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# Serafima Birman: the Path of the Actress from the Moscow Art Theatre to People's Artist of the USSR

Serafima Birman was an actress of the Moscow Art Theatre who worked in the First Studio and Second Moscow Art Theatre throughout the revolutionary and civil war period (1910s–1920s) and went on to have a distinguished career as a performer, teacher, and director in Stalinist and post-Stalinist USSR (1920s–1970s). In this article Rose Whyman investigates her artistic and cultural contribution in the development of the Stanislavsky System and of her approach to acting, working alongside Vakhtangov, Michael Chekhov, and influenced by Meyerhold and other artists of the avant-garde. She was the first female director at the theatre, continued to act and direct in Soviet theatres, and worked in film, notably with Eisenstein on *Ivan the Terrible*. The development of her career required great determination and necessitated making theatrical and political choices in order to survive and maintain the artistic principles on which her work was based. Rose Whyman is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Drama and Theatre Arts at the University of Birmingham and is the author of *The Stanislavsky System of Acting* (Cambridge, 2008) and *Stanislavsky: the Basics* (Routledge, 2013).

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SERAFIMA BIRMAN is most widely known from Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible, Parts 1 and 2* as the murderous Efrosinia Staritskaya, who plots against her nephew Ivan, believing that her son Vladimir should be on the throne instead. Apart from this, Birman's work as an actress and director is hardly known outside Russia, nor is that of other actresses of the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) Studios who remained in the Soviet Union after the Revolution. These include Sofia Giatsintova and Lidia Deikun, founder members of the MAT First Studio in 1912, as well as Maria Durasova, Nadezhda Bromlei, and Olga Pyzhova, who joined the First Studio a little later.

Birman and Giatsintova became the leading actresses of the Second Moscow Art Theatre (MAAT2), as the First Studio became.<sup>1</sup> Some actresses gained wider recognition through international exposure, as did Maria Ouspenskaya, another founder of the First Studio, who toured to the West with the MAT in 1922 and stayed in the USA, and Maria Knebel, who worked in both the Second Studio and Chekhov's studio, with

the MAT troupe from 1924 to 1950 and also directed a production of *The Cherry Orchard* at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, in 1968. Nevertheless, the contribution of this generation of actresses to the development of Stanislavsky's System and other acting practices remains under-researched.

After working in the Studios throughout the revolutionary and civil war period (1910s–1920s), those who did not emigrate often had distinguished careers as performers, teachers, and directors in Stalinist and post-Stalinist USSR (1920s–1970s). Pursuing a career as an actress was, on the one hand, a path of agency and of self-determination but, on the other, necessitated finding ways to survive and to compromise with the regime.

Under the Tsarist autocracy in the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, estate theatres had flourished with both male and female serf actors. Mikhail Shchepkin, who was revered by Stanislavsky, was released from serfdom in 1821 and like others gained autonomy in developing an acting career. By the 1870s, the

Imperial theatres featured star actresses such as Maria Savina, Glikeria Fedotova, and Maria Ermolova. Anna Brenko was the first actress-entrepreneur to open her own theatre in Moscow in 1880. Then, in the early twentieth century in what Catherine Schuler calls the Nina Zarechnaia epidemic,<sup>2</sup> young women flocked to join the theatre, imitating Anton Chekhov's Nina in *The Seagull*, who runs away from home to pursue her vocation in the theatre, seeking a profession which could afford meaning and some autonomy in their lives, although having to contend with the still disreputable estimation of the profession and sexual patronage. In the same period, the influence of Isadora Duncan's tours to Russia led to many upper-class young women seeking self-expression and careers in dance, and numerous studios of plastic dance were opened in Moscow and St Petersburg, their leaders also contributing to actor training.

The leading actresses of the original MAT, founded in 1898 by Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, included Stanislavsky's wife Lilina, Olga Knipper-Chekhova, Maria Andreyeva, and Olga Gzovskaya. The MAT became famous throughout Russia, Europe, and America for its staging of the new drama – often concerned with a woman's situation – of Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen, and others, for innovative productions of classics and for the development of Stanislavsky's System of training actors.

The establishment of the theatre and its ethics contributed a great deal to the legitimization of the profession. Yet, while establishing an ethos in which the profession of actress became a reputable one, relationships were often conflicted and younger performers such as Alyssa Koonen and Vera Baranovskaya often sought, at least in some ways, to fulfil Stanislavsky's expectations but, in others, were unable to do so.<sup>3</sup> The actresses' work is of interest in relation to tensions between the representations of femininity and conventional gendered behaviour in the plays produced by MAT, generally authored and directed by men, and the actresses' lives.<sup>4</sup>

## Role of the 'New Soviet Woman'

The MAT contributed to the establishment of Russian theatre and acting as high art. Maude F. Meisel shows how both men and women in the Russian or Soviet theatre 'consistently present their lives as dedicated to a transcendent cultural good'.<sup>5</sup> Birman writes of Stanislavsky and the System in this way despite becoming part of movements that challenged Stanislavsky's dominance. In the MAT studios, Leopold Sulerzhitskii, whom Stanislavsky considered his only 'true' disciple, was initially in charge (1912). This responsibility was then taken on variously by Yevgenii Vakhtangov (1916) and Michael Chekhov (1922). At times, Stanislavsky saw both Vakhtangov and Chekhov, Birman's contemporaries, as errant students who had diverged from his principles, but both developed aspects of the System in ways that still continue to be influential in the practice of acting.

In the late 1930s, Stanislavsky's System (or a received notion of it) was endorsed by the state as the ideologically correct way of training performers for Socialist Realist art. Some of the actresses, including Birman, taught the System, while not necessarily using it exclusively in their own roles and having to keep silent about allegiances to Chekhov, who emigrated in 1928, and to avant-garde theatre movements such as that led by Vsevolod Meyerhold.

There were further complexities related to the increasing need for the identity of the female actor, director, and teacher to hinge around being a Soviet citizen. For actresses of Birman's generation, despite the changing sexual politics of the revolution, success continued to be dependent on negotiations with male directors, teachers, playwrights, and, increasingly, the Soviet state. In 1918, the first constitution of the USSR proclaimed the equal rights of all citizens. In the 1930s, the victory of socialism in completing the industrialization and collectivization of the economy was declared. The 1936 Constitution of the USSR stated that women were accorded equal rights with men in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, social,

and political life, but this translated into an equal right with men to work supported by maternity benefits and nursery provision.

