

AFTER THE ORCHARD: A JOURNAL

*Carnegie Mellon and the Moscow Art Theatre
interculturalize actor training*

BY ANTHONY NEWFIELD

Russian chaos is seldom quite so bad as it looks. John Lawrence, *A History of Russia*

Last July, Carnegie Mellon University inaugurated a new, cross-cultural MFA program in acting in conjunction with the Moscow Art Theatre in Russia. Classes were given in three locales over the course of a year—first in Cambridge, Mass., then at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, Pa., and finishing up at the Moscow Art Theatre (known to the Russians as “MXAT”).

The Cambridge classes—taught by both Russian and American instructors—included movement, Michael Chekhov technique, scene study, voice and speech, and classical text work as well

as intensive Russian language instruction. Lectures on Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre were given by Adolph Shapiro and Anatoly Smeliansky, the literary director of MXAT. Smeliansky spent the entire year with the students.

In Pittsburgh, work intensified, including an additional class in the history and culture of Russia, and rehearsals for two productions: *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Three Sisters*. Then, in January, the students packed their bags and headed for Moscow. What follows is a diary kept by one of the students, New York-based actor Anthony Newfield, during the Russian segment of the program.

4 P.M., JAN. 26, MOSCOW

Ya zdies. I am here. As the plane taxis to the terminal, I can see endless birch trees and snow-covered pines out my window. Stepping out of the plane, I stumble as the ancient ramp does not quite meet the plane. Two Russian guards stand in a corner eyeing us as we deplane and enter the dark, ominous-looking customs area of Sheremetyevo Airport. I've flown in and out of a lot of airports in my life, but never one this shabby. It's snowing lightly as we leave the airport. Entering the city, I am reminded of parts of New York: big, ugly buildings with stores and shops on the street level. Suddenly there is a beautiful 19th-century railway station: Beloruskaya. We are around the corner.

In my room at the dorm on the third floor, windows overlooking 3a Tverskaya-

Yamskaya Ulitza. Gray skies. I am lucky; I have a good room. Spacious and light, and it is at the end of the hall where I think it will be quiet.

“THE BEST ACTING I’VE SEEN HERE HAS BEEN FROM YOUNGER ACTORS. AS WITH SO MUCH ELSE IN THIS COUNTRY, THE FUTURE OF RUSSIA DEPENDS ON ITS YOUTH.”

There is a reception for us in [director] Oleg Tabakov’s office. Many of our instructors are there along with some of the people who work in the various offices. There is a good buffet laid out for us and many bottles of

vodka, mineral water and juice. Many toasts. Much vodka. Paul Smith of the U.S. Embassy is there. I ask if the Clintons will be able to visit us and perhaps see our show while they are here for the Summit in May. “It’s absolutely something we’re working on. And if not the President, perhaps Hillary alone.”

JAN. 29, CHEKHOV’S BIRTHDAY

We are taken to the Novodevichy Cemetery where Chekhov, Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko are buried, along with many other notables. Several fourth-year Russian students come with us. It is a beautiful cemetery, quiet and peaceful and covered with a blanket of snow. The Russian students show us what is called “The Cherry Orchard” section of the cemetery where Chekhov and members of MXAT are buried. They place flowers on various graves.

Back to the dorm where we prepare to see the fourth-year students' production of *The Cherry Orchard*. Racing for time, still battling jet lag and lack of sleep, we run into McDonald's for a quick cup of coffee and a cherry pie before settling down in the studio theatre to watch what turns out to be a wonderfully moving production. I am completely caught off guard—the direction is simple and clean and

focused on the acting. At the end of the play, Sasha, who plays Ranyevskaya, carries a small bouquet of flowers to a photograph of Chekhov that had been placed on an easel off stage. Earlier in the day, she had placed a flower on his grave. It is a simple gesture that connects the cast to Chekhov.

JAN. 30

First day of classes. After three days of being led around the city, we are now on our own to navigate the metro system or the buses in order to get to the Actors Club where our classes are to be held. There is no room for us at the MXAT school. I don't like being separated from the Russians—it perpetuates an Us vs. Them attitude that I find uncomfortable. We need something—a party—some way to introduce us to the other students. Our first movement class



Moscow Art theatre instructors, left to right, Roman Kosak (acting), Larissa Borisanna Dmitrieva (dance), and Anatoly Smeliansky (literary director) and Andrei Droznin (movement).

with Andrei [Droznin] since Pittsburgh. We take it slowly today and spend most of the time stretching and getting back into a routine.

In the afternoon we start *Grapes* rehearsals so Tony [McKay] can redirect it for this awkward space. The stage is long and narrow and some seats in the house have terrible sightlines. The building the theatre is in stands next door to the venerable MXAT and was used as a hospital during the revolution in 1917. It was taken over by MXAT in the '40s, and it is here that the students present their shows. It is an amazing feeling to walk on this stage and speak lines from a quintessentially American play, a play I have grown to love, and which we will soon be performing here.

I walk to the ATM in the telegraph office across Tverskaya Street and withdraw

\$100 from my bank account in New York. (I love modern technology.) Jeannie and I walk through Red Square, past the Bolshoi, up Tverskaya Street and stop for a beer in a bar that is a part of a new supermarket. We get into a conversation with a Russian sitting next to us who had taught Russian literature in the States. As he gets up to leave, he warns us to be careful in Russia.

