

Stanislavski's century

An interview with Richard Nelson

By Julien Le Mauff

At the Vincennes Cartridge Factory, as part of the Paris Autumn Festival, the Théâtre du Soleil company plays *Our Life in Art*, a new play by American playwright Richard Nelson.

In its naves, the Théâtre du Soleil has broken with its customs. Ariane Mnouchkine has entrusted Richard Nelson with the task of staging his own play, [Our Life in Art](#), his first creation in a language other than English, between the intimate stands set up for the occasion.

The American playwright and director, who has won numerous awards for his books of musicals and movie scripts, and for his numerous plays written for the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon and London, and for the Public Theater in New York, drew his inspiration for this new play from the life of Russian legend Constantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) and the Moscow Art Theatre (founded in 1898).

Recounting a day in the life of Russian legend Constantin Stanislavski and his company, the play brings together eleven actors of the Théâtre du Soleil. Eleven actors playing actors who don't act, captured in their everyday lives, gathered around a festive table during an American tour amid the authoritarian tightening of Lenin's rule. Eleven characters keeping their shared vocation alive, in hope, anxiety, doubt and resignation, as if stopping the time of the world for a moment.

Books and Ideas: Our Life in Art takes place in Chicago in 1923, during the American tour of the Moscow Art Theatre. Is this a historical play?

Richard Nelson: I have written many so-called historical plays in my career and I've never been interested in reconstructing history as if it were a history lesson. It's not what I do, it's not what I think theatre can do, it's not what I think art really does. What you can do is use historical events when you want to talk about something that's really about today. That's where my interest comes from. One is going to explore historically and then you discover things that you would never on your own discover. You learn how one thing leads to another and that's surprising. So, it's a way of also, confronting the present (your own life, your own situation, society) in a sort of conversation with the past. That's been my effort and my interest all along.

Books and Ideas: When did you have the idea of writing a play about this tour, and how did you come to create it with the Théâtre du Soleil?

Richard Nelson: I've had the idea of a play about Stanislavski in my notebooks for a long time. I've thought about it, about different ways, different stories out of his life and out of the life of the Moscow Art Theatre. In 2020, I sort of settled on an idea. I had a great admiration for the Russian director Lev Dodin and I talked to David Binder who was the artistic director of the Brooklyn Academy of Music [BAM]. I suggested writing a play for Lev about the Moscow Art Theatre, David and BAM were supportive and I reached out to Lev. He was very interested, he knew my work, so I wrote the play in 2020, sent it to Lev in early 2021. My friend Larissa Volokhonsky translated it into Russian. I've been working with Larissa and her husband Richard [Pevear] for the last 12 or 13 years on a series of translations of Russian plays into English.

Lev really liked the play, he wanted very much to talk about it and had ideas. In summer 2021 I went to St. Petersburg and spent some weeks with Lev, going through the play and talking about things, and we agreed to disagree about a very substantive part of the play, though we became quite good friends. Then I had the idea to try Sergey Zhenovach who at that time was the artistic director of the Moscow Art Theatre, and who also has a second theatre in Moscow [the Theatre Art Studio], which is actually constructed out of Stanislavski's family's factory. Sergey also liked the play a great deal. I went to Moscow in autumn of 2021 and he had a first reading to his company on February 23, 2022. We all know what happened the next day.

Parallel to this Ariane Mnouchkine, who had been interested in my work, who had seen my work in New York and on video, asked me if I could do something with her company. I was obviously incredibly honoured and flattered. We met in last November. The company was in Toulouse [touring with *L'Île d'or*], I went there and over a dinner we talked about various things, and I was asked if I had a play that might interest them and I said: "Well, I happen to have a play about a theatre company that I had started in Russia." Ariane read it overnight and said she wanted to do it.

Books and Ideas: What drove you to write a play about Stanislavski?

Richard Nelson: There's an important moment in my play where Stanislavski is trying to say, towards the very end, why we matter. And he says: "what do we do as actors? We watch. We look at this person and that person. And in a myriad of gestures all put together we find a human being." And he also says: "What we do is we see ourselves in others, and others in ourselves."

That is at the very heart of what it means to find a commonality among human beings. And in a time like his, and like ours, that is so divisive, where the goal seems to be to put people in silos or pigeonholes, to keep cultures separate as opposed to combined and connected, influencing each other... This is what theatre does, this is what living actors do in front of a living audience: they see themselves and others and others in themselves. And how important is that at a time when so much else is going on?

Books and Ideas: One century later, how does Stanislavski's method, his approach to theatre remain tied to the present?

Richard Nelson: Theatre is a very, very interesting and I think very important, but I also think very valuable part of our culture and society. And it's a necessary part of society. Theatre is the only artistic form that uses the live human being as its expression. The only one. Dance uses the body, music sound, but with theatre it's the human being who is at the centre. Therefore, theatre has a philosophical basis. It's a humanism, where the human being is at the very centre. And in time like our own when the value of commonality is in question, theatre is a very significant form.