Women were needed as a major part of the workforce. Soviet propaganda promoted images of New Soviet Woman 'in films, as factory and collective farmworkers, teachers, Communist leaders . . . pilots'.<sup>6</sup> Stalin wrote, 'It is not property status, not national origin, not sex, not office, but personal ability and personal labour, that determines the position of every citizen in society.'<sup>7</sup> However, this aspiration was not necessarily reflected in women's pay or career prospects and, in a sense, for the actress the loyalty and submission demanded by Stanislavsky to his ideal of theatre art was expanded into that demanded by what has been termed the Stalinist neopatriarchal social system.<sup>8</sup>

While Marxist teaching on emancipation from traditional gender roles in the creation of the New Soviet Man and the New Soviet Woman had been a lynchpin of the Bolshevik attempt to transform society, by the 1930s it was clear that policies such as easy divorce and abortion available on demand were creating instability and the birth rate was falling. The ideal of the stable family as a cornerstone of society was reinstated with a new slant on the Soviet family, in which women had a double responsibility, as workers and home-makers, and the authorities attempted to 'construct a particular set of gender relations – a triangular set of relations in which the primary relationship of individual men and women was to the state, rather than to each other'.<sup>9</sup>

In order to sustain a career, the second-generation actresses had to pledge themselves as workers for the Soviet state: avant-garde art was condemned as formalist and pre-revolutionary work such as that of Isadora Duncan's free dance followers was repressed. As Birman put it, 'from a "priest of art" the actor was gradually transformed into a citizen of the Soviet country, organically united with it'.<sup>10</sup>

While in some parts of the world in the early twentieth century emancipation brought with it opportunities for actresses to use their position to fight for change and voice poli-

tical views, under Stalinism actresses were silenced for any artistic affiliation designated inimical to communism, whether or not overt political views were expressed. Emblematic of this is Zinaida Raikh, Meyerhold's second wife, who had been imprisoned for her political activities and membership of the Socialist-Revolutionary party in 1914 and was murdered in 1939, as some think, by the internal security forces (then the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs).

### Serafima Birman

Serafima (Sima) Birman was born in 1890, four years before Raikh, in Kishinyev in Moldova, to a German army staff-captain and a Moldovan mother. She writes that her own nationality was Russian, adding that perhaps the reason why she entered the theatre was because 'people with mixed blood always have a restlessness that cannot be repressed'.<sup>11</sup> Her older stepsister fought to leave the family to study medicine in Moscow in a course for women reopened in the early twentieth century after a period of repression of women's education, and she encouraged Birman to leave home in 1911.

As far as her family was concerned, she was to study at the historical-physiological faculty of the Higher Courses of Ger'e but secretly also took the course at the Dramatic School of MAT actor A. I. Adashev, alongside Vakhtangov. Birman knew the System from its earliest variations when taught there by Sulerzhitskii. She suffered from a bad lack of confidence at the beginning of her training, yet Stanislavsky recommended her inclusion as a member of the First Studio and noted, along with Olga Baklanova, Giatsintova, Durasova, and Ouspenskaya, that she was 'very interesting'.<sup>12</sup> Birman also began her directing career there, taught for Vakhtangov at the Third Studio from 1920, and worked with the MAAT2 from 1924 to 1936.

After the closure of the MAAT2, Birman, Giatsintova, and Ivan Bersenyev, Giatsintova's husband, worked from 1936 to 1938 at Teatr Moskovskogo Sovieta (MOSPS), where Birman staged Maxim Gorky's *Vassa Zhelez-nova* and played the main role. In 1938, she

was one of the founders of the Moscow Komsomol theatre, worked there until 1958, and rejoined what was then known as the Mossviet theatre. She won the Stalin Prize for her role in Eisenstein's *Ioan the Terrible, Part 1* in 1946 and was given further awards, including People's Artist of the RSFSR.

She published four books in the Soviet period: *Akter i Obraz (The Actor and the Role)* in 1934, *Trud aktera (The Actor's Labour)* in 1939, *Put' Aktrisy, (The Path of the Actress)* in 1959, and *Sud'boi darovannii vstrechi (Encounters Gifted by Destiny)* in 1971. Interestingly, Chekhov's books written before Birman's have similar titles: *The Path of the Actor* (1928) and *Life and Encounters*, published in extracts before Chekhov left Russia in 1928. Perhaps Birman intended her titles as homage to her colleague, whose name she could not mention publicly for a long period under Stalin.

### Beginnings at MAT and the First Studio

In the autobiographical writings or memoirs of late nineteenth-century actresses, the conventions governing the presentation of the female self in theatre work involved a public dedication as if to a religious vocation.<sup>13</sup> This continues with the second generation actresses who refer to realizing their vocation (*prizvanie*), and Birman writes of this in relation to the MAT, continually acknowledging her love and respect for Stanislavsky and also dedicating herself to art in the service of the Soviet state.

Other tropes found in the memoirs of these actresses are cathartic encounters with the Master. Birman recounts how she was struggling with her role as Night in a revival of Maurice Maeterlinck's *The Bluebird*, while Giatsintova and Durasova were not having problems. Stanislavsky called her to rehearse as he ate his lunch. He began rehearsing the dialogue taking the role of the Cat. She relates that she 'turned to stone': she could not address him as the Cat with the familiarity that the lines required while sitting with him over lunch, when he clearly was Stanislavsky and not her acting partner. He got impatient, criticized her technique and

she burst into tears. He spoke to her more kindly and she reminded him how he had cursed her at rehearsal that day. Seeing her upset, he told her to go and come back to the theatre the next day. She walked away after this experience of confession and forgiveness, she says, feeling 'pure, fresh, warmed, as if after a summer rain shower'.<sup>14</sup>

Stanislavsky aimed to develop a method of acting that enabled truthful depiction of human behaviour, based on his observations in life and understanding of psychology. The Studio was the laboratory for this, and Birman writes of its beginnings, when working in actor Boris Afonin's home in 1911:

A new concept of the theatre and of acting as a profession was formed. Our purpose was to reveal the truth, to probe the depths of human experience. We had the greatest contempt for the 'mechanical expression of unfeeling feelings'.<sup>15</sup>

The first artistic principle the Studio sought to define was how to convey the 'life of the human spirit' in artistic form to the audience.<sup>16</sup> Conveying the actor's experiencing was promoted by the intimacy with the audience in the small Studio in the Komissarzhevskaja Theatre, where the audience sat on raked seating very close to the playing area, which was marked off by a carpet rather than footlights.

Another principle of the work was the humanist ethos and aesthetic of the System formulated by Sulerzhitskii in keeping with his Christian Tolstoyan philosophy. He saw theatre as an active moral influence on people, and humanism as the unquestionable quality of a great artist, who should be able to stir an audience's compassion for the character's experiences.<sup>17</sup>

In 1915, Birman was invited by Sulerzhitskii to join the Council of the First Studio. A factor in her development as a performer was her appearance. In view of the conventions around character type (*amplua*), and representations of femininity, she was not considered for lead 'heroine' roles or roles such as those in *Twelfth Night* – the celebrated 1917 First Studio production directed by Stanislavsky and B. M. Sushkevich in which Pyzhova was Viola and Giatsintova, Maria.



Portrait of Serafima Birman, Peoples' Artist of the USSR, winner of Stalin Prize, in 1967. She is holding a photograph of Stanislavsky © Sputnik Images/ArenaPAL.

She writes that her long nose and thinness precluded such opportunities, so in the early part of her career she played mostly bit parts.

