

Theatre Will Save Us

di Konstantin Raikin

I grew up in a theatre milieu. I am from a theatre family. My parents, my elder sister, my uncle – all of them are actors. For many decades, my father was perhaps the most famous and beloved actor in our country. He suffered from a heart condition. Throughout his whole life he battled health issues, but theatre would often save him. When he entered the stage, the pain would abate he would be overflowing with vitality looking incredibly striking and tireless. For almost fifty years my father had been the Artistic Director and principal actor of his company. During his shows he had almost never left the stage, enduring enormous physical strain, and throughout his whole career – until the last days, when he was already quite an elderly man – he had appeared in at least twenty performances a month. At the age of 16, I also entered the Theatre Institute and since then I have been doing theatre for my entire conscious life. For over than 45 years I have performed on seamer for over than 40 years I have taught acting and worked as a director, for over than 30 years I have been the Artistic Director of a major drama theatre company in Moscow. Not only has my whole life been connected with theatre but I could even say that theatre is the essence of my life. I perceive the entire world around me from the theatrical point of view: dramatic structure, acting, set design, sound and lighting score, etc. On the whole, my perception is based on Shakespeare's «All the world's a stage» which is also true if you reverse it: «stage is the entire world». The entire world fits into this tiny little box. Exploring the laws of theatre, we get to understand the most important laws of the entire life, the human society, psychology and interconnection between the spiritual and the material creative work and production, egoism and collectivity, dictatorship and democracy, love and duty, element and reason, etc. Due to their susceptibility, i.e. agile emotional structure, people who world in theatre – first of all, actors – carry reflections of all the modern human problems and phenomena. As Hamlet said, «They are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time: after your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live». This is truly so. I love actors. I love the actors' milieu. Of course, I am speaking first and foremost about good actors from good companies, where constructive and creative element prevails over destructive element, where centripetal forces triumph over centrifugal forces. I certainly understand that nothing human is alien to them – they might be prone to egoism, jealousy, envy, but normally these feelings are obvious in them as in children, they are expressed so naively and openly and, what is most important, are so easily suppressed when the performance begins and the creative collective, unifying feeling, of comradeship comes into force, subduing everything else. At that point all personality traits, which may get in the way of that collective creativity retreat and wither away. It does one a lot of good to be an actor – of course an actor in a good theatre company, but perhaps we don't need to repeat this every time. For the most fastidious people, I could clarify once again that for me a good theatre company is the one (irrespective of its style or trend) where creativity clearly prevails over everything else. Thus, being an actor is wonderful and beneficial: you benefit a lot from standing in front of the full houses feeling that you have a grip on the audience. It is power through art. The most supreme, divine power over people which is caused not by their fear of some physical or political force but by their loves admiration interests and inspiration. It happens when the audience members lovingly surrender themselves into slavery to talent, artistry, the charm of an actor, director, production. These are the

