Laurence Senelick

# The Accidental Evolution of the Moscow Art Theatre Prague Group

During the period of confusion and divided loyalties that followed the 1917 Revolution in Russia, the resources of the Moscow Art Theatre were severely depleted, and its artists and staff found themselves giving barebones performances for the enlightenment of often mystified working-class audiences. By 1919 the decision was taken to split the company, with a contingent sent out on tour with the intention of rejoining the parent group for the new season. In the event, with civil war raging between the forces of the Red Army and the White Guard, this did not happen, and groups of former members of the Art Theatre worked independently in the provinces and eventually abroad. While some returned to Moscow in 1922, the 'Prague Group of the Moscow Art Theatre' continued to lead an independent existence, and in this article Laurence Senelick traces the events leading up to and following its creation – which caused much annoyance to Stanislavsky and confusion in the West. A frequent contributor to *New Theatre Quarterly*, Laurence Senelick is Fletcher Professor of Drama and Oratory at Tufts University and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is a recipient of the St George medal of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation for services to Russian art and scholarship. His latest books are *Stanislavsky: a Life in Letters* (Routledge) and the forthcoming *Soviet Theatre: a Documentary History* (Yale University Press).

MOSCOW was starving. The disruptions caused by the February 1917 Revolution, the vacillating Provisional Government, then the Bolshevik coup in October, and the separate peace with Germany in March 1918 which ceded great portions of the Russian Empire, caused commerce and industry to grind to a halt. Factory workers looted plants and products. Railway workers agitated in their own interests. Banks were abolished, their holdings confiscated by the 'nation'. Government seizure of agricultural stores, including seed grain, abetted by the breakdown in transport, interrupted the provision of foodstuffs. Famine spread rapidly. In Moscow, the urban economy had entirely collapsed. For everyday necessities the populace was dependent on the black market.

Shortages of fuel, electricity, and raw materials complicated the routine of day-to-day theatrical performances. The Bolsheviks could not spare funds to maintain repertories or staffs at a pre-war level. The day-book kept by directors and stage managers of the Moscow Art Theatre is a chronicle of increasing deterioration of scenery and props, absences of actors and staff, dereliction of duty by caretakers and stagehands, and unrest in the sparse audiences. Rats ran wild.

As stage companies broke up, many actors took to or were assigned freelance work, performing for a proletarian public in fit-up conditions. A neologism, '*khaltura*', entered the language. A calque of '*kultura*', 'culture,' it might be roughly translated as 'moonlighting': the People's Commissar of Enlightenment, Lunacharsky, saw *khaltura* as a valuable introduction of art to Red Army soldiers, workers, and peasants thirsting for it.[1] Stanislavsky regarded it as hackwork. The Art Theatre was enlisted into the activity, chiefly with barebones performances of *Uncle Vanya* to uncomprehending working-class audiences.

In March 1919 the personnel of the MKhT[2] proposed to reorganize as a co-operative and to travel with their families in a private train equipped with all the mod cons to some peaceful, bountiful areas – Siberia, the Ukraine, or the Caucasus. The unrealistic nature of the plan is immediately apparent: the civil war was raging in the West and

  doi:10.1017/S0266464X14000268

South, and scarce rail stock was controlled by the very Soviet state they were avoiding.

Their fantasy bespeaks the inability of many educated Russians to recognize that the world they knew was on the way out. The project was discussed at length: Stanislavsky was among the dissenters, while Nemirovich-Danchenko hesitated. It soon became clear that it would be too expensive and cumbersome to move the whole troupe. Instead, a small contingent would conduct a summer tour, returning to Moscow in time for the fall season, when the political situation might be more settled.[3]

## The Kachalov Group

The splinter group included two of the Art Theatre's biggest stars: Olga Knipper, widow of Anton Chekhov, and Vasily Kachalov, its leading man, along with his wife the actress Nina Litovtseva and their sixteen-year-old son Vadim. Other significant members were the character actors Ivan Bersenev, Nikolay Podgorny, and Nikolay Massalitinov. They were assisted by Sergey Bertenson, a former official of the Imperial Theatres who had just been admitted to the MKhT as a junior administrator.

As their manager, they engaged Leonid Davydovich Leonidov,[4] a Jew who had organized the Art Theatre's Russian tours in 1917. He rented the municipal theatre in the Ukrainian university town of Kharkov. The group was organized as a shareholding company: each member received as a salary a percentage of the total profits indicated by stamps allotted to him. So Kachalov received five stamps, Knipper four, Bersenev three as actors, plus one each as members of the governing board.

The repertory was limited to *Uncle Vanya* and *The Cherry Orchard*. These Chekhov plays had been among the most popular MKhT productions, but they also capitalized on Knipper as Chekhov's widow and creator of the roles of Masha and Ranevskaya. In Stanislavsky's absence, Kachalov assumed the role of Astrov and was promoted from Trofimov to Gaev. Bersenev had prepared portable scenery, without realizing that eventually 'portability' would become a production value. When the troupe of players left Kursk station in early May for a three-week junket, they had no idea that some of them would not return for three years. Others never would.

They travelled south not in cushy Pullman cars, but in specially disinfected cattle wagons, along with the scenery. The troupe's naive ignorance of political realities left them unaware that the civil war was now raging on three fronts. Kharkov had fallen into Bolshevik hands, controlled by an exceptionally sadistic faction of the Cheka, the ruthless arm of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Struggle against Counter Revolution and Sabotage. There was a ban on alcohol and performances had to begin at six so that the audiences could get home before the nine o'clock curfew.

When some of the actors attended a late party at the Menshevik club, they were raided by Chekists, who manhandled the actors as drunkards and prostitutes. Arrest was prevented only after a desperate phone call to the town commandant. One of the performances of *The Cherry Orchard* had to be cancelled to honour the funeral of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg; and when the replacement performance had reached the third act, gunfire broke out in the streets. The audience agreed to the show going on, but by the time it was over the Red forces had fled, General Denikin's White Guard had entered the city unopposed, and the audience cheered.