Assessing her as member of the First Studio, Sulerzhitskii wrote of her as 'small, unattractive, with smallpox-marked cheeks and rather snub-nosed'.<sup>18</sup> Deikun and her husband A. I. Blagonravov in their memoir write that, when the studio group were on tour to Novgorod-Seversk, Vakhtangov, in a state of depression, said: 'Actresses should be beautiful but you are ugly!' Sima laughed in embarrassment, replying 'Val'da is very pretty, Lida is charming and sweet and I am original . . . !'<sup>19</sup> Birman wrote that she was only 'absolutely . . . happy with her appearance' when this was 'hidden' and 'transfused into a new form' – 'a stage image'.<sup>20</sup>

In the early days of the System, Stanislavsky stressed working from personal experience more than he did later, and Vakhtangov took the idea of 'banishing theatre from the theatre' in experiencing even further than Stanislavsky. In a production of Gerhardt Hauptmann's *Festival of Peace* (1913), where Chekhov played the servant Fribe, Birman wrote that the experiences of Augusta Scholtz, a daughter in a neurotic and troubled family, were too close to her own background and that the degree of self-analysis required by Vakhtangov was torture for her.<sup>21</sup>

The production was rejected by Stanislavsky, and Birman states that the reason for its failure was because Vakhtangov's direction had got the students immersed in their own emotions, forgetting the audience. She

argued with him about his leaning towards naturalism, when, for example, he wanted to smear the edge of a glass with quinine so that the actor would 'really experience and express bitterness', and when two students performed an etude called 'Palm-Reading' Vakhtangov praised their stage concentration, although she argued that they were not acting, as one of the students was genuinely doing a reading.<sup>22</sup>

### 'The Joy of Justified Theatricalism'

Meanwhile, she was directed by Stanislavsky in other small roles at MAT such as Ortensia in Carlo Goldoni's *Mistress of the Inn* in 1914, performing with Maria Kemper as Dejanira, and she writes that Stanislavsky supported her in giving her this role when she had not got an actor's 'backbone'. She records experiments with the System in developing the role. N. E. Efros wrote that this was played as 'a "psychological" comedy, aimed towards experiencing' with 'Birman and Kemper in the style of buffonades. . . . This was charming.'<sup>23</sup> Working with Stanislavsky while beginning to exercise her considerable comic talents, she discovered the 'joy of justified theatricalism'.<sup>24</sup>

Birman adored her colleague Chekhov, writing that he once asked her, 'Serafima – what do you think of me?' and she replied: 'You are a rainbow through which God smiles.'<sup>25</sup> He rejected working from personal experience and Birman drew from his ideas of 'imitating the image' as an alternative to these aspects of the System.<sup>26</sup> In *The Wreck of the 'Hope'* by Herman Heijermans, directed by Richard Boleslavsky, where the System was tested out, Chekhov played Cobus to great success and Birman played Matilda Boss, a hypocritical, affected, and rich ship-owner's wife. As she later wrote, she found this grotesque character from her lips, grimacing in a way that made the character repulsive in the period when Chekhov was formulating ideas that were to become the 'imaginary centre'.<sup>27</sup>

Another notable role was *Mistress Fielding* in *The Cricket on the Hearth* directed by Sulerzhitskii and Sushkievich in 1914, which

Stanislavsky approved, unlike the experiments of Vakhtangov and Chekhov. Chekhov played Fraser in Henning Berger's *The Flood* (1914) and reviews discussed his capacity for 'comic seriousness'.<sup>28</sup> Birman admired Chekhov's capacity for transforming the quality of his acting from comic to tragic simply by transforming the rhythm.<sup>29</sup>

Vakhtangov's experimental expressionism began to be seen in *The Flood*, which he was later to develop into the fantastic realism of *Princess Turandot*. After Sulerzhitskii's death in 1916, Vakhtangov was entrusted with the System, although he departed from it in ways that brought about conflict with Stanislavsky. Birman writes of Vakhtangov as a genius, although she says he made mistakes and had faults.<sup>30</sup> In 1918, Vakhtangov writes that Stanislavsky read his lectures to Birman, Cheban, and him until late at night, 'and we . . . insolent ones . . . corrected his plan and gave him advice. He . . . great man . . . listened to us and believed us.'<sup>31</sup> Yet, Vakhtangov wrote to her in 1921:

While we followed the path set out by the Art Theatre, we walked calmly and surely, without any sense of what it meant to stage and perform a play. We made everything out of the same dough – rolls, muffins, cookies,, and bread – and their taste was identical, too. We followed this road and came to a luxurious cemetery. We should do our own work.<sup>32</sup>

Vakhtangov's fourth production, instrumental in the development of Birman's own method, was his expressionist version of August Strindberg's *Erik XIV* with Chekhov in one of his great roles as Erik, and Birman acclaimed for her role as Katarina Stenbock, Erik's stepmother, the 'strong, majestic, embittered Dowager Queen'.<sup>33</sup> Visually influenced by cubism and showcasing Vakhtangov's experiments with the grotesque, the production was seen as relevant to the Revolution in its depiction of the social conflict between the court and the ordinary people. Birman discussed the role of rhythm and musicality, and the influential Soviet critic and director Pavel Markov wrote that Birman was

a good conductor of his ideal. . . . a symbol of cruel and evil power alien to interests of the people...

The world which was to be destroyed was best expressed in this tall dry figure with a severe angry face, who glided along the corridors of the northern palace.<sup>34</sup>

The character was described as like 'a giant black bat'.<sup>35</sup> Birman remarks: 'Before I began reading my role I suddenly found myself sliding my feet over the floor.'<sup>36</sup> Chekhov liked this, and in this production were the antecedents of what he was to name 'psychological gesture':

When Vakhtangov was directing me in the play *Eric XIV*, neither of us knew about these things, but somehow we were both driving towards the archetype or gesture. Vakhtangov told me that if I had an imaginary circle on the floor and tried to go through it but could not, then it would be something of Eric. From this we found a certain form of gesture and shouting for the whole play.<sup>37</sup>

Birman also wrote, 'My queen was fearfully lonely and unhappy.'<sup>38</sup> The experience led to the creation of further complex anti-heroines or what she called 'extraordinary women'.<sup>39</sup> Although she was cast in episodic, background roles she made them main roles.<sup>40</sup> She played Goneril in *King Lear* on the main stage in 1924 and was praised for her 'sharp plastic depiction'.<sup>41</sup>

In the First Studio, she worked from Stanislavsky's spiritual naturalism to the extreme psychology of *Festival* and the expressionism of *Erik XIV*, imbuing her powerful characters with contradictory features. She was a consummate artist of the tragi-comic grotesque.

### Birman and the Avant-Garde

While continuing to address Stanislavsky with gratitude – writing in 1922, 'If our life is confused and dark, I will think of you and think in any case I am telling black from white'<sup>42</sup> – Birman, like Chekhov, developed her own acting and pedagogic method from the 1920s, finding her own principles beyond the borders of *amplua*, and writing in 1928 of 'beginning to sense . . . the borders of tragifarce'.<sup>43</sup>

Tragi-farce, or the tragic-grotesque, on the development of which Nikolai Gogol's writing was influential, was a theatre aesthetic

based upon the presentation of a distorted reality, where farcical events have tragic consequences or aspects. Meyerhold and Eisenstein developed a genre of circus-like farce and, similarly, Grigorii Kozinstsev and Leonid Trauberg's *Factory of the Eccentric Actor* celebrated the Revolution, linking with ideas from Russian formalism. The term 'eccentrism' signified angularity and precision in performance, and extremes in movement and voice used to shock or jolt the audience, as part of the avant-garde rebellion against Stanislavsky's 'experiencing'. Meyerhold revolutionized audiences' 'horizon of expectations' pre- and post-revolution, asserting anti-emotional representational acting based in the technical mastery of movement, influenced by Delsartean gesture, plastic dance, and movement forms such as Jacques-Dalcroze's Eurhythmic.

The concept of the 'mask' was important to him, the ability to act as if changing masks showing both the contradictions in a person and the playwright's attitudes to the character. He discusses this in relation to Molière's *Don Juan*, rejecting the notion of character development in favour of the idea of the 'social mask'.<sup>44</sup> Birman's characters were also sometimes seen as masks rather than realistic.

