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Contemplating *Suicide*: A Conversation With Jonas Jurasas

BY SY SYNA

Jonas Jurasas, director of The Suicide now on Broadway, formerly headed the State Theatre of Kaunas in his native Lithuania. After his Moscow production of Macbeth was banned, he wrote an open letter to the Ministry of Culture in protest. He was immediately stripped of his position and, two years later, was permitted to emigrate together with his wife and son.

Nikolai Erdman wrote The Suicide in about 1931. His 1925 play, The Mandate, which received high praise from Gorki, was staged by the brilliant director Vsevolod Meyerhold. Both Stanislavski and Meyerhold put productions of The Suicide into rehearsal. Stanislavski sent a copy of the script to Stalin, who remarked: "I do not have a very high opinion of the play The Suicide. My closest comrades consider it empty and even harmful." Meyerhold's production at the Vakhtangov Theatre was denied a license after eighteen months of rehearsal.

Both Erdman and Meyerhold fell from favor. Erdman never wrote another play and, after temporary exiles in outlying villages, died in obscurity in Moscow in 1970. Meyerhold, given a chance to address a theatre congress, tore up his approved text and delivered an impromptu speech in which he not only attacked the state of Soviet theatre but uttered a manifesto for the artist's right to explore and experiment. He left the hall but never reached home. None of his colleagues ever saw him again.

SYNA: *The Suicide had previously been produced only by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1979 and by you earlier this year at the Trinity Square Repertory Company in Rhode Island. Why did you choose it for your Broadway debut?*

JURASAS: *I liked this play. It satisfied my hunger to do something big and serious and important. I always considered that an artist should do something for his own sake. My concept was exciting enough to make people enjoy and appreciate this piece of theatre. It still has a potential hearing. It's one of the greatest Soviet plays.*

The Suicide is a Soviet morality play in which the characters seem to be emblems or aspects of Soviet society rather than real people.

Sy Syna, who himself has extensive directing experience, is drama critic for WNYC-TV, appearing nightly.

All the characters are frustrated individuals. It's a very hard task to make them look like emblems and yet have them retain their humanity. It's a metaphor. My objective was to create that metaphor—a nightmarish vision of a society that tried to harness the individual and make him serve no matter what the cause. And the danger of that society, which sucks you in and makes you act in a certain way, makes you one of the screws in this mechanism. The great pathos, the human quality of the play....The author stresses the individual, a little man who is able to resist that dehumanization. Some people see in the character of Semyon Semyonovich a Chaplin or even a Russian Hamlet in the way he contemplates his life or death.

The way that I saw this play for an American audience was to show the danger of this dehumanization—the potential danger for all of us in being a tool. By pushing a so-called ideological cause, you can get a Hitler, a Stalin, or one of those narrow-minded people. Erdman shows this at one point, when Semyon contemplates being a hero. Erdman shows where this could lead. This is the play's philosophy and social message.

Stanislavski put this play into rehearsal at the Moscow Art Theatre, yet he never opened it. Why?

Stanislavski was quite a cautious person. He knew how far he could go. He never seriously considered doing this play. In fact, I believe Erdman wrote this play exclusively for Meyerhold. There is no way to find out what the original play was like. The battle for this play went on for several years. I believe there were endless attempts to please the critics and censors. Probably no one will be able to recover the first draft.

After making his last speech, Meyerhold disappeared. Do you know what happened to him?

Meyerhold was given a last chance to admit publicly his own "mistakes" and recant his ideological and artistic heresies. But he didn't use this opportunity. The Stalinist regime was virtually exterminating all people in the arts. One of the rumors was that Meyerhold was allowed to do amateur performances in one of the concentration camps. By this time there were a lot of actors in them.

Someone brought an amateur show from Siberia that was unmistakably Meyerhold's, it was so beautiful. I can only guess what frustrations that man went through, because he was a real believer in the Soviet system, in communism. His fate was like the actor Mayakovski's, who committed suicide because of his disillusionment, which started at this time.

Did you have Mayakovski in mind when you were shaping the role of Semyon with Derek Jacobi?

Yes. I also had Yassenin, a poet who also considered suicide, and many, many others. The greatest poets were either silenced or got into trouble, like Osip Mandelstam.

Both Meyerhold and Erdman were Jews. Do you feel that, in addition to the suppression of the arts, Stalin's anti-Semitism was a factor in their persecution?

Oh, yes, of course. At that time it was called the "anticosmopolitan campaign." Once everyone's great aim was to be cosmopolitan. The Jews were automatically considered cosmopolitan; the terms were synonymous. At that time only those Jewish scientists whom the state couldn't afford to lose survived.

When you say, "that time," when do you mean?

The late '30s was the hardest oppression. Few excep-

tions survived. They gave up or went into total silence.

Erdman chose silence.

He had no alternatives. He tried writing under other names. He wrote film adaptations, children's stories and pieces. But he never tried to write again for the theatre.

When you look back to the '30s, '40s, and '50s—more than thirty years—I can't recall any play that would be feasible or worthy to revive. It was virtually empty, the dark ages. Stalin managed in just a few years to silence all the greatest art of the '20s. He managed to suppress, exterminate, and put into limbo the whole art. He had a special obsession against intellectuals because he was himself illiterate.