On 19 June, Tsaritsyn fell to Baron Wrangel's Caucasian army. Most of the populace of Kharkov believed, with the actors, that it was only a matter of time before the Whites would take Moscow and put down the Bolsheviks. But, so long as the outcome was uncertain, the Muscovites had to be cautious. To his parents' horror, Vadim joined the White Guard. With only a summer wardrobe, billeted in an abandoned hotel, they were stuck in Kharkov through June. As Massalitinov remembered it:

> The union of Kharkov actors announced a 'White Army Day'. All actors without exception had to



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X14000268 Published online by Cambridge University Press

take part (recitations, scenes, and circus acts). V. I. Kachalov and I headed for the Union to explain that we had left our nearest and dearest in Moscow, who might suffer – we couldn't take part! But all our attempts to persuade them were in vain: we were compelled to organize a free concert. . . . For this compulsory participation we all got letters threatening that, when the Soviets were back in power, we would be shot. Whether this was a serious threat or blackmail I don't know; but when our group decided to stay in one of the cities to wait out the end of the Civil War, our wives raised a hue and cry: 'They'll kill you!', and we had to clear out in the rear of the White evacuation. But for a rather long time we performed in Kharkov, filling out our repertoire with a dramatization of *The Brothers Karamazov*. We rehearsed it at the hotel. I remember, when the actor playing Mitya shouted, 'I am guiltless of my father's blood!', the door opened, the police came in with the public prosecutor. We had to explain that no one had killed anyone, it was only a rehearsal.[5]

Podgorny, worried about the wife back in Moscow, riskily made his way home by a ten-day trek on foot; his achievement in returning under difficult conditions made the remaining actors in White territory suspect in the eyes of Bolsheviks. The capture of Kharkov by the Whites was not known to the Art Theatre in Moscow until Podgorny showed up in early August. Hoping that Moscow would fall to the Whites by the end of the summer, the breakaway troupe decided to venture a season in the Crimea if no urgent call came from the parent company. Kachalov even suggested to Nemirovich-Danchenko that the rest of the Art Theatre go South to join them.[6]

Their itinerary took in Evpatoriya, Simferopol, Sevastopol, Yalta, and Odessa. There they were joined by Alla Tarasova, a Second Studio student; she had been cast as Nina in Stanislavsky's long-awaited revival of *The Seagull*, but illness had forced her to leave for better-provisioned regions. Other newcomers were Nemirovich's favourite actress Mariya Germanova and the excellent character actor Mikhail Tarkhanov, Ivan Moskvin's brother.

What had saved the wanderers from arrest by the Cheka and prompted their exploitation by the Whites was the prestige of the Moscow Art Theatre among the Russian intelligentsia. Over the course of twenty years, it had attained not only the reputation of the best privately subsidized theatre in the Empire, but was appreciated for the social purpose inherent in its quest for artistic perfection. The MKhT was believed to embody the ideals of pre-Revolutionary intelligentsia. Its castaways held themselves to that standard, and consequently were welcomed warmly in the backwaters of the former Empire.

### To Prague via the Caucasus

Although by the end of August 1919 Denikin had captured all the major cities in the Ukraine, in autumn the White cause collapsed catastrophically. Unaware of this defeat, Kachalov's group sailed from the safety of the Crimea to Novorossiisk for performances. They were met by chaos, filth, and a demolished railway station, where they had to sleep on the platform. Because typhoid was raging, the playhouse had been turned into an improvised hospital. There, their funds almost depleted, they put on *The Cherry Orchard*.

By February 1920 the Red Army was advancing on the town, so the only direction the Kachalov group could take was southwards across the Caucasus. Luckily, they received an invitation to perform in Tiflis (Tbilisi), the capital of independent Georgia. The harbour was teeming with desperate refugees; they were among the lucky ones to get aboard an Italian steamer.[7] Poti, Batum, and finally Tiflis were the stages of this anabasis. In the capital of Georgia they were reunited with Nikita Baliev, the genial conférencier of the Bat (Chauve-Souris) cabaret. He declined to join them and managed to get to Paris, where he reconstituted his popular entertainment.

In the balmy Caucasian summer, the refugees could take a breather and consider their immediate future. They could not return to Moscow: Bolshevik reprisals threatened anyone tainted with White sympathies and the brief stint of Kachalov's son in Denikin's army counted against them.[8] Their colleagues at home had made no serious efforts to repatriate them and filled their vacant roles

Olga Knipper-Chekhova in Berlin, 1921. All illustrations are from the author's collection.

with students from the studios. They could survive only by hanging together outside Soviet Russia. In this quandary, Olga Knipper wrote to her sister-in-law Mariya Chekhova:

> I have been suffering for a month in Borzhomi [*a spa*], and cannot make up my mind whether to go West. I don't think that I have shed so many tears in my life. And I did not agree to it. I keep expecting at any moment to get a summons back to Moscow. . . . And we've received a bunch of letters from Moscow, very moving, very lyrical, but no one has decided definitely to call us back there, I mean officially. We spent an insane day – we sat around from morning to night and could not decide what to do. . . .
>
> How I want to go to Moscow! How tired I am of wandering, living among strange people, eating fast food out of paper napkins! . . . No hope of seeing Moscow, the grave [of Chekhov]. . . . We are thinking of leaving at the end of September. . . .
>
> Masha, try to sense it when we set off across the Black Sea. . . . My God, how revolting and disgraceful it is to go abroad![9]

After a valedictory performance of *The Cherry Orchard* the group took up their wanderings once more. Informing Moscow that they would be going abroad, they left Batum on another Italian steamer. The first stage of this journey led them from Constantinople to Sofia, where a former colleague, I. Duvan-Tortsov, was prominent on the Bulgarian stage. The Treaty of Versailles had created the new nation of Yugoslavia and they were warmly welcomed by the Croats when they appeared in Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Bled, and Osiek. In Zagreb a crowd waited from 5 a.m. to offer them a breakfast with music and speeches.

