was his visit to Pope Paul VI at the Vatican, a meeting which shocked his Orthodox brethren, but which were silenced when as a result of this, the Pope issued the 1965 declaration on the abolition of Jewish guilt for the crucifixion. The beginning of eradication of the roots of Christian antisemitism for nearly two thousand years was an epochal event. Rabbi Abraham Joshu Heschel was a mensch I am proud to have known.