Speaking of Birman in 1929 at the Central Commission for the Improvement of the Life of Scholars, Meyerhold presented her as an actress of the grotesque, 'a gifted inventor of new stage forms' and in the 'region of the grotesque . . . surpassed by no one'.<sup>45</sup> For Stanislavsky, the grotesque had to be founded in internal psychological content, but for Meyerhold in gesture and movement. The grotesque for Meyerhold was the synthesis of extracts of opposites, the conflict between form and content,<sup>46</sup> while for Stanislavsky the internal content of the play, the essence, was more important than the form. Although it could be exaggerated, even caricatured, the role was experienced as expressing the fullness of life.<sup>47</sup>

Vakhtangov's experiments with the grotesque allowed the actor and director to 'inwardly justify the content of the given play in a dramatic and condensed way . . .

with a form that manifests the essence of the play's content'. He would also introduce satirical elements to a character after it had been developed by the actor in accordance with psychological realism, resulting in mask-like characterisations.<sup>48</sup> Birman, too, found a middle ground in the dispute on the grotesque, aiming for an eccentric, precise form of her anti-heroines while revealing their humanity by using Stanislavsky's famous precept: if you are playing a bad person you should look for what is good in him or her. She wrote: 'I know that there is a rubbish bin in every home but there are also places where people hang if not icons then pictures of people they love. . . . In the most pitiful and impoverished soul there is something unchangeable and majestic.'<sup>49</sup>

As Julia Listengarten argues, tragi-farce later developed into a nuanced form reflecting in a coded way the ambivalence of Soviet political realities and, despite the attempts to quell it, as Socialist Realism became dominant and theatrical representation an ideological battleground, it persisted in various ways. Russian tragi-farce is 'full of pain and poignancy as it reflects the absurdity of a society, not an inexplicable universe, and the grotesqueness of human beings, not dehumanized and brainless creatures'.<sup>50</sup>

In her published writings from the late 1930s, Birman could not mention Meyerhold, whose star had fallen. In *The Actor's Labour*, largely an exposition of the main aspects of Stanislavsky's System, for example, she cites Stanislavsky, Vakhtangov, and Sulerzhitskii as her influences and acknowledges that Socialist Realism is essential in art as it 'refashions life'.<sup>51</sup> However, Irina Shestova, in her seminal essay of 2013, evidences Birman's link to Meyerhold's avant-garde movements.

### Beginnings as a Director

Birman was the first female director in the First Studio. Although others emerged, directing remains a male-dominated profession in Russia. Birman's first attempt was an adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *Chorus Girl* in the First Studio, which was viewed as a

failure. She writes that Vakhtangov doubted her powers as a teacher and as a director, whereas Stanislavsky alleviated her suffering with kind words.<sup>52</sup>

After Vakhtangov died in 1922, Chekhov was appointed director of the Studio. He developed his pedagogical and directorial approach, basing it in Stanislavsky's System, Vakhtangov's Fantastic Realism, his own anthroposophical spiritualism, and Rudolf Steiner's eurhythmy.

In 1924, Birman staged her first independent directorial work, A. N. Tolstoy's *Love is the Book of Gold*, encouraged by Giatsintova and Deikun. Chekhov initially opposed it, but she explains that in 1923, 'We showed a rehearsal to Chekhov . . . and conquered. The play was included in the repertoire'.<sup>53</sup> The play is 'an elegantly written . . . comedy bouffe, almost vaudeville'. When she read it to the First Studio while on tour in Berlin, the troupe 'hurt their chests laughing'. It concerns a calendar almanac published with the consent of Catherine II, which tells the story of a court romance and offers advice on how a 'gallant cavalier should behave towards the fair sex and love relationships'.<sup>54</sup>

Although the acting was applauded, the play was not at first well received. There was increasing scrutiny of plays for suitable revolutionary content, and in 1922 Tolstoy had been excluded from the Union of Soviet Writers at Maxim Gorky's behest. Although Tolstoy had acceded to alterations demanded by Glavrepertkom, the Commission for approval of performance repertoires to ensure they met revolutionary aims, it appears that initially there were doubts as to how the play related to Soviet reality.

A critic in the newspaper *Izvestia* then wrote that it was not a mere satire, but a chance for 'the Soviet spectator of the twentieth century to taste the culture of the past. . . . The labyrinth of feelings, love and envy, happiness and its changeability . . . to sympathize with each character while laughing at what is happening.' Doubts remained and the production was taken off in 1925 because of the 'lightweight theme', although it ran for over sixty performances.<sup>55</sup>

Giatsintova writes of Birman's satirical



comedic imagination in the treatment of the text. Although Birman was often overcome with laughter, she was serious in bringing out psychologically truthful decisions and amusing details in scenes. She encouraged energized gestural, ironic performances from the actors. Deikun and other actresses revealed in their roles as 'sinful women' while Giatsintova recalls the men dismissing the project as 'women's directing'.<sup>56</sup> However, it was a major advance for her as a female director in the work of the Studio, building on her experiences to produce a vivid celebration of Russian literature and its relevance to the contemporary audience and interesting roles for women.

### Birman at MAAT<sub>2</sub>, 1924–29

In view of its success, the First Studio was reformed in 1924 as the MAAT<sub>2</sub> with Chekhov as artistic director, Bersenev in the directorate, and Giatsintova and Birman as the leading actresses. Relations with MAAT<sub>1</sub> were strained: Birman wrote in a letter about a misunderstanding with Nemirovich-Danchenko and that 'KS is cold, and behaves as if we are betraying him. . . . They have had their own great and interesting life – why aren't they glad about something good in ours?'<sup>57</sup>

Early productions included Chekhov's renowned *Hamlet* in 1924 and, in 1925, N. Leskov's *The Flea, the King of the Square Republic*, authored by Bromlei, and Andrei Bely's *Petersburg*. S. Vasil'eva explains that the attempts of the Studio after *The Cricket on the Hearth* to innovate theatrically were often defined by critics as 'eclectic', departing from the art of 'spiritual realism' to 'plastic grotesque' and the 'construction of the image-mask' but this presupposed some freedom of choice in the repertoire.<sup>58</sup> However, the eclecticism resulted in part from internal divisions that were eventually to split the theatre.

*The Flea*, Evgenii Zamyatin's comic adaptation of Leskov's *The Left-Hander* directed by Alexander Dikii, one of the Studio founders, told the story of a simpleton outwitting clever people. The adaptation was simplified to an 'amusement', with dance and a fair-

ground atmosphere, designed by Boris Kustodiev in the style of a Russian woodcut.<sup>59</sup> Birman played 'a Chaldean woman' and 'the English girl Mary'. As Mary, she united lyricism and the grotesque with 'precision and internal sadness' in a scene of anguished goodbyes with Volkov, as the simpleton Levsha, in a way that brought acclaim, demonstrating that even ostensibly comic roles for Birman always contained contradictions.<sup>60</sup> Chekhov disliked *The Flea* and Birman also said that the work 'coarsened her as an actress'.<sup>61</sup>

But they put their hearts into *Petersburg*, a project with Chekhov's fellow anthropologist Bely that was dramatized and directed collectively by Birman, V. Tartarinov, and A. Cheban, with Chekhov making the artistic decisions. The production was seen as 'eclectic and weak', although Chekhov's tragic-farcical performance in the role of the Tsarist official Ableukhov was 'celebrated for its brilliant and mature eccentricity and grotesqueness'.<sup>62</sup> *The Flea* ran for many performances whereas *Petersburg* was taken off after a short run, and conflict between Chekhov and Dikii began to come to a head.