Then it was off to Vienna. The troupe swelled with former members of the First Studio who had their own reasons for emigrating. Venturesome Richard Boleslavsky, a native Pole who had been directing in Warsaw, crossed the border illegally. Grigory Khmara, who had been living in Berlin, and the couple Andrius Zhilinsky and Vera Solovyova in Kaunas joined the troupe to work in Prague and Berlin.[10]

### The Troupe of MAT Artistes Abroad

By this time, the company had grown to nearly forty members: twenty actors with their families, stagehands, and extras, scene painters, property and lighting men. The stage directors were Massalitinov and Litovtseva, the chief designer Ivan Gremislavsky, son of the Art Theatre's original make-up man.[11]

The repertory had expanded as well: in addition to the two Chekhov plays, they added a number of works that had already been staged at the MKhT or its First Studio, though with the production values necessarily reduced: Surguchev's *Autumn Violins*, an abridged version of the two-evening adaptation of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ostrovsky's *No Fool Like a Wise Fool*, Gorky's *The Lower Depths*, Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, Hamsun's *At the Gates of the Kingdom* (a vehicle for Knipper) and *The Drama of Life*, Berger's *The Deluge*, *Hamlet*, and an evening of Chekhov 'miniatures' – more productions than were being offered by the parent theatre in Moscow at the same time. Between October 1920 and June 1921, 125 performances were given,



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X14000268 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The play-within-a-play scene in the renovated *Hamlet*: Andrius Jilinsky as the Player Villain, Richard Boleslavsky as the Player King, and Vera Solovyova as the Player Queen. The latter two were later instrumental in promoting Stanislavsky's ideas in the United States.

changing almost daily. This speaks eloquently for the troupe's discipline and ethics, especially when their free time was occupied with tributes and ceremonies of appreciation.

Sticking to the tried-and-true made sense, but in many cases the adaptations were made to suit the troupe's own capabilities and the mood of the times. Boleslavsky's staging of *Hamlet* was based on Gordon Craig's monodramatic concept of 1911–12, in which he had played Laertes. Kachalov, Knipper, and Massalitinov retained their original roles as the Prince, Queen, and King, with the other parts newly cast and more decorative scenery and costumes by Gremislavsky. Quick scene changes replaced the ponderous pace of moving Craig's screens behind curtains.

Stripped-down materiality put new emphasis on the acting and the relevance of the plays to current events. Olga Knipper's remarks on *Three Sisters* could be applied to the rest of their repertory as well:

> Everybody had the feeling that we used to act it unconsciously, without lending significance to the ideas and experiences but chiefly the dreams inherent in it. And all of a sudden the whole sounded differently, it was felt that these were not only dreams, but, as it were, premonitions.[12]

The idea that they were a temporary and accidental team gradually began to dissipate, as a distinct identity started to coalesce. Careful not to declare themselves an independent theatre in their own right, they took the name 'The Troupe of Moscow Art Theatre Artistes Abroad', and saw themselves as itinerant missionaries, revealing to post-war Europe the values and talents of the parent company. This gave them a purpose beyond mere survival.

For all their disclaimer of political allegiances, the Russianness of the enterprise was given a political interpretation by their audiences: they regarded the Kachalov group as preservers and ambassadors of Holy Mother Russia. Romantic concepts of the 'Russian soul' and the spiritual suffering of the Orthodox faith were read into their cohesion as a company. This surfaces in a statement made by Mariya Germanova in 1922:

> Not only are work and art dear to us, but there is the love of spirit for spirit, tenderness of heart for heart, and something more than respect, a kind of mutual pride. We may argue with one another, lose our tempers, inflict and receive 'inexcusable offence', but never, never do we overstep features of this mutual pride, great dignity. Otherwise we would stop being the 'Art Theatricals', as you have been calling us of late: we should fall from the Order.[13]

This was a very heavy burden to lay upon a theatre troupe which had come into existence through expediency and accident.

Czechoslovakia was another new nation founded as a consequence of the First World War. A democratic republic, its capital Prague was a hotbed of artistic experimentation, not least in the theatre. Next to Zagreb, it was the European city most receptive to the company's artistic methods, style, and personality. Some of this had to do with a sense of Slavic solidarity, the need to create a national identity distinct from its powerful neighbours. The President Tomáš Masaryk became personally acquainted with the Muscovites and offered them a subsidy. Proposals were suggested for schools. The ancient castle of the Counts Lobkovits in Mělnik was put at their disposal for *Hamlet* rehearsals.

However, their prolonged stay and the rumour that they would be housed in the municipal Vinohrady theatre raised protests: Czech actors would be out of work![14] In September the troupe left for a brief stay in Vienna and then for a more extensive one in Berlin. Those cities still recalled the tour of the Moscow Art Theatre sixteen years earlier: it had been greeted rapturously as a revelation of a new kind of acting, a new type of ensemble.

### The 'Russian Soul' in Berlin

Post-war Berlin held the largest colony of Russian émigrés in Europe: but the community was riven by feuds between the exiles and the representatives of the Soviet state. The former greeted the 'The Troupe of Moscow Art Theatre Artistes Abroad' as emblematic of a vanished golden age and created a Committee for the Reception of the Moscow Artistes, including the editor of the leading Russian-language journal *Rul'* (*The Rudder*) and the prominent writer Vladimir Nabokov. Nabokov's welcoming speech demonstrated the cultural schism. As he put it, the Russian intelligentsia was split into 'here' and 'there', as was the kernel of art. Since both kernels inhered in the visiting Moscow artists, so the hopeful prospect prevailed that both halves of the intelligentsia would soon be reunited.[15]

Knipper tried to justify to the Communists back home the mystical bond that held them together:

> This connection in experience brings people in the West closer to us, through us they are introduced to the secret countenance, the soul of Russia. In the restoration of this living connection, which is stronger than any deviation, I see the meaning and the value of our touring.[16]

The Berlin audiences also bought into this concept. One émigré critic insisted that what 'enthralled and enchanted foreigners' was 'the Russian theatre techniques, Russian drama, the Russian artists, and I may say the "Russian soul" expressed in Russian art – precisely the RUSSIANNESS.'[17]

For this reason, it was the Chekhov plays that had the deepest appeal for audiences abroad. Although as early as 1917 Stanislavsky had complained that a Chekhovian tone had come to mean *nityo* ('moaning and groaning', 'snivelling and whining'), it was the tours of the breakaway group that condensed the doleful mood of longing for a vanished Eden. Living in a state of suspended expectation, of hope that Communism would soon blow over, the émigrés faced a quandary: should they definitively reject the past and found new lives, or carry on yearning for a homeland left behind and a possible return? These uncertainties and conflicts were projected on to the Chekhov plays. The three sisters' 'To Moscow' became a leitmotiv.