Stanislavski was interested in the complexity of the human being and how to convey that in a play. And as he developed throughout his entire life, as he was always a searcher, a seeker (he didn't settle on one method or one thing) he was always looking for that way to make human beings and put them on stage in all their

complexity. I often quote Strindberg, who writes in the preface to *Miss Julie* that the multiplicity of motivation is indicative of his time. By which he means that we do things, the same thing even, for different reasons at the same time. And sometimes those reasons are even contradictory. That's how complex human beings are. And so, theatre is the search for that complexity, how to put that on stage, how to recreate it.

I tell my actors on the first day of every rehearsal of a play, that our job is very very simple and very very difficult. That is to put people on stage who are as complex, confused, ambiguous, lost, happy, as any one person in the audience. And we will always fail because we can't do that. But that's our goal. That's our ambition. That's what we strive for. And that I think is what I believe Stanislavski was after from the beginning of his career, he tried one thing, he tried another...

***Books and Ideas:* As in your previous works, such as the Apple Family plays, The Gabriels trilogy, or The Michaels, conversation seems central to your approach in this new play.**

Richard Nelson: Stanislavski's approach and my approach are slightly different because he came at his entire view from the view of an actor. That's what he was. I come at the same thing from the view of a playwright, which is what I am. So, he often looked into the individual actor to find their truth. Whereas I who have only the tools of dialogue, of conversation between people in my abilities...

I see everything in terms of relationships. I see that one individual, one thing talking to one person, and another thing talking to another person, and so forth and so on, and all of those things make up who that person is. So that becomes the source of my work as a director and a playwright, and of my connection to Stanislavski, but taking it in a somewhat different direction.

***Books and Ideas:* In addition to Stanislavski, *Our Life in Art* also appears as a tribute to Chekhov and to Chekhov's theatre. To what extent does your own work inherit from him, and from your previous efforts directing some of his plays?**

Richard Nelson: Well, Chekhov is another thing. And that's so fascinating to watch Chekhov and Stanislavski and how they worked and how they didn't work. There are many examples where clearly Stanislavski didn't understand what Chekhov was doing and we know because Larissa Volokhonsky and I reconstructed the script of the *Cherry Orchard* that went into rehearsal with Stanislavski as opposed to the one that came out and there are many many changes, and nearly all the changes are to the

detriment of the play. There are things Stanislavski did not understand, didn't get, and he knew it. Even in his book, *My life in art*, he talks about the rehearsals of *Cherry Orchard* and how he had to cut the scene at the end of act two and how sad that made Chekhov, and what a failure he, Stanislavski, felt for not being able to achieve that.

One of the unbelievable elements of genius of Chekhov is that he was finding a way of putting human complexity on stage without having hardly any tradition of that to work off. He was just inventing in a way, and because of that kind of freedom that was coming from him he's full of great discoveries, and of ways of not judging a character. Never is a judgment at play.

Down that route comes the notion of conversation because it's human beings talking, not necessarily coming to a big argument. There might be a moment of argument... We did something in my production of *Uncle Vanya*. It was a moment that I was really proud of. Vanya is upset with his mother. She's upset with him. And my Vanya was very big, and his mother was very small and sitting at a table. And in the middle of this he just gets up and gets a cushion for her back while he's arguing with her. Which is what he would do! It's just, in one second, the complexity of arguing, but it's a family... So much more is going on than trying to make a point. And that's life. That's what I'm looking for. How do we just sculpt life, life, life into this play?

Books and Ideas: What message would you say your play conveys to a modern audience?

Richard Nelson: It's an interesting story about artists in a time of political upheaval, and in which art and artists are being used to be this or to be that. And these actors – in my play everyone is an actor – are being seen from the Soviet Union as being one thing, old-fashioned, bourgeois, needing to be re-educated, to be retaught, and as very suspicious. And among their American audience, some see them as Bolsheviks because themselves come from Soviet Union or from the White Russian audience, or they're embracing the sentimentality of a past time. Canada won't allow them to come because they're seen as Bolsheviks. They've been criticized in the press both in Russia for embracing White Russians and in America for being Bolsheviks. And how does one navigate that, how does one find one's place and one's value and one's purpose in this?

I've often said that art or theatre runs parallel to politics. It's something parallel to it. It's not in the mix of politics but it's there and necessary alongside it. That is what the play tries to convey through human beings, through a day, in which they celebrate,

in which they eat, in which they make jokes, in which they are family, in which they deal with very difficult and serious problems and some less serious problems. And we hopefully experience a day of life of these artists and these people. And the minutia of that life becomes what is celebrated.

There's something I quote to my actors. Proust wrote a little book about Chardin, and he said: "you look at a Chardin, the still lives, and you say, oh! it looks like my kitchen. Then you go into your kitchen, and you say, that looks like a Chardin". The minutiae, the small, the detail of life – and you find its greatness and its beauty and its profundity.

Interview by Julien Le Mauff, 22 November 2023

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