Some of your staging seems reminiscent of Meyerhold's mise-en-scène, judging by the production photos in K. Rudnitski's book published in Moscow in 1969. And you claim Erdman wrote the play for Meyerhold. How influenced were you by Meyerhold's work?

By the time I finished the Moscow Academy of Dramatic Arts in 1973, Meyerhold, as you know, wasn't very popular. I knew more of him as a legend. I started in Moscow in 1968. His fans and legend were very strong then. I didn't feel any direct inheritance, but I



D.F. Bach

(Left to right) Meyerhold, Erdman, and Mayakovski, from a 1928 photo

was always fascinated by his approach to theatre.

I consider myself a Westerner. I came from Lithuania, the most Western of the Soviet countries. It was absorbed in the 1940s. I digested that part of the Russian culture, therefore, and rejected the dogmatism of socialist realism. From the first day I was introduced to the Russian theatre, the flatness, the grayness were disgusting to me. I was always looking to the West. It was hard to obtain first-hand knowledge as a student. It was hard to see the practice, except through occasional theatre companies and some books. The West was my prime inspiration.

All Soviet theatre is missing some steps in the theatre's development. Even now the Theatre of the Absurd is absolutely forbidden in the Soviet Union. You can't produce the plays of Ionesco and Beckett. One of the controversial plays in the Soviet Union was my production of Slavomir Mrosek's *Tango* in 1967. It was a long battle to get permission. All my productions were a long struggle. Most of them were either censored or banned.

A friend of mine recently came for a visit. Curiously enough, he told me that two of my productions, after I was expelled and my name removed from the posters, are still running twelve years later, at the State Theatre in Kaunas. One administrator was punished. He lost his position because he mistakenly put an old poster on the billboard with my name on it. How stupid a tactic! Everybody knows who directed it. It just shows the narrowmindedness of the system.

The ultimate goal of the Soviet Government is to make art an instrument of propaganda, which they admit openly. Consequently, you can't expect much space for real art. I would say that heavily commercialized American art provides more space for real art than ideologically oppressed art.

It would seem that with the scarcity of good new works in the Soviet Union artistic creativity would go either into allegory or reinterpretations of classics.

The restriction and inability to talk directly forces all of us to go into hiding. The hiding is in metaphors of language. We develop skills and talents for communicating ideas to the audience in a very secret way, virtually inaccessible to censors. That's why there's such interest in the classics in the Soviet Union today. Anatoly Effros, one of the most talented directors, famous for conveying contemporary messages through classical pieces, had his production of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* banned for two years. My *Macbeth* was banned because of interpretation, though I didn't change a single word. It's the only area, relatively, where you can have freedom of creativity. And yet it can be very dangerous. Some Gogol was banned. If you present a deadly classic in a deadly classical way, nobody cares. The audience, along with the artist, develops a special sensitivity to the contemporary message. The most important ideas can be conveyed through that secret code.

Why then did you write that open letter to the Ministry of Culture when your Macbeth was banned? Surely you were aware of its possible repercussions.

I found myself at the end of my rope. I felt there was

no more sense in playing hide and seek with the censors. One of my last shows was accused of being "too spiritual" without any further explanations. I consider this one of the ultimate goals—to bring the spiritual into the realms of art. My *Macbeth* was accused of being too revolutionary, too drastically breaking with the classical interpretation of Shakespeare.

But the most important point and reason for writing that letter was that, by playing a game with the authorities, by compromising on a day-to-day basis, you are gradually losing your personality. You are destroying yourself with your own hands. I saw many, many of my colleagues and people around me—in order to survive or gain something in life—become corrupted, totally cynical servants of ideology.

I decided that I didn't want that. I lived a pretty decent life during the short period of time I was allowed to express myself and managed to squeeze ideas through the censorship. I decided rather than to compromise further and become a morally destroyed person I would cease my activities altogether. It was a form of protest and the means of my survival.

The effect of my action was just devastating. It was unparalleled. Nobody in the theatre field had tried to do that. They called me a moral suicide. There was a good reason behind the label. I didn't expect to escape punishment. Yet, by a miracle I managed to survive a few hard years without any job and gained some strength. I don't know how to explain it. Just by saying "No," you put your life on the line and yet you gain something. The authorities, with all their power, don't know how to deal with you. I wasn't allowed to work in any cultural field. I wasn't allowed to work as a manual laborer. They didn't expect the strong reaction from the invisible audience behind me. People were very helpful, even risking their careers. Other people I considered my friends turned away from me in fear. Some people gave me unofficial jobs, food, and money. The authorities were startled and scared by that growing solidarity, one of the reasons they decided to let me leave the country.

You were trained in the mainstream of the Russian theatre tradition and you have directed a Russian play. What is it like to have to express your traditions and talent in an alien land?

Every night I can feel the pulse of my country. The people are hungry for the truth and enlightenment, and my inability to serve my people in the way that I feel the need is frustrating enough.

I consider myself very lucky to have escaped the physical punishment, to say the least, and to regain my ability to work in the American theatre. It wasn't easy. It took me years to get the first shot at reaching the greatest audience, on Broadway. And yet I feel frustrated, because the message I'm addressing to the public contains a double perspective. On the one hand I'm trying to present that piece of art as if I were facing the audience I know and feel. And on the other hand it's not the truth, because the American audience is not capable of digesting that message, nor does it have the same need of that play. It's why only part of the message reaches the audience. 