The Chekhov plays, largely replicas of the Moscow productions, were slightly renovated in design and staging by Litovtseva and Massalitinov. Germanova, as Olga, was already being hailed as 'the Russian Duse', and she, along with Knipper as Masha and Kryzhanovskaya as Irina, constituted a kind of Holy Trinity. According to Max Reinhardt, audiences flocked to *Three Sisters* as to a religious ritual in hopes of getting a glimpse of the original pre-Revolutionary magic.[18]

The nostalgia in which these plays were steeped served as a sharp contrast to the present, especially given the seamless nature of the ensemble. It presented a persuasive polyphony. 'We have greater actors in Germany, but not such a great play,' opined one critic,[19] and he was echoed by the Russian-language press: 'The Germans have some great actors, interesting directors. But


https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X14000268 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Vasily Kachalov as Vershinin in *The Three Sisters*, a role that had previously been played only by Stanislavsky.

they never blend into a whole, a perfect unity.'[20] The natural speech patterns, semitones, extended pauses, lack of declamation, and paucity of gestures which had been developed by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich precisely to render Chekhov were in sharp contrast to the classic German histrionic style as well as to the overwrought Expressionist acting that was coming into fashion. A new staging of *The Brothers Karamazov* had some figures cast as projections and shadows of an inevitable fate, a device dear to Expressionist film-makers; but here they were almost motionless in a sparsely decorated space.

The success was all the more remarkable since Berlin already possessed a number of Russian-language troupes, including the much-frequented cabaret The Blue Bird. The Art Theatre actors proved so popular that the sojourn was prolonged through November 1921 to March 1922, with the last performance given on 12 March. Then they split up: a small group toured eastern Germany, while Germanova, Kachalov, and others travelled with the Berlin-based Russian Dramatic Theatre to Riga. The troupe reunited for a brief Scandinavian tour, with quick sorties to Poland and Latvia. They then prepared to return to what they now regarded as their home base, Prague.

**Meanwhile in Moscow**

In Moscow the parent company had been thoroughly reorganized as an Academic Theatre, supported and protected by the Commissar of Enlightenment, Lunacharsky. Nemirovich had kept in touch through long, hectic letters to Kachalov, who was concerned about how his ex-White Guard son Vadim would be treated if they returned. (Typically, Stanislavsky made no effort to communicate with his distant colleagues.) It was proposed that three troupes, in Moscow, Petrograd, and the provinces, be formed, but the use of the name 'Moscow Art Theatre' was definitively withdrawn from the troupe abroad.

Nemirovich hoped to send Podgorny to Berlin to treat with the expatriates and exhort them to come home; he was outraged when the Soviet government refused to allow the actor to travel.[21] The Cheka was concerned about defections, but was eventually overruled by Lunacharsky. With a major tour of the MKhAT to Germany, France, and the United States in the offing, the return of the prodigals was devoutly to be wished. Nemirovich pleaded to Kachalov in November 1921, 'Come! Please come!'[22] Knipper, who had resisted when she thought he was simply concerned about the welfare of the studios, acceded to the idea that there would be 'the rebirth of a united, splendid theatre'.[23]

Finally, a telegram from Nemirovich[24] stipulated that these individuals were officially welcome back to the fold: Kachalov and wife, Knipper, Germanova, Aleksandrov, Bertenson, Gremislavsky, Baksheev, and Massalitinov. Khmara was considered problematic and his invitation was put on hold. Kachalov could not conceal his misgivings:

I am so afraid, it is so hard for me to make up my


https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X14000268 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mind to return to Moscow, for it seems to me that at the present time living conditions in Russia instead of getting better are getting more complicated. . . . The closer the day for departure approaches, the more frightened I am, and I find myself looking for a pretext to put back the day as much as possible.[25]

Nevertheless, he and most of the invited colleagues, as well as Tarasova, Tarkhanov, Solovyova, and Zhilinsky, took the step. Germanova, Kryzhanovskaya and Massalitinov decided to remain in Prague with the remainder of the company, under the aegis of the impresario Leonidov. Boleslavsky left for Paris and then New York. Khmara worked in German films before moving to France. Ties were broken for good, but the castaways, now technically émigrés proscribed from Russia, were still bent on preserving the traditions and the ethos of the Moscow Art Theatre.

The actors who returned to Moscow were given the cold shoulder by their colleagues.[26] The Muscovites occupied the moral high ground, having lived through intense hardship, while their compatriots abroad had enjoyed relative comfort and security. Some, such as Germanova, were advertised as enemies of the Soviet state. Olga Knipper, on the other hand, was presented with the honour of 'Meritorious Artiste of the Republic.'

### The Prague Group Takes its Name

In 1922, the only book ever to be devoted exclusively to the wanderers was published in Prague and in Russian: *The Artistes of the Moscow Art Theatre Abroad*. It was entirely backward looking. The frontispieces are portraits of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, and there are tributes to them, to Chekhov, and to the special nature of the Art Theatre. Bertenson's history of the Art Theatre ends with a footnote confessing that the breakaway group is aware that there are new artistic developments in Moscow but has not experienced them first hand. There is no hint that the troupe in Prague constitutes an independent entity, though the book's preface acknowledges that the group feels more at home in the Czechoslovakian capital than anywhere else.

Pavel Massalitinov as Lopakhin in *The Cherry Orchard*.

Nevertheless, the departure of Kachalov and his cohort forced a reshuffling of the troupe in May 1922. Fyodor Komissarzhevsky, who had settled in London as Theodore Komisarjevsky, was invited to be their director, but he declined. The Czech government proposed that Germanova run the municipal theatre of Královské Vinohrady; she was the only one offered a stipend, but eventually sixteen actors were vouched similar invitations. Under the leadership of Massalitinov, they opened their new season with *The Cherry Orchard*.

In 1924 their Czech residence was acknowledged under the name the 'Prague Group of the Moscow Art Theatre', to the disgruntlement of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich. Massalitinov was an uninspired director, whose unadventurous staging of Chekhov and Dostoevsky was based on outdated models. The interest often lay in seeing younger actors in the veterans' roles. In Knipper's absence, Germanova succeeded to the roles of Ranevskaya and of Elena in *Uncle*

*Vanya*; she also revived her Moscow parts of Agnes in *Brand*, Grushenka in *Karamazov* and Donna Anna in Pushkin's *The Stone Guest*. When Litovtseva left, Germanova shared the directing duties with Massalitinov and tried to steer the company in more daring directions.

A generation younger than Knipper, Germanova had participated in a more modernist repertoire. Nemirovich tried to lure her back to Moscow by offering her Queen Sudarshana in Rabindranath Tagore's *The King of the Dark Chamber*, which she had once played at the Bat Cabaret. She turned him down, and instead staged her own production in Berlin at the New Year of 1922–23. Germanova deepened the company's expression of the darker side of Russian thought with an adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* and Andreev's study of a nymphomaniac *Elizaveta Ivanovna*, which had been written for her.