There was also a division between V. S. Smyshlaev and Sushkevich: critics commented that none of the artistic leaders in the studio knew where they were going and asked what theatrical principles could unite the tragic-grotesque world of *Hamlet* and *Petersburg* with the eccentricism of Dikii's production of J. M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* (titled *Ireland's Hero*), the 'mask' characters in, for example, *Taming of the Shrew* (1923), and the lyricism of *The Flea* and *Love the Golden Book*.<sup>63</sup> The theatre also maintained a tradition of producing classics and historical plays.

Although political content and consistency of style in the repertoire continued to be criticized, Birman continued to have personal successes. For example, her direction of A. M. Faiko's *Yevgraf, Seeker of Adventures* in 1926, produced by Sushkevich, was seen as successful, and she created another grotesque masterpiece in the manicurist Tamara, depicting the 'will to conquer in how she holds the finger of the client' and painting

her lips, using a mirror, then closing her eyes, 'exhausted by the effect of her own beauty'.<sup>64</sup>

In Isaac Babel's tragic-comic *Sunset* in 1928 Birman played to great acclaim a Jewish bride with 'her sing-song speech and clumsy duck-like movements', the role combining realistic treatment with Babel's ironic attitude to the contemporary environment he was describing.<sup>65</sup> But the role was criticized by some, as Mary in *The Flea* had been, as a mask rather than a 'living person'.<sup>66</sup>

Chekhov's last role in Russia was as Muromsky in Alexander Sukhovo-Kobylin's *The Case* in 1927. The conflicts now became a schism. Dikii and others accused Chekhov of mysticism and refusing to put on contemporary plays. Birman supported Chekhov, and twenty-three actors signed a letter threatening to leave if Dikii and others were not removed;<sup>67</sup> and so Dikii, Volkov, and Pyzhova departed, Pyzhova joining Meyerhold's Theatre of the Revolution. Soviet policies towards the arts became increasingly dictatorial and MAAT2 productions were becoming seen as irrelevant to Soviet life. Despite support also from Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, director Alexander Tairov, party official and arts theorist Pavel Kerzhentsev, and the Union of Theatre Workers, Chekhov's work was condemned as mystical and anti-Soviet, prompting his emigration in 1928.

Stating that 'our theatre is experiencing a moment of fracture', Birman and Smyshlaev directed K. A. Lipskerova's *The Tsardom of Mitkino* in 1928. They were seeking socially significant plays that avoided pessimistic moods, as *Petersburg* and other productions had been interpreted, whereas Soviet plays were meant to express the joy of the new way of life. Although *Mitkino* concerned a well-used theme, the exploration of how monarchical power was inimical to humanity, it was a step further in that it had 'elements of the major chord, infectious humour, and that optimism, sensing, and conveying which is the basic task of the play'.<sup>68</sup>

### Birman at MAAT2, 1929–36

Until 1929, MAAT2 had been, in Vakhtangov's words, able to 'do its own work'

maintaining its artistic policy, eclectic though it may have been. Glavrepertkom had not managed to impose one sole ideology on theatres. However, as Lenin's New Economic Policy was replaced by Stalin's first Five-Year Plan in 1929 and controls of all kinds began to be tightened, the MAT was accused of 'ideological backsliding'.<sup>69</sup> The theatre's management was reorganized with V. F. Smirnov, Bersenev, Sushkievich, and artistic colleagues including Giatsintova, Birman and Bromlei, and there was an expectation that a consistent repertoire in keeping with Soviet ideology would be developed.

In 1929, a tragi-farcical production of Victor Hugo's *The Man who Laughs*, the first production after Chekhov left, was directed by Bromlei and N. A. Podgorny with Birman in the role of Queen Anne. Birman wrote about this grotesque character:

My rendering of Anne, who was ugly morally as well as physically, was directed against monarchism, despotism, tyranny. I did everything in my power to express the ugliness of her body and soul. . . . I believed that the denunciation of all that is hostile to life and man is the equivalent of affirming all that is beneficial to them.<sup>70</sup>

Birman's performance was described as 'masterly'.<sup>71</sup> In the same year A. N. Afinogenov's *The Crank*, staged by Bersenev and Cheban, explored in an optimistic way the problem of the intelligentsia in the Communist state in a story of the relationship between an eccentric intellectual who fights bureaucracy and philistinism, and paper factory workers who set out to fulfil a five-year plan in four years. According to Giatsintova, Birman played the bureaucratic official Anna Troshchina with a particular, self-assured walk, frightening in her stupidity, creating both a 'collective type and a real character'.<sup>72</sup>

As with Mary in *The Flea*, even when playing a downtrodden person, 'according to Stanislavsky's law' she found in the character signs of protest and made downtroddenness concrete, in this way bringing out the human spirit.<sup>73</sup> However, some critics said that Birman did not always 'find the image of today's hero'.<sup>74</sup> *The Crank*

represented Soviet material performed in a psychologically realist style; it was recognized that ideology and aesthetics worked together here, while other productions by MAAT2 such as V. N. Kirshon's play *Bread* were not so successful. There were 500 performances of *The Crank*.

The traditions of the First Studio of expressing the life of the human spirit were emphasized with *The Cricket on the Hearth*, still in the repertoire. In 1929, *The Women (Baby)* combined two plays by Carlo Goldoni, *The Curious Women* and *Women's Gossip*, as reworked by Birman, Giatsintova, and Deikun. 'The light "masquerade" comedy genre evidenced that after the departure of Mikhail Chekhov the theatre was alive, fit for work, and free from mystical mist . . . no despair or historical pessimism'.<sup>75</sup> Markov saw it as 'simple and defined, no directorial cunning but with great stage strength, without theatrical subtlety but a clear sense of theatricality'.<sup>76</sup> The production was extremely successful and the first distinctive women's theatre project.

### Creating a Contemporary Repertoire

The collective continued to grapple with the problem of finding a contemporary repertoire. In 1930, Cheban and Birman staged A. A. Karavaeva's *The Homestead* and Ukrainian writer I. K. Mikitenko's *Shine for Us Stars!*, which treated the struggles of Soviet youth with labour and study, along with the historical tragedy *Peter I*. Pavel Sukhotin's *Darkness of the Liberator* in 1931 was based on writings by M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin, with Birman as a money-grabbing informer, the snake-like Ulita. *Peter I* was seen as not in keeping with Socialist Realist optimism, and so staging a production of Dostoevsky's *The Humiliated and Insulted* in 1932 was a risk, as momentum for the imposition of Socialist Realism began to gather in 1934. The theatre was accused of evoking 'antiproletarian moods', and the spirit of Chekhov as Muromsky was dismissed as the apogee of petty bourgeois ideology.<sup>77</sup>

Boris Vladimirovich Alpers, a critic, theatre historian, and theatre worker who

had originally worked with Meyerhold and published an article titled 'Theatre of the Social Mask' in the journal *Sovietskii Teatr* (1931), turned his attention to the MAAT2. He investigated the basis of the theatre's art, 'the humanitarian precepts, Christian values, the fear for these values in the threat of a changing world, the tragic constants of the art of Mikhail Chekhov', and wrote that all this was 'growing' in the theatre. The production of *Lies* by Afinogenov in 1932 treated the internal life of the Communist Party, drawing criticism from Gorky, who said it was 'unsuccessful and harmful'. The reworking, *The Ivanov Family*, remained unsatisfactory as far as Stalin was concerned.<sup>78</sup>

There was then yet another reorganization of the management, which still included Birman, Giatsintova, Bersenyev, and Deikun and an instruction to raise the creative activity of the collective and to widen responsibility for the artistic and ideological guidance of the theatre and its creative growth.<sup>79</sup> V. Kirshon's *The Court* in 1933 was a Socialist Realist play, contrasting the class struggle in Germany with Soviet patriotism, but had little artistic imagination. A vivid new production of *Twelfth Night* was staged in 1933, and Birman directed a colourful version of Fletcher and Massinger's *The Spanish Curate* in 1934, with an ironic portrayal of Violante and other characters. The Socialist Realist *The Watchmaker and the Hen* by I. Kocherga in 1934 treated the Bolsheviks in different time periods: 1912, 1918, and 1929.

