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MY LIFE IN ART

INSTANTIN
TANISLAVSKI

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MY LIFE IN ART



by CONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKI

Translated by J. J. Robbins

MERIDIAN BOOKS *New York*

Meridian Edition first published March 1956

First printing February 1956

Second printing September 1957

Third printing March 1959

Reprinted by arrangement with Theatre Arts Books:
Robert M. MacGregor

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 56-6576

Manufactured in the United States of America



Photograph by Jacobi, Berlin

CONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKI IN 1928

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK IN GRATITUDE
TO HOSPITABLE AMERICA
AS A TOKEN AND A REMEMBRANCE
FROM THE MOSCOW ART THEATRE
WHICH SHE TOOK SO KINDLY TO HER HEART

Constantin Stanislavski

Constantin Stanislavski, co-founder and director of the Moscow Art Theatre, died in 1938 at the age of seventy-five years. Among his published works are: *An Actor Prepares*; *Building a Character*; and *The Seagull Produced by Stanislavski*, containing his working notes as director.

My Life in Art

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My Life in Art

CHAPTER I

OLD RUSSIA

I WAS born in Moscow in 1863, a time that may well be taken as a dividing point between two great epochs. I remember the landmarks of the age of serfdom, its icons and icon lamps, its lard candles, its pony express, that peculiar Russian conveyance called the tarantas, the flintlock muskets, the cannon that were small enough to be mistaken for playthings.

My eyes have witnessed the coming of electric projectors, railroads, and express trains, automobiles, aeroplanes, steamboats, submarines, the telegraph, the radio, and the 16-inch gun.

In such wise, from the lard candle to the electric projector, from the tarantas to the aeroplane, from the sailboat to the submarine, from the pony express to the radio, from the flintlock to the big Bertha, from serfdom to communism and Bolshevism, I have lived a variegated life, during the course of which I have been forced more than once to change my most fundamental ideas.

I remember the story of my ancestors, who came from the glebe filled with a strength that was the accumulated result of centuries, and lived through their lives in an incomplete way, unable to take advantage of their natural endowments. Their blood flows in me, and I would like to tell what I remember of their life, of the life of the old generation and its strong spirits.

Here is one chip of the past, — a figure astounding in its wholesomeness and strength. One of my aunts became dangerously ill when she was very old. Feeling the approach of death, she ordered the servants to carry her into the parlor.

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"Cover the mirrors, the candelabra and the drapery with canvas," she commanded. The servants hastened to obey her. The dying woman lay in the middle of the room and continued to order them about.

"Put the table for the coffin here. Take the plants to the greenhouse. Put this near the table. That is not right. This to the right, and this to the left."

At last the table was ready to receive the coffin, and the plants were arranged to her taste. She looked about the room with darkening eyes.

"A carpet," she commanded, "but not a new one."

They brought the carpet.

"Put it here, for the reader of prayers. He mustn't spit on the floor."

"Let everybody dress in mourning," the dying woman continued in a weak voice that was almost hushed to a whisper. The servants hurriedly left the room and after a while filed, one after the other, before their mistress.

"Fool, why have you tightened that dress?" the old woman whispered angrily. "Have it remodelled at once. Why did you shorten it, blockhead?" she murmured to another. "Fix the thing at once, or you will be late. Fool!" she hissed in anger at a third girl. But her voice refused to obey her will, her eyes could no longer see, and having prepared everything and everybody for her death, she died in the same room that very day.

And here is the story of a paladin with a restless soul, who seems to have stepped out of the pages of "The Brothers Karamazov." The son of a famous merchant, he harbored in himself much good and much evil, and the two sides of his nature continually warred against each other, creating a chaos in his soul that neither he nor his friends could analyze. He was clever, and strong, and able, and courageous, and kind, and lazy, and meandersome, and evil, and

OLD RUSSIA

attractive and repulsive. All his actions, his entire life, were unreasonable and illogical. No sooner would he settle down to work and quiet, than he would leave everything for the sake of a tiger hunt. From one of these tiger hunts he brought home a small tiger cub. Soon the cub grew into a well-sized beast, and the man could find no greater pleasure in life than training the tiger in full view of his terrified household. The tiger escaped, clearing a fence between his estate and ours. There was a city-wide scandal, the tiger was caught and immured in a zoological garden, and its owner was fined. But he immediately imported another tiger cub which soon became a ferocious tigress. The shouts of the trainer and the roars of the beast again reëchoed through the house. The servants came demanding that the beast be done away with, to which the trainer quietly replied :

“ Take her, if you can.”