She subscribed to the notion of Russian messianism inherent in the Art Theatre's principles, declaring:

> The theatre is dear to me not only for its exceptional, astonishing art but also for its incomparable ethics. . . . All my strength, all my soul, I have humbly given to theatre. . . . I have abandoned everything and entered the theatre as my family, like a temple.[27]

Her belief in the quasi-mystic concept of theatre as 'life in art' – temple and home, sacred and familiar – along with the strict discipline of ensemble and rigorous training could not be reconciled with the compromises required by circumstance. In such instances, her bereavement was profound and sincere.

Germanova had never been a favourite of Stanislavsky, and the dislike was mutual. 'Konstantin Sergeevich has quite gone off the rails, he is crippling actors, crippling plays, crippling the Theatre.'[28] When they met in Berlin in 1923, however, journalists turned a private event into a political rapprochement; Nemirovich chivalrously defended the breakaway troupe, insisting in the Soviet press that 'they have found the correct method of training. . . . The main goal . . . is . . . to aspire, preserving the spirit of the Moscow Art Theatre without breaking with its traditions and associations.'[29]

## A Thorn in Stanislavsky's Side

Even as they provided aesthetic pleasure, their cultural mission conveyed a level of directorial art as a creative principle, uniting all the components of a production into a unique artistic whole. The acting was considered perfection at the time, though their activity had little influence on actor training. Over the course of a decade, they toured to Zagreb, Belgrade, Ljubljana, Sofia, Pernik, Ragusa, Split, Budapest, Paris, London, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, and even Glasgow.

For Stanislavsky, the troupe remained a thorn in his side. In 1904 and again in 1917 he had conceived an Art Theatre that would be the hub of a wheel extending its spokes into the provinces. Instead, a motley group of former students and B-list players, unfamiliar with his latest discoveries, was, he feared, disseminating a distorted version of his gospel. In 1924, concerned about the prestige and financial future of the MKhAT, he complained to Nemirovich-Danchenko that the Prague Group was trying to lure away their actors and to pre-empt their own foreign tours.

> There is no doubt that the [Prague] Group's effrontery is going beyond all bounds. Even their well-wishers waxed indignant at the behaviour of Sharov, who in Paris publicly proclaimed that Stanislavsky doesn't have the right to prevent them from using the MKhAT's name, because they are the original MKhAT (this is Sharov, who never was an actor with us). And they will show us. . . . All this, of course, is empty threats, but there is no doubt that they are vulgarizing and tarnishing our name (with the connoisseurs). . . . There's no doubt that, by exhibiting our plays and our style of playing them in advance of us, they have skimmed the cream, and in their wake, with skimmed milk, it will be hard to attain the success that the theatre might have if it were the only one abroad and could make an appearance after a long hiatus. The constant flaunting of the MKhAT name on posters cheapens us. Now, if they go to Paris and London and flop there, you will never convince America that we weren't the ones who flopped. They're slow-witted over there, and cannot understand these combinations of multiple

MKhAT troupes. [The impresario Morris] Gest is planning to take [our] theatre to London, and in time to America. But, of course, he will refuse if the MKhAT trademark flops in London before we get there. There is an even greater problem – if it succeeds. But in Paris, they might go down in flames. Paris is not Czechoslovakia. This is how I would proceed. In the sternest formal terms I would warn them that we will no longer tolerate the exploitation of the MKhAT trademark without our express permission. . . . And in case our proscription fails – send telegrams not to them, but to those theatres and cities where they are performing. In the telegram make a protest and explain that they are using the trademark illegally. If even this does not work, then we will have to go to law. It is impossible to remain indifferent to this phenomenon, because they are luring all our best actors away from the MKhAT and ruining our tours abroad so much that we will have to give them up forever.[30]

As usual, Stanislavsky was over-dramatizing the situation. The Soviet government would not allow the parent company another foreign tour until 1937, and no actors were being lured away by the Prague group. It was, in fact, losing actors. A collective that had been brought together so improvisationally began to implode. The authority of the stage directors was resented, personal animosities were ignited, and recriminations flew back and forth. Discipline flagged and the demand for perfection was rarely met or even entertained.

**Preservation or Speculation?**

Cut off from her roots and her spiritual father Nemirovich, her husband arrested by the Cheka, and her son ailing, Germanova suffered more than her colleagues from the progressive deterioration of the values that had constituted the power and originality of the original Art Theatre. The harsh conditions of exile (nomadic fatigue, constant adaptation to new stages, precarious finances, the difficulty of renewing the repertoire, the lack of a pedagogic director) lowered discipline in the company. Even before the Kachalov defection, Germanova had complained to Nemirovich, 'We are not preserving the MKhT, we are speculating on the MKhT. Our art, our work are reduced to the impoverished revival of antediluvian stagings.'[31]

Massalitinov was the first to leave, claiming he could no longer stand the envy and nastiness. The vacuum he left was filled by Pëtr Sharov. As Stanislavsky complained, Sharov had been a minor functionary in Moscow, an assistant stage manager. (Later he claimed to have been an assistant director and secretary to Stanislavsky.) Circumstances turned him into a player of small roles with the Kachalov group, and, when Massalitinov departed, he became joint stage director with Germanova.

Germanova, who in her memoirs proudly called herself an *art-nouveau* 'decadent', had ambitions to be a tragedienne. Her *Medea*, inspired by reports of the work of Tairov and Vakhtangov, displayed acquaintance with innovations by Dalcroze and eurhythmics, Isadora Duncan and *Aufdruckstanz*. The parent company had never succeeded with Greek tragedy: after a failed *Antigone* in its first season, it periodically planned a *Hippolytus* or a *Prometheus Bound*, but failed to follow through. Germanova's *Medea* turned its back on sedulous recreations of ancient Greece,

Maria Germanova as Medea.