From 1934 to 1938, the theatres were reorganized and a major attack on the avant-garde began, specifically on 'formalism'. In 1935, in a debate in the Club of Masters of Art about Birman's production of *The Spanish Curate*, a number of prominent figures acclaimed the production and its director. Georges Duval's *Plea for Life* – an exposé of bourgeois life, with Bersenev and Giatsintova in the main roles – drew over-capacity audiences.

In 1935, the MAAT2 approached Gorky with a request to produce *Vassa Zheleznova*. Gorky had returned to the Soviet Union in 1932 at Stalin's request and was acclaimed as

the founder of Socialist Realism. He asked for time to rewrite the play.

Birman directed the production of *The Beginning of Life* by L. S. Pervomayskii on the civil war and played Domakha Chub, which, as a tragic role that was true to life, Z. V. Feld'man saw to be a departure from the grotesque. Alpers found her 'empty of feeling and living thought' in the role.<sup>80</sup> Eight years after the departure of Chekhov, despite Birman's and all their efforts, the view of the collective remained unchanged. Alpers' article, 'Down with the Eccentric School!', published in 1936, attacked Birman and leading actors Igor Ilinsky, Babanova, and others who worked with Meyerhold. Alpers wrote that they were 'partial to playacting, to cold and empty eccentricism', performing 'complex and puzzling trick operations', while 'juggling various . . . masks'.<sup>81</sup>

Stanislavsky, whose System became seen as the correct method for Socialist Realist plays, agreed to write to ask for MAAT2 to be preserved, but before this could happen the theatre was closed by a decision of the Committee for Artistic Matters in 1936. Stalin directed that the theatre be sent to a provincial capital but the ensemble refused and were split up. Birman, Giatsintova, and Bersenev were sent to Mossoviet, where they were made to work with actors with a very different aesthetic and working practice.

### Mossoviet and the Komsomol Theatre

Birman wrote as positively as she could about the move:

We fathomed with great respect the capacity for work of the collective, its precise ability to convey to the auditorium the idea of the play. Sometimes the MOSPS actors were hampered by exaggeration . . . rather than living in the image. But having met with the realism of the MOSPS theatre . . . we were to a large degree saved from the sin of 'psychologizing'.<sup>82</sup>

However, there were problems in attempting to work with E. O. Lyubimov-Lanskoï's theatre, in which the three were guests, having so long had their own company. The planned production of Gorky's *Vassa Zhelez-*

*nova* was to turn out to be a means of artistic survival for Birman and her colleagues. In 'Down with the Eccentric School', Alpers had ferociously attacked Birman's portrayal of Queen Anne in *He Who Laughs*, but support came from Gorky, who had admired her performance.

While Birman questioned her right to put on a play by the 'great realist' – writing in 1975, 'Did I, an eccentric actress, possess the qualities and abilities required of Gorky's heroine?' – Gorky encouraged the project and rewrote the play radically, emphasizing the class politics in this tragedy of a tyrannical bourgeoisie struggling to keep her family and business together.<sup>83</sup> Birman directed the production at Mossoviet in 1936, also playing the title role, with Giatsintova as Rachel, Vassa's daughter-in-law. In this play of thirteen roles, seven are for women.

Birman writes of Vassa as the high point in her career.<sup>84</sup> She said in a lecture in 1937 that she was pleased to hear a Communist writer describe Vassa as a 'fascist', because she herself had referred to the events unfolding in Spain in rehearsals as a 'frightening image of capitalist society', although intending the production to create a humorous, even joyful impression since such a situation 'does not exist in our country'.<sup>85</sup>

However, although Vassa was complex and cruel, 'a capitalist, a wild beast, she was not painted in dark colours only but as crushed by social forces'.<sup>86</sup> It was a controversial production, but the play continued in the repertoire and was re-directed after the move to the Komsomol, with reviews becoming increasingly positive, despite the sympathy for a character deemed a class enemy.

Moreover, through the role of Vassa, Birman was eventually able to assert the avant-garde aspects of her method, although this was not until the 1970s (she died in 1976). She wrote that Gorky's view of her Queen Anne meant that he recognized her as an eccentric actress and therefore she had the right to be so, although until then she had had to call eccentricism 'expressiveness', as she had been advised to do by the All-Union Theatre Organization. Similarly, she had had to refer to her art as 'character, almost gro-



Still from the 1945 film *Ivan the Terrible*, directed by Sergei Eisenstein, with Serafima Birman as Efrosinia and Nikolai Cherkasov as Ivan. © Sputnik Images/ArenaPAL

tesque roles . . . it seemed to me that this was my calling'.<sup>87</sup> She refers to the pain that Alpers's article caused her, although, looking back, she could say calmly that he was wrong in his vicious attack against eccentric actors. She defines eccentricism as 'justified exaggeration and sharp but carefully considered accentuation'.<sup>88</sup>

Eisenstein had to do battle with the Film Committee to get permission for Birman to play the role of Efrosinia Staritskaya in *Ivan the Terrible*, as Stalin had particular ideas about the film and the Committee considered her unsuitable. She writes that she struggled with the role of a noblewoman and that the first meeting with cinematographer

Andrei Moskvin 'was ghastly', as he could not see how her physical attributes would work on film.<sup>89</sup>

Unlike other film directors she had worked with, Eisenstein expected her to achieve the role with little preparation or direction, and she was struggling with the culminating scene when they heard that a commission from the Film Committee was coming to see how the work was progressing, including how she was coping with her role. The Committee viewed the scene at the end of *Part 2*, where Staritskaya anticipates seeing that Ivan had been assassinated, as she had planned:

At rehearsals I had always tried to discover in myself the attributes of a domineering woman . . . a 'ruler', a 'matriarch', but all of this was suddenly supplanted by the knowledge that I, Efrosinia, was a sinful woman, but that moment had come when I would no longer have to resort to deception, intrigue, disloyalty, and crime.<sup>90</sup>

Then, instead of seeing Ivan dead, and 'expecting to find supreme happiness', Staritskaya sees that it is her son, finding instead 'supreme anguish', as Birman phrases her insight into the humanity of the character. Eisenstein said that the Film Committee had approved the scene, thinking it was another actress, the implication being that her transformation into the character was so convincing that they did not recognize her. Birman writes that she felt exultation at this culmination of her work as a tragi-grotesque actress.