most acute feelings of human understanding: and unity. These are the moments of happiness which you remember throughout your life. In fact, this is what makes life worth living. One might feel pity for the people who do not work in theatre and who are not even playgoers. These people are the majority and they are not aware of these moments of happiness. Luckily they do not realize how unhappy they are and therefore they might feel quite happy. However, I am absolutely positive that in the arts no one else enjoys such an enormous success as theatre actors. I am speaking about theatre in a broad sense – ballet, opera, stand-up, drama – performing arts. Writers, painters, sculptors, even film actors could never cause a hurricane of gratitude similar to the one caused by a theatre actor, who, right here and right now, in front of the audience, creates something which takes people's breath away, which makes their hearts beat faster, which brings tears to their eyes. Perhaps only sportsmen who, also in front of the audience, triumphantly score a goal, break a record or win a decisive fight, happen to enjoy a similar kind of success. This success is invigorating for an actor. It provides strength, self-confidence, it nourishes the soul. Even considering the colossal nervous and physical strain a *sine qua non* of acting, what a generously compensating energy refill an actor receives during these ovations! And what great metamorphoses happen to the members of the audience! In my theatre, I often watch performance from an open window which is located over the auditorium – in its back wall facing the stage. This gives me a chance to see the entire audience. How great is the difference between the people when they enter the theatre right from the street, from their everyday life, and the same people, watching the performance which is playing powerfully and exactly the way it should! Now they are taking their seats: normally they sit in pairs – husband and wife, two friends, two girlfriends, etc. At the beginning they chat and crack jokes, sometimes quite loudly so that other people could hear them, they shout to someone they know who is sitting in the other end of the house, they wave at him, take pictures. .. On the whole, the audience is segmented, fractured, mottled, just an assembly of people. However, the show begins. The silence comes. The silence of universal attention. The divine, unifying silence of theatre. Now all the people in the house are together. The audience is no longer segmented. It turns out that all of them are very similar. And very close to each other. And all of them become one. And the whole house becomes one. Now we are hearing a dialogue between the hero and the heroine. He is on the proscenium near the left stage portal, she is near the right stage portal. Twenty meters divide them. First he speaks, then she speaks. And the audience, like a tamed monster with a thousand heads simultaneously turns its thousand heads in the direction of the actor who is now speaking. He says – a thousand heads are turned to the left. She speaks – a thousand heads are turned to the right. Thus people are following this verbal ping-pong, although with the twenty meter distance it is already tennis. For those who are sitting in the first rows, this is an exercise for the neck muscles for the back rows – an exercise for the eye muscles. It is worth noting that no one is embarrassed about being like everyone else. In fact, every person now is in accordance with his or her own spiritual interest. Yet how beautiful they are in their unity! It is so because – at this moment – every audience member, working with his or her heart and soul, expresses the best qualities of his or her individuality, personality because it is not the sheep-like sameness of the crowd, but a supreme unity of the spirit of a large number of very different people. And it turns out that in their best expressions people are very similar. This is how theatre is doing its great deed, working its magic making its miracle! And how interesting the audience members look, if you are watching them from the direction of the stage! Sometimes I peek at them from behind the scenes, through a crack in the portal, or some other way. I see how, in the darkness of the house, under the influence of theatre magic, they lose their usual masks. How, in a childishly divine manner, their faces become silly, how they sprawl because of surprise and compassion, reflecting everything that happens on stage! Indeed, in order to start liking people, one should just peek to see how they watch a good, powerful theatre performance. It goes without saying that theatre is a kind of chamber art compared to film and

especially television. It is just a germ, but a very strong one. It is capable of having an impact on spiritual and intellectual atmosphere of the whole city where it is situated. I often tour Russia with my one-man shows. I visit lots of various towns, big, mid-sized, and small. When I come to some small Russian town for the first time, by the look of the audience coming to see my show. I can tell precisely, whether this town has a theatre company or not. I can determine this by the ability of the audience to understand quickly the grammatically correct literary Russian languages, which is delivered from the stage. That is the language I use in my performances. Unfortunately nowadays casual speech of common Russian people is in most cases very different from literary speech. It is more primitive and rude, therefore the audience of the town, where there is no drama theatre, finds it difficult to switch from their language to the way I speak – especially if there is humor in my speech and I speak quickly. They are clearly lagging behind me. Yet if the town has a theatre, even a mediocre one, the audience can sometimes watch Russian classical plays and listen to good Russian language; thanks to that, audience members perceive this speech and start applying at least some of it in their everyday life; other people in this town, even if they are not playgoers, hear these words and expressions. Thus, circular ripples of rudimentary culture of speech spread over the surface of the weedy pond filled with ditchwater of the primitive everyday vocabulary and raise the general level of understanding. I feel much easier working in a town where there is a theatre.

Theatre as the hearth and home of spiritual and intellectual life has always been in demand in Russia, and in the turbulent years it often became a lifesaver for those who tried to keep warm in its proximity. Not far from Moscow, in Tula region, there is a remarkable Museum Preserve Polenovo. It was created around the estate of the outstanding Russian artist Vasily Polenov. According to the museum staff, this house and the estate survived in its time only because the great artist was also a famous theatre lover, who energetically and consistently advocated theatre among the inhabitants of the local villages – peasants and their kids. In the revolutionary years when aggression towards the landowners was kindled among the common people, and poor village dwellers were instigated "to throw the red cock", i. e. to put the nobility's houses on fire and "rob what was robbed", according to the Bolshevik's formula, in Polenov's estate all these destructive moods would be smashed against the rehearsals of one more production, which local peasants were preparing under the guidance of the artist. They were so carried away with theatre work that it would not even occur to them that they could try to destroy or rob the house of their theatre supervisor. Thus, Theatre saved the House.