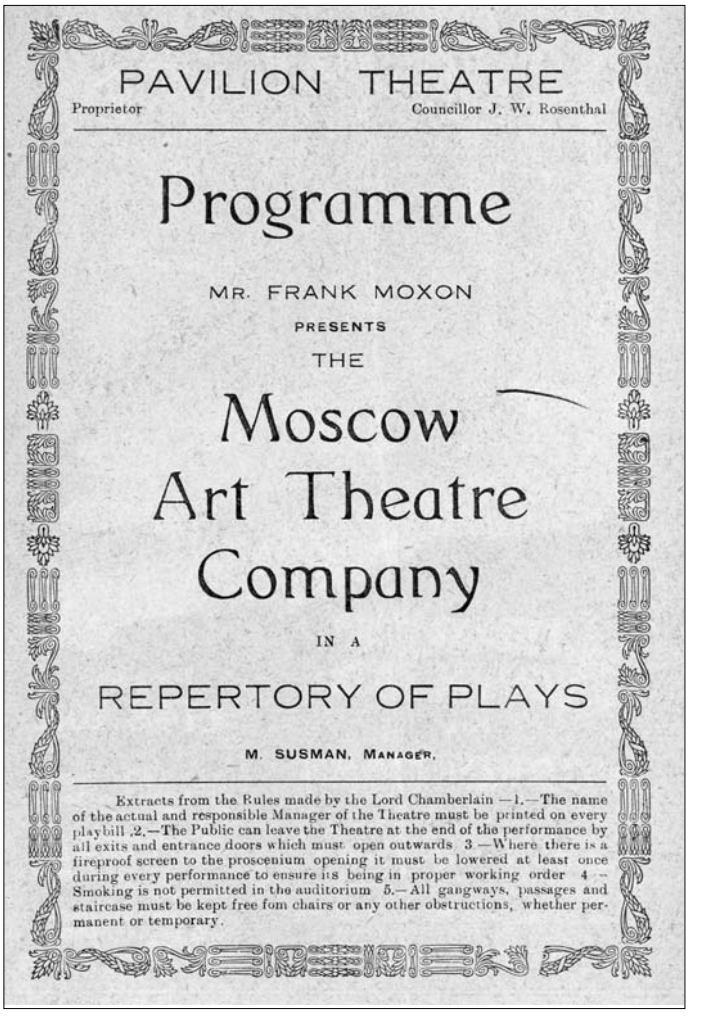


https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X14000268 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and strove for the epic and the mythological. Musical intonations, statuesque groupings, and an expressionist use of colour accents definitively renounced realism.

The Prague Group toured to Paris in June 1926 and, contrary to Stanislavsky's dire predictions, the visit was so successful that it was repeated in November and again in January 1927. At first they played at Charles Dullin's Théâtre de l'Atélier, where they were seen by André Antoine and where their repertoire included Gogol's *Wedlock*, Ostrovsky's *Poverty's No Crime*, and Tolstoy's *Living Corpse*. These lived up to the Parisian expectations of picturesque 'Russianness', and Georgy Serov's grotesque style was found so attractive that Dullin asked him to join his company.

When the Russians moved to the larger Comédie des Champs-Élysées, Germanova's *Medea* was much admired. Veteran critics lauded 'this powerful and pedigreed tigress', 'this primitive creature with milky arms and a tragic mask'.[32] Antoine lauded her in 'the ritual character of primitive tragedy'.[33]



PAVILION THEATRE

Proprietor — Councillor J. W. Rosenthal

Programme

MR. FRANK MOXON

PRESENTS

THE

Moscow Art Theatre Company

IN A

REPERTORY OF PLAYS

M. SUSMAN, MANAGER.

Extracts from the Rules made by the Lord Chamberlain —1.—The name of the actual and responsible Manager of the Theatre must be printed on every playbill .2.—The Public can leave the Theatre at the end of the performance by all exits and entrance doors which must open outwards. 3.—Where there is a fireproof screen to the proscenium opening it must be lowered at least once during every performance to ensure its being in proper working order 4.—Smoking is not permitted in the auditorium 5.—All gangways, passages and staircase must be kept free fom chairs or any other obstructions, whether permanent or temporary.

The more widely it travelled, the more the Prague Group had to withstand attacks on its legitimacy, from both Soviet Russia and émigré competitors. It visited London in April and May 1928 with a repertoire composed entirely of pre-Revolutionary Russian plays. The parent company had never played that city, so Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko threatened to sue impostors using the MKhAT brand. On 13 April a letter appeared in *The Times* from Theodore Komisarjevsky, declaring that the name of the 'world-famous' Moscow Art Theatre meant nothing because the MKhAT had no affiliate abroad and the visitors had 'very little in common with the methods of acting and production of K. Stanislavsky'.[34] (Ironically, Stanislavsky had disdained Komisarjevsky's pre-Revolutionary explication of his System; but the émigré had a vested interest in maintaining his uniqueness as the exponent of Russian theatrical styles in England.)

Germanova took it upon herself to reply: 'Those of us who have stayed abroad are no less faithful to the tradition and are trying sometimes in difficult circumstances to interpret it to audiences in Western Europe.'[35]

In Prague, the company had begun to grow stale, its only novelties the insertion of guest artists. In Paris Germanova played Olga in a French-language *Three Sisters* for Georges Pitoëff, but his dictatorial methods and her heavy Russian accent made her nothing more than a token of authenticity. After tours to Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy, in 1929–30 she sailed for New York,

summoned to be the artistic director of the Laboratory Theatre.

Boleslavsky, who had founded this on First-Studio principles six months after the MKhAT's New York performances, had left for Hollywood, and it needed another authentic veteran of the Art Theatre to preserve the original vision. Germanova aided Maria Ouspenskaya in teaching the senior class and staged yet another variant of *Three Sisters*, this time with herself as Masha. But she found herself out of her element and soon returned to Paris, where she rejoined a rump of the Prague Group. There she played Raskolnikov's mother in Gaston Baty's adaptation of *Crime and Punishment*.[36]

A depleted company revisited Paris and London in 1931, directed by the character actor Polikarp Pavlov. Despite his adaptation of Bulgakov's *The White Guard*, a version distinct from *The Days of the Turbins* performed in Moscow, and a Soviet comedy, *Squaring the Circle*, by Kataev, it came across as old news. Ignored by the press, outside the émigré community it made no stir whatever.