Birman had a number of notable albeit small film roles from the 1920s to the 1970s, working with famous directors such as Kozintsev, Yakov Protazanov, and Yury Zavadskii. A flavour of her tragi-comic technique can be seen in her role as Madame Irene in Boris Barnet's *The Girl with the Hatbox* (1927), where she plays the profiteering modist Madame Irene, who tries to appear aristocratic but betrays her lack of refinement while 'holding a long ladies' cigarette, as if her fingers are too tired to do so, with her insincere affectation and very sincere, acidic fear in front of Soviet power'.<sup>91</sup>

Birman continued to direct successfully at MOSPS – Pushkin's *Stone Guest* in 1937, for example, and, after the move to the Komso-

mol Theatre, Leo Tolstoy's *Living Corpse* in 1942 and Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* in 1943. Although her own directorial style had incorporated other influences, she carefully justified her approach in 1938, citing Stanislavsky as an example of how a director

brings harmony between the playwright and the production, the main idea of the play and all the means of expressing it – set, light, music, sound, the actor and the role, content, and form. Formalism arises when the form of the spectacle emerges not like a necessary and united expression of content but as an invention of the director-egoist.<sup>92</sup>

### Birman as Soviet Actress and Director

Synthesizing Stanislavsky's System with Vakhtangov and Chekhov's innovations and the avant-garde, Birman also found a way to navigate from the theatre of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, with its realisms reflecting the problems of society (she wrote of Stanislavsky in 1959 as a 'true artist patriot and true realist' who 'thought theatre could fight banality, force and injustice'),<sup>93</sup> to Socialist Realist theatre, with its positive heroes, where social problems were supposedly solved. While doing this, she attempted to maintain her own artistic principles.

This involved navigating a conflict between what could be called 'the world of the play', whether that might be an imaginative world or a world contextualized in the real world mediated by the writer's view, and the world according to Soviet Realist theatre. She never researched historical roles such as the Queen in *Erik XIV* or Staritskaya from chronicles or authenticities of the past, using only the imagery in the text.<sup>94</sup>

At the end of the 1930s, Markov criticized her for an insufficient analysis of class and social powers. In creating her roles, he said, she at first favoured the notion of the 'genius' playwright, with each play evoking a particular stage world, instead of going through the author to reality. Allowing this divide between the author and reality characterized 'philosophically romantic theatre' and led to stage idealism.<sup>95</sup>

Markov asserts that, following Vakhtangov, her method emerged from the exposition

of royal power in *Erik XIV*, but she did not realize the limitation of this as she had not analyzed class and social powers fully. She was 'saved' by the role of Troshchina in *The Crank*. This character could have been merely comedic but, he wrote, Birman 'loved' her and began to go beyond the 'particular world' of the play, embodying Troshchina's belief in the factory, socialism, and the new psychological and social structures of real life.

He added in his critique that this thesis regarding the particular world of the play divided the MAAT<sub>2</sub> from the MAT Theatre: there was a difference in the actor's method, in *playing the image* or *being* the person you are portraying, uncovering the character statically or dynamically. The MAAT<sub>2</sub> actors showed the image as a finished, complete mask. Birman tried to overcome this by detailing the warring contradictions in the image and won through when she finally bound them together in one, avoiding 'shallow psychologism' and rejecting details, however attractive or cunningly observed by the author, unless they had real meaning when resolved into a whole in relation to actual circumstances. This evoked a 'psychological storm' so that the image of the person grew, changed, and acted dynamically in relation to psychology.

Markov asserts that sadly Birman reverted to her previous methods in *Vassa Zheleznova*, returning to a 'particular' world, where the characters live by their own laws and where the image of a person is formed from conflicting features. Birman exaggerated the different aspects of Vassa's character but did not unify them. Therefore, he argued, greed and criminality became evil, and grief and love became sentimentality, because she did not take on the social situation and characteristics that Gorky had depicted.

Chekhov's technique emphasized working from the 'peculiar features of the character' and he rejected the materialism of the new Soviet plays.<sup>96</sup> If Birman shared this view at all, she had no voice to answer such ideological analyses during Stalin's rule. But the part of Vassa evolved through time to become the role for which she was most celebrated. In 1937, she wrote:

It is necessary to act in the Marxist way; there lies an economic principle, an economic lining in the foundations of history [and it is] so in the history of the image, in the life of the image where a willed energy lies, directed to one place or another. . . .

I think that in all of Gorky's characters – those who have fallen hardest, or, if you take *The Lower Depths*, those who are drunk – all these characters who have lost their human image always aim for something better, and all of Gorky's powers are used to achieve something better.<sup>97</sup>

Here she is perhaps endorsing a humanity beyond the Communist conception.

Perhaps her answer to Markov, as she had answered Alpers in *Life's Gift of Encounters*, was in the same text. Referring to the MAT's production of Gorky's *The Lower Depths*, first produced in 1902 when Stanislavsky played Satin and in which she had a small role as a nun in about 1925, she writes:

In those days the conception of realism was often identified with the conception of everyday life. I am an actress for portraying the eccentric, almost the grotesque. I have always loved the extraordinary in art and I 'get over' to the audience best when I am playing the part of 'extraordinary women', women outside the usual run. . . . I believed then and I believe now that art has an inalienable right to exaggerate, to accentuate, and to sharpen according to the artist's understanding.<sup>98</sup>

Asserting the right of the artist, as opposed to the artist as a Soviet citizen, was also her response to the dispute between Stanislavsky and Chekhov about 'going from oneself or going from the image', which had begun in the 1920s. This relates to Markov's distinction between 'being' and 'playing' the image. For Stanislavsky, creative and imaginative powers come from within as the actor develops and fuses with the character. He wrote: 'Always act in your own person as an artist. You cannot get away from yourself. . . . You lose yourself on stage at the moment when experiencing ends and overacting begins.'<sup>99</sup> Elsewhere he asserted: 'Everyday life differs from the life of the stage only in that the actor must purge the life on stage of everything conditional and fortuitous.'<sup>100</sup>

Stanislavsky's notion of truth in acting was validated by the reality of personal experience, whereas Chekhov's *feeling of the*

truth was validated by what was generated by his imagination in the context of the play, the route to 'other worlds'. Spiritual forces were the source for creativity and an external source for the imagination, and Steiner's anthroposophy gave him a route to harnessing these powers, which he wished to marry with the inner truth and emotional depth of Stanislavsky's system.<sup>101</sup>

However, the source for the work of the imagination should not be personal experience. He argued that 'If we take the real image of our grandfather, it becomes too personal in the wrong sense.'<sup>102</sup> The actor is not confined to characters emerging from their own personality, or lower ego. Chekhov's images, created by the fantasy of the artist, have an independent life and are an expansion into worlds beyond oneself. Kirillov explains that, in this method, the actor imagines the character and consciously asks questions of this image, which 'gives its answers not in verbal form, but *visually* . . . demonstrating its features . . . to the actor in his imagination'. The image of the character 'dictates' itself 'objectively' to the actor who then imitates it. This is the 'method of image fantasizing and imitating'.<sup>103</sup>

Deftly combining Stanislavsky's with Chekhov's ideas, Birman wrote:

It is recommended that you should go from yourself to the image, but this is a recommendation and not a creative directive. The preference 'going from oneself' changes in dependence on given circumstances, unnoticed, gradually the actor re-arranges himself and preserves the feeling of living his life. There is a fear that 'going from the image', the actor does not achieve fusion and does not ignite his life in the image. The image will be alien, forced, formalistic. But through myself I get to know the image and its new life. Or through the image I find new life according to new laws in myself. This is absolutely the same thing. Some roles are easier to find from oneself and some from the image.<sup>104</sup>