The only answer to that was a silence interrupted by the roaring of the tigress.

The man was married and jealous. His wife was being courted by a young manufacturer, fat, large, clean, pomaded, dressed in the latest English fashion, with a flower eternally in the lapel of his coat, a scented handkerchief, and a pair of sharp Kaiserlike mustachios.

On a certain holiday, this young spark came to the house of our man, carrying a large bouquet of roses. While waiting for the appearance of the hostess he carefully twisted his mustachios into sharper points before the mirror. Then something rubbed against his leg. It was the tigress. He moved his hand. The tigress growled. He wanted to change his position. The tigress roared. Petrified in a foolish pose, with the ends of his mustachios in his fingers, poor Don Juan remained motionless for half an hour. He was ready to faint from fatigue when the fully revenged and delighted husband

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came out of hiding, greeted him very pleasantly, as if nothing unusual had happened, and chased the tigress away.

"I must go home," murmured the dandy, recovering from fright.

"Why?" wondered his host.

"I am not in the best of order," whispered the guest, rapidly leaving the room.

Our hero was a friend of the famous generals Skobelev and Chernyaev. When they began their historical advance into Central Asia, he naturally went with them. He soon became a legendary figure, astounding everybody with his disdain for death.

"Life is dull," he cried out once on a quiet night. "I will visit the khan."

"What!"

"I will visit the khan in his camp."

"Where is your common sense?" wondered his comrades.

He rode to the khan's camp, struck up a friendship with the khan, received a jewelled sword as a gift, and was rumored to have spent a night in the khan's harem. The very next morning, before the Russians advanced, he was back with his detachment, in ecstasies from his unusual excursion.

His wife died, leaving him a son whom he worshipped. Soon afterwards his son also died. The father was shaken to the depths of his soul. All day and all night he sat near the coffin of his dead son, dry-eyed and motionless. All night a nun read prayers above the coffin, in a deadly monotonous voice.

On the next day the bereaved father was almost insane. The people about him feared that he was going to commit suicide. He became restless. He drank heavily to drown his grief. With the evening he sat down near the coffin again. The same nun read prayers over the coffin in her deadly monotonous voice. He looked up at her by accident, and found that she was pretty.

"Let us go to Strelina."

OLD RUSSIA

And the unhappy father, in order to deaden his inner grief, took the nun in a troika to the gypsies and spent the entire night in wild carousing until the very beginning of the funeral.

When men like this were able to interest themselves in useful work, they showed the full breadth of their generosity and good intentions. The finest institutions of Moscow in all spheres of social life, including art and religion, were founded by private initiative. The first philanthropists were the aristocrats and the nobles, but after their gradual impoverishment their rôle passed into the hands of the merchants.

"Listen, my friend," my cousin, who was the mayor of Moscow, said to one of these rich business men. "You are rather fat of late. Isn't there a bit of extra money in your poke? Come, let me shake you down for a good cause." And he painted the needs of the municipal administration in striking colors.

"Bow low to me three times, and you will see the color of my money," decided the rich man.

"How much?" The mayor was curious.

"A clean million," promised the rich man.

"And if I bow to you when I am dressed in my uniform, my ribbon and all of my decorations, will you add anything to that?" bargained the mayor.

"Another three hundred thousand," cried the rich man.

"A bargain. Call all the clerks into my office," ordered the mayor. "Bring me my uniform, my ribbon and my decorations."

Having delivered a brilliant speech in introduction to the rare bit of foolishness, the mayor bowed three times to the rich man in the presence of the clerks. The rich man wrote him a check for thirteen hundred thousand, and the clerks gave an ovation—to the mayor.

The poor rich man was hurt. He quieted down only when Moscow