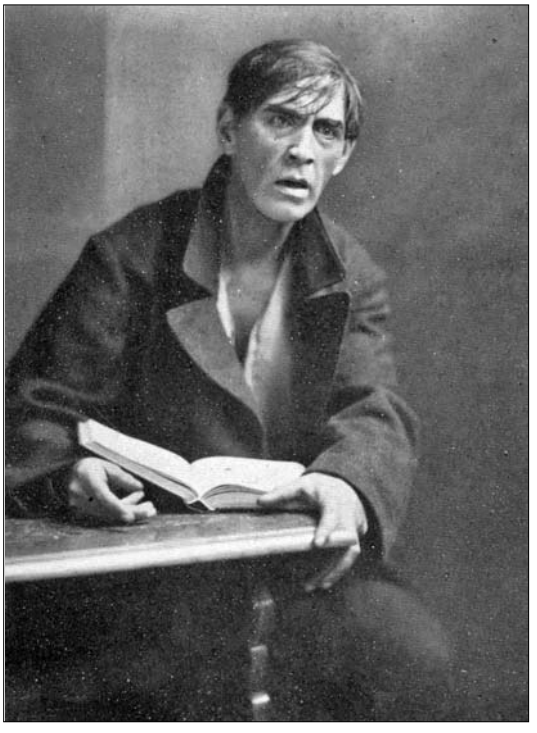
In 1935 Mikhail Chekhov cherry-picked the best actors for a newly-formed company of his own, which was preparing to go to Boston and New York. At this news the Soviet administration of the Moscow Art Theatre sent a telegram to Oliver Sayler, former press agent of the 1922–23 American tour, to be inserted in the *New York Times*: 'Inform the American press that the productions played under the emblem of the MKhAT have been prepared without any supervision on the part of this theatre. . . . The MKhAT has nothing to do with these productions.'[37] Whatever vestiges of the Prague Group were still operative in 1940, when Germanova died in Paris, they were dispelled by the war.

What precisely was the residual influence of the Prague Group? As early as their time in Georgia, observers noted how traditionally unruly audiences became silent and attentive.[38] In those first years, the sense of apostolic succession from the legendary Art Theatre and the low-keyed realism of the ensemble were eye-opening innovations. In Prague, the productions of Jaroslav Kvapil conspicuously displayed the lessons he had learned from the visitors. But by the late 1920s the Prague Group seemed to have nothing fresh to impart. James Agate, the leading English dramatic critic, lamented the empty stalls at their London *Cherry Orchard*.[39]

Ironically, it was Sharov, the farthest removed from direct contact with the methods of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich, who became the most influential Russian director in Western Europe. Beginning in Rome in 1933, he gained a reputation as the specialist in staging Gogol, Gorky, Turgenev, and especially Chekhov (as comedy); throughout Italy, the Netherlands, and southern Germany his detailed productions were taken to be the most authentic and harmonious. Although actors tended to regard him as a tyrant, Sharov insisted that his treatment of them embodied the Stanislavsky system. He died in 1969, laden with honours from the Dutch and Italian governments.[40]

Opposite page: a London programme for the Prague troupe. Note that the billing suggests that this is the original Moscow Art Theatre.

Below: Pëttr Sharov (Pëtr Sharov) as Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov*.





https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X14000268 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Pedagogy had been considered a useful source of income and prestige from the troupe's first days. In Moscow, Massalitinov had been part of the triumvirate that ran the MKhT's Second Studio, known as the Studio of the Three Nikolays (the others being Aleksandrov and Podgorny), which had provided the next generation of Art Theatre actors. He and his wife offered a course in 'diction, declamation, and stage practice' in Berlin in early summer 1922. However, the most congenial climate for such work was found in Slavic countries, and in 1926 Massalitinov founded a studio-school at the People's Theatre in Sofia, acting and directing there to 1944, when he met an untimely death.[41] Other Prague actors came to the Balkans when Mikhail Chekhov's enterprise failed. Ultimately, the émigrés left their deepest imprint on the theatres of Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Slovenia.

## Conclusion

Fortuitously, a hastily organized splinter group of the Moscow Art Theatre had been compelled, for reasons of survival, to coalesce into a formal troupe, emblazoning the name of the parent company. As a consequence, they were accepted as ambassadors for the artistic and ethical principles of the MKhT, despite the disclaimers of the founders. For Russians in exile they trailed clouds of glory from an unrecoverable past; for Europeans, they enabled acquaintance with what seemed authentic echoes of a fabled theatrical aesthetic.

Over time, the company's nomadic nature, defections of its leading members, and growing distance from the original impulses reduced its efficacy. Nevertheless, the company's credentials enabled less talented individuals to disseminate a specious 'Moscow Art Theatre' legacy throughout the Western hemisphere.

To date, the historiography of this phenomenon is fragmented: there are first-hand accounts by Shverubovich, Germanova, and Massalitinov, published in non-integral form; contemporaneous letters, some in print, others in archives; press accounts in a dozen European languages; biographical narratives of individual performers; and scholarly résumés of one or another aspect. Microhistory is inadequate in covering the Prague Group's odyssey(s), its influence, and its legacies.

This is a case in which the historian has to step back to gain perspective; to master a wide, variegated array of sources; and to be alert not only to the 'facts' but to the individual agendas of those who relate them. The focus has regularly to shift between a panoramic wide-shot, placing the troupe within its host cultures, and detailed close-ups of its condition at any given period. The historian has not only to trace the vicissitudes of the troupe itself but the cultural reverberations it stirred up as it encountered diverse publics in its various avatars. Most critically, one has to assay the values projected on to the troupe, whatever its own motives and intentions. Their history constitutes a classic example of synergy abetted by serendipity.

## Notes and References

1. Anatoly Lunacharsky, 'Teatr i revolyutsiya', *Vestnik teatra*, 47 (23–28 December 1919), in *Sobranie sochinenii v vosmi tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1964), III, p. 93.

2. MKhT was the acronym for Moskovsky Khudozhestvenny Teatr until 1919, when it was renamed Moskovsky Khudozhestvennom Akademichesky Teatr (Moscow Art Academic Theatre); then the acronym became MKhAT.

3. Vadim Sherubovich, *O starom Khudozhestvennom teatre* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1990), p. 178–83. Vadim Vasilevich Shverubovich (1901–81), son of Vasily Kachalov, later accompanied the MKhAT to the USA 1922–24. His book is one of the fullest and most sympathetic accounts of the Prague Group.

4. Leonid Davydovich Leonidov (Berman, 1885–1983), who later settled in Berlin and managed the MKhAT tours to Europe and USA, 1922–24, not to be confused with the actor Leonid Mironovich Leonidov.

5. N. O. Massalitinov, 'Moi vospominaniya', in N. M. Vaganova, *Russkaya teatralnaya emigratsiya v tsentralnoy Evrope i na Balkanakh. Ocherki* (St Petersburg: Aleteyya, 2007), p. 219–20. All translations are my own.