Another example. The most northern theatre in the world is located in the Russian city of Norilsk, which is above the Arctic Circle. This city is the most northern city in the world. Nickel is mined there. Once, Norilsk was also the place of exile for Stalin's political prisoners. It is in their milieu that an amateur theatre was born, which was later reorganized into a professional theatre, and that was happening in 1941 – twelve years before Norilsk got the status of a city. That means that the theatre is twelve years older than the city. Some of the great political prisoners took part in the creation of this city, such as Lev Gumilev, son of the famous poet, princess Olga Benois, who became the set designer for the prison camp theatre; among the actors were Evdokia Urusova, also born a princess, an actress of Errolova Theatre Georgy Zhzhenov, and Innokenty Smoktunovsky, who subsequently gained international fame. "In the zone", i.e. in the prison camp, theatre festivals would take place every year and the nominees would be given awards. On the whole, the history of this theatre is amazing and once again it proves the idea that sometimes theatre emerges under the most difficult life circumstances as an irresistible creative need for spiritual unity and salvation through that. The amazing record of Norilsk theatre continues today. A few years ago the theatre burnt down as a result of a fire. The city was left without its theatre. Then the local authorities of Norilsk made a decision to build the new theatre as soon as possible. In half a year the theatre was built from scratch, furnished with top-notch equipment, and opened. I brought my one-man show to this opening. When I spoke

to a representative of the authorities, he told me: "We can not survive without our theatre. Nothing can replace it. Nothing – not a disco, not a club, not a restaurant, not a movie theatre. Nothing else can give us such a feeling of shared festivity and unity. My parents introduced me to our theatre as a child. I remember how we and all the audience members would arrive a half an hour earlier, so that after the fierce cold and polar night we could enter the warm, brightly lit house, go to the cloakroom to leave our fur-coats, felt boots, hats, mittens warm socks – everything that we had to wrap ourselves in – and finally put on our fancy evening shoes; women would also need to comb their hair and adjust their makeup; then, "all dressed up", after walking in a beautiful foyer, seeing smartly dressed friends and talking to them without haste, we would all enter the auditorium in anticipation of joyful impressions, which would warm up our hearts and bring us all together." Indeed, theatre has a unique ability to unify people and, at the same time, what it gives them is not the feeling of sameness, but the acute sense of supreme spiritual kinship. Curiously, on the low mundane level people seem to discover lots of irreconcilable differences between one another, they quarrel and fight, but on the high level of spiritual ascent they appear to be very similar and even dear to each other. Therefore the true living theatre is the great peacemaker.

For many years we toured Ukraine annually with my company. We mostly visited Kyiv and Odessa. We brought there practically all of our productions. I could say that we had never enjoyed so much success before. The emotional, passionate Ukrainian theatre audiences would give us such ovations that sometimes we did not know what to do with that. We were good friends with many of our Ukrainian colleagues. Some of them were truly great actors. Ukraine has always been famous for its good actors, strong theatre traditions, and has always been perceived as a part of the common theatre space, which it shared with Russia. Then, as it is known, political relations between our countries became strenuous, conflicted, and even hostile. We began to hear about Ukrainian Russophobia, about the attempts to ban the Russian language, about the reassessment of many historical events, denial of our common historical values, etc. It was very painful to me to follow this, because a large part of my life was connected to Ukraine, I knew and loved this country, my wife is Ukrainian, our daughter knows and loves the Ukrainian language etc. At some point of the deepening political conflict, I bitterly thought that I would probably never go to Ukraine again and would never perform there again. At the same time I could not but feel pain remembering those wonderful passionate audiences in Kyiv and Odessa, which had received us with such admiration so recently, as it seemed... And just a few months ago, I received an unexpected invitation from the Russian embassy in Ukraine to perform my poetic one-man show in Kyiv and Odessa during the days of the Russian language in conjunction with the celebration of Pushkin's birthday. I was to perform in Kyiv in a theatre with one thousand and five hundred seats and in Odessa in a theatre with a thousand seats. I accepted the invitation, although I worried a lot. I understood that I was bringing my work to an unfriendly country (to put it mildly) and was trying to guess how the audience was going to greet me. In fact, I was not even sure whether people would come. A week before my arrival, I found out that both shows had been sold out. I was still worrying, but now my hope was getting stronger. My hope was built on the emotional memory, which must have remained after our many tours, it was built on the poetic heights of the Russian language which the majority of the population of Kyiv and Odessa spoke, finally, it was built on my own acting skills and experience. I am pleased to say that what I saw was beyond my expectations. Rarely or, perhaps never have I felt such an emotional engagement of the hearts, such a unanimous understanding, inspiration and gratitude of the audience. I was standing amidst that storm of ovations and thinking that culture was smarter than politics. And Theatre, despite all of its seemingly intimate scale, is the strongest means of restoring humanity the strongest cure for hatred and hostility.

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