She also wrote that Chekhov said: 'We give the image our dwelling space and we ourselves sit on the threshold and observe what the image is doing in us.' The example she gives, however, is Stanislavsky as Stockmann in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*.<sup>105</sup>

In 1937, writing about playing Vassa, she notes,

the most frightening thing to me seems the so-called question of 'from oneself'. I hate this word. I play nothing from myself and 'from myself'. I do not go onstage 'from myself', I would be ashamed.<sup>106</sup>

Birman, when speaking in a seminar in the same year titled 'Work on the Image', opens with a discussion of Stanislavsky's view on will, mentions Engels and goes on to say:

I make much use of Chekhov's advice although he has had little credit as an actor of authority. . . . Chekhov said 'the image exists outside me. The idea is to get close to the image, to oneself, and to fuse with it'.<sup>107</sup>

There was no mystical aspect to this for Birman and, defending Chekhov against the accusations that his spiritual beliefs were unhealthy, she wrote:

I saw with what striking speed he went from the joke to the tragic state. I could see him singing gypsy songs in the wings, but when the curtain went up, you saw a dying man onstage. In this sense, Chekhov was a healthy person. He went to the kernel of the role with such lightness that you would be astonished. If you could imitate him you would not lose anything.<sup>108</sup>

These unpublished talks and essays at the end of the 1930s were the last times she was able to say Chekhov's name publicly for many years, and the thaw period perhaps came too late for Birman to fully achieve what she could have done as an actress, director, and teacher. Bersenev died in 1952 and Giatsintova became the artistic director at the Komsomol Theatre. Birman created her last role as Mrs Dinescu in *In the House of Mr Dragomirsky* by the Romanian playwright Kh. Lovinescu in 1953 on the conflict between Communists and the bourgeoisie.

## Conclusion

While Birman and the actresses of her generation could be seen as willing to compromise with the regime, and this indubitably brought material rewards and some status, this was a necessity as far as survival as an



artist was concerned. Like other artists during the 1920s and 1930s, she appeared to be sincerely committed to the government's project of transforming society and implementing the arts for the sake of this transformation. The closure of MAAT2 was a severe blow, since it deprived her and her colleagues of the theatre they saw as home, but she continued to pledge herself to the Soviet state and to work for a way forward in the theatre while remaining in Russia.

This choice was perhaps influenced by her perception that Chekhov 'fell' as an actor when he emigrated.<sup>109</sup> She could not mention publicly the name of her close colleague until after Stalin's death in the 'thaw' years, which, reportedly, she found 'unbearably painful'. However, she maintained her commitment to the principles of the First Studio, assessing in 1959 whether they were too wedded to the 'life of the image'. She writes: 'we were true to the basis of Russian theatre art – the desire for life on the stage'.<sup>110</sup>

While avant-garde art was vilified and suppressed under Stalin, Birman was able, at least sometimes in such roles as Staritskaya, to assert both her eccentricism and her humanist ethos through her artistic creation of 'extra-ordinary' women, powerful anti-heroines and class enemies such as monarchs, bourgeois capitalists, and women of lower social status attempting to exert power through acquiring wealth or status in the Soviet bureaucracy.

Her tragi-farcal and tragi-comic characters could be frightening, touching, and funny. In their creation she broke new ground in a theatre which had represented femininity in a conventional way and portrayed emotions as gender-defined. She also humanized her characters in a period when policies of dehumanization of those perceived to be enemies of the state purported to justify mass killings. Perhaps to do so was essential for performers to preserve their own humanity in the Stalin period and beyond.

## Acknowledgement

Thanks, as ever, to Brian Door.

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18. Evgenii Vakhtangov, *Dokumenty i Svedetel'stva*, ed. V. V. Ivanov (Moscow: Indrik, 2011), Vol. 1, p. 248.
19. L. Deikun and A. I. Blagonravov, 'Niezabyvaemoe': *strannitsy iz vospominanii*, MKhAT 144.63.7, p. 24.
20. S. G. Birman, *Autobiograficheskiye zapisi 1935–[1946]* RGALI 2046.1.187, p. 24, quoted in I. Shestova, 'Serafima Birman: ot pervoi studii MKhAT k Mkhat Vtoromy' in *Russkoye Akterskoye Iskusstvo, XX Veka* (2013), IV, p. 81.
21. Birman, *Put Aktrisy*, p. 118.
22. Birman, *Life's Gift*, p. 82.
23. I. N. Solov'eva, et al., ed., *MKhAT Vtoroy: Opyt vosstanovleniya biografii* (Moscow: Moskovskiy Khudozhestvennyy Teatr, 2010), p. 403–4.
24. Markov, p. 308.
25. Birman, *Put' Aktrisy*, p. 81.
26. The Russian word 'obraz' can be translated as the 'role' or the 'character' or as the 'image' of the character, that which is conjured up in *voobrazhenie* (imagination).
27. Birman, *Put' Aktrisy*, p. 84; Shestova, p. 70.
28. I. N. Solov'eva et al., p. 33.

29. Serafima Birman, *Sud'boi darovanniye vstrechi* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971), p. 103.
30. Birman, *Life's Gift*, p. 86.
31. Evgenii Vakhtangov, *Sbornik*, ed. L. D. Vendrovskaya and G. P. Kapteleva, trans. Doris Bradbury (Moscow: VTO, 1984), p.160.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
33. Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant Garde*, trans. Roxanne Permar (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988), p. 53.
34. Markov, p. 312.
35. I. N. Solov'eva et al., p. 48.
36. Birman, *Life's Gift*, p. 84.
37. Mikhail Chekhov, *The Path of the Actor*, ed. Andrei Kirillov and Bella Merlin (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 118.
38. Birman, *Life's Gift*, p. 84–5.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
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41. I.N. Solov'eva et al, p. 57.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 607–8.
43. Birman, *Aktery i rezhissery*, p. 71.
44. Edward Braun, trans. and ed., *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1991), p. 131–3, 190.
45. Shestova, p. 81.
46. Braun, ed., p.141.
47. K. S. Stanislavsky, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, Vol. 2 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1999), p. 211–12.
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49. Shestova, p. 68.
50. Julia Listengarten, *Russian Tragiforce: its Cultural and Political Roots* (London: Associated Universities Press, 2000), p. 24.
51. Serafima Birman, *Trud Aktera* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1939), p. 130.
52. Birman, *Sud'boi*, p. 87.
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54. *Ibid.*, p. 59–61.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 618–19.
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57. Solov'eva et al., p. 630.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
59. Rudnitsky, p. 193, 232–3.
60. Markov, p. 315.
61. Solov'eva et al., p. 634.
62. Chekhov, *The Path of the Actor*, p. 215.
63. Solov'eva et al., p. 60, 618–19.
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65. *Ibid.*, p. 708–9.
66. Shestova, p. 99.
67. Solov'eva et al., p. 665.
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69. Inna Solovyova, 'The Theatre and Socialist Realism, 1929–1953', trans., Jean Benedetti, in Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky, ed., *A History of Russian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999), p. 326.
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71. Solov'eva et al., p. 741.
72. Giatsintova, p. 290–1.
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74. Shestova, p. 101.
75. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
76. Solov'eva et al., p. 744–5.
77. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
78. *Ibid.*, p. 290, 305.
79. *Ibid.*, p. 781–2.
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81. *Ibid.*, p. 81–2.
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