6. Nemirovich was far too cautious about the outcome of the Civil War to make any rash moves. Letter to V. V. Luzhsky, 2 August 1919, in V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko, *Tvorcheskoe nasledie* (Moscow: Moskovsky Khudozhestvenny Teatr, 2003), II, p. 605.

7. Anthony Beevor, *The Mystery of Olga Chekhova* (New York: Viking, 2004), p. 63–74.

8. They had accidentally found Vadim suffering from typhus in a troop train in Novorossiisk and his mother

almost killed him with unsuitable medication before the mistake was discovered.

9. Letter to M. P. Chekhova, 11 September 1920, Tiflis, Olga Knipper-Chekhova, *Perepiska* (*1896–1959*) (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1972), p. 121.

10. Inna Solovyova, *Vetvi i korni* (Moscow: MKhAT, 1998), p. 67.

11. Michaela Böhmig, *Das russische Theater in Berlin 1919–1931* (Munich: Otto Sagner in Kommission, 1990), p. 71–2

12. Olga Knipper, 'Iz moikh vospominaniyakh Khudozhestvennogo Teatra', *Artisty Moskovskogo Khudozhestvennago Teatra za rubezhom* (Prague: Izd. 'Nasha Rech', 1922), p. 29.

13. M. Germanova, 'Nash teatr', in *Artisty Moskovskogo Khudozhestvennago Teatra za rubezhom* (Prague: Izd. 'Nasha Rech', 1922), p. 12

14. Vera Velemanová, 'Le Théâtre d'art de Moscou à Prague: "Salut à vous, Slaves!"', in *Le Théâtre d'art de Moscou: ramifications, voyages*, ed. Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2005), p. 111. See also S. Postnikov, *Russkie v Prazhe: 1918–1928* (Prague: Volja Rossii, 1928).

15. Böhmig, *Das russische Theater in Berlin*, p. 74–5.

16. In *Teatr i zhizn*, quoted in Böhmig, op. cit.

17. S. Makovsky, 'Khudozhestvennyy teatr zagranitsey', *Zhar Ptitsa,* 1 (1921), p. 20.

18. 'Maks Reyngardt o Moskvichakh', *Teatr i zhizn*, 5–6 (1921), p. 7.

19. J. Meier-Graefe , 'Die Russen in Berlin,' *Ganymed*, 4 (1922), p. 294.

20. Ju. Ofrosimov, 'Khudozhniki za rubezhom', *Spravochnik Almanakh*, reprinted in *Teatr: Feletony* (Berlin: Volga, 1926), p. 266.

21. Letter to A. V. Lunacharsky, 20 August 1921, *Tvorcheskoe nasledstvo,* II, p. 628–30.

22. Letter to V. I. Kachalov, 22 November 1921, *Tvorcheskoe nasledstvo,* II, p. 634.

23. Letter to Nemirovich-Danchenko, 14 February 1922, *Perepiska*, p. 130.

24. Telegram to Kachalov, after 18 January 1922, *Tvorcheskoe nasledstvo*, II, p. 646.

25. Letter to Nemirovich, 23 March 1922, quoted in V. A. Maksimova, ed., '"Nevozvrashchenko." Pisma M. N. Germanovoy,' *Mnemozina: Istoricheskikh Almanakh. Vypusk* 2, ed. Vladislav Ivanov (Moscow: Editorial URSS, 2000), p. 157.

26. Shverubovich, *O starom Khudozhestvennom teatre*, p. 389.

27. Mariya Germanova, 'Moi larets', ed. Inna Solovyova, *Diaspora: novye materialy* (2001), p. 62.

28. Letters to Nemirovich-Danchenko, 14 and 31 October 1922, in *Mnemozina,* Vyp. 2, p. 169.

29. *Vestnik rabotnikov iskusstv* 5–6 (January–February 1923), p. 109–10.

30. Letter to Nemirovich-Danchenko, 10 July 1924, K.S. Stanislavsky, *Sobranie sochineny*, ed. A. M. Smelyansky *et al*. (Moscow: Moskovsky Khudozhestvenny Teatr, 1999), IX, p. 163–4.

31. Letter to Nemirovich-Danchenko, 20 September 1921, in *Mnemozina*, Vyp. 2, p. 151.

32. Jean-Pierre Liausu and Gabriel Boissy, in *Comœdia*, 2 (22 and 26 November 1926), quoted in Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu, 'Le Théâtre d'art de Moscou en exil: le Groupe de Prague à Paris dans les années 1920 et 1930', *Revue d'histoire du théâtre*, 2 (2003), p. 126. Also see Michèle Beyssac, *La vie culturelle de l'émigration russe en France: chronique, 1920–1930* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1971), and Marina Litavrina, *Russky teatralny Parizh* (St Petersburg: Aleteyya, 2003), p. 84–105.

33. *Information*, 29 November 1926, quoted in Autant-Mathieu, 'Le Théâtre d'Art', op. cit.

34. *The Times*, London, 13 April 1928, quoted in Sergei Ostrovsky, 'Maria Germanova and the MAT Prague Group', in Laurence Senelick, ed., *Wandering Stars: Russian Émigré Theatre, 1905–1940* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), p. 95.

35. *The Times,* London, 16 April 1928, quoted in Ostrovsky, op. cit, p. 96. This letter became known in Moscow and received a public riposte from the MKhAT actor Mark Prudkin, who declared that the Prague Group was totally distinct from the parent company and that any connections should be 'liquidated': see *Sovremenny teatr*, 20 (1928), p. 390–1; 21 (1928), p. 419.

36. Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu, 'Disciples et transfuges du Théâtre d'Art de Moscou', *Premières Rencontres de l'Institut Européen Est-Ouest* (Lyon: ENS, 2004).

37. *New York Times,* 2 March 1935, quoted in *Teatral'naya zhizn*, 3 (1993), p. 16.

38. *Slovo*, Tiflis, 88 (21 April 1920), p. 4.

39. *The Times*, London, 12 April 1928, p. 6.

40. Sharov is ignored by English-language reference works. See 'Peter Scharoff', *Theaterencyclopedie: beleef de wereld van theater en dans* <wiki.theaterencyclopedie.nl/wiki/Peter_Scharoff>.

41. N. M. Vaganova, *Russkaya teatralnaya emigratsiya v tsentralnoy Evrope I na Balkanakh. Ocherki* (St Petersburg: Aleteyya, 2007), p. 129–70.