FEB. 1

Dance class. Too many of us—bad space. I like our instructor Larissa Dmitrieva. A former prima ballerina of the Bolshoi Ballet, she is ageless—somewhere in her fifties—and she is beautiful, gamine-like, lithe—a bit Audrey Hepburnish. She is graceful (of course), has great charm, style and a kind of aristocratic bearing that comes, I think, from the ballet. She has a ready smile and



seems genuinely thrilled to be working with us. She is, however, very concerned with the space we have been given—the lip of the stage at the Actors Club. There is a movie screen behind us that would require major manpower to lift for every class, so we can't even use the whole stage. She is not pleased, nor is the class. There is just no room for us at the MXAT school studio, so here we are. Larissa speaks through an interpreter, Tatyana, but is frustrated by this. [Later, she will do away with the translator and communicate with us using French phrases and the little English she knows. By the end of the semester, it is working fine.] We do seem to understand her—not everything, of course—in a mishmash of Russian, English, French, sign language and intuition.

FEB. 2

Saw *Boris Gudonov* at MXAT. Very disappointing. Presentational and outdoor drama-like. Much mugging. Actors bored?

FEB. 6

Walking from GUM department store past the Bolshoi, I see lines of women, standing next to one another, selling what appears to be one object each. I see lines of women like this all over. One holds a bra, another a loaf of bread, another a puppy, another a bottle of vodka. As they stand, they talk to one another. They are not peasants, not the desperately poor. Who are they?

FEB. 7

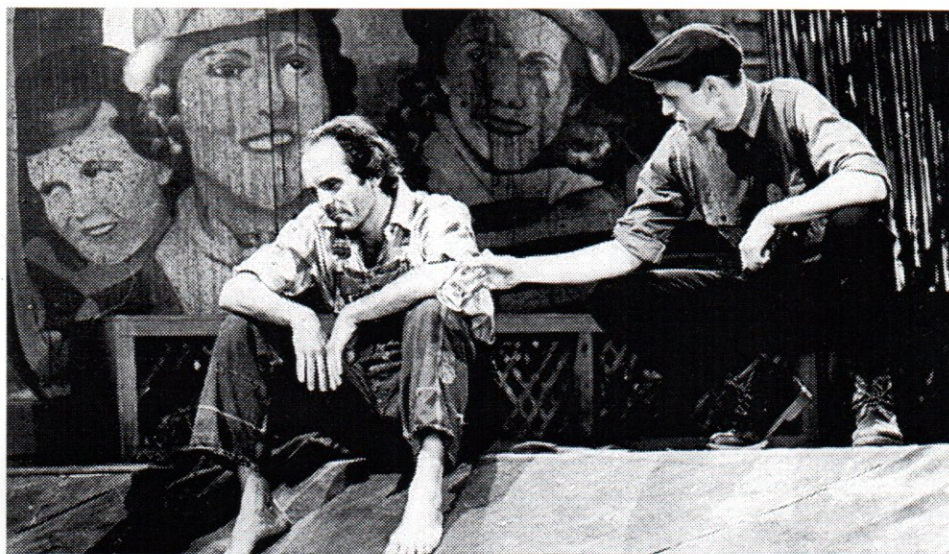
Saw *Teible and Her Demon* at MXAT tonight. Terrible. Indulgent. Monotonous. Dreary. And if the demon's going to be naked, be naked. But the whole evening became a play about how to hide his genitals. Yes, I understand that this is daring because there isn't a lot of nudity on Russian stages, but spare me from this somber, dark dreariness.

FEB. 8

Saw *The Deadly Number* tonight at MXAT's smaller space. Very good. *Godot*-like. Theatrical and full of energy and life. Directed by a young up-and-coming director/actor. The actors are also all young.

FEB. 12

Sitting in the Stanislavsky House Museum, waiting for the rest of the group to arrive, I am alone in this house where he lived his final years. Do I feel anything special? No. But the Russian attendants are chatting with



The CMU students brought to Moscow their production of John Steinbeck's quintessentially American story *The Grapes of Wrath*. In this scene Anthony Newfield as Jim Casey is consoled by Eric Bohus, in the role of Tom Joad.

me and enjoying my attempts to communicate with them. The view outside the main windows must be much the same as it was 60 or 70 years ago. But today the building across the street houses the Cuban Embassy.

FEB. 14

The Russian language class with Valentina is helpful in that she is explaining cultural things as well as trying to improve our conversational skills. I find I never have time to open my Russian book but as I am using the language on a daily basis, I don't really mind. My real language training at this point comes from speaking with the people. I constantly make a fool of myself as I stumble along, but slowly it's coming together. Little by little the door seems to be opening.

Tolya's class is exceptional today. (We've long since embraced this affectionate nickname for Anatoly Smeliansky.) He gives us an impromptu, extemporaneous talk on Bulgakov after we discuss seeing *The Master and Margarita* at the Taganka Theatre. Tolya's talks are giving us incredible insight into Bulgakov's soul—what the late Soviet system did to this brilliant man, and how it affected his career and others like him. It is almost as if Tolya is saying, "This is what happened. This must not be lost." I am very lucky to be here now at this time in the evolution of the history of Russia and to be experiencing these changes. Who knows how long this openness will last?

FEB. 26

The best acting I've seen here has been from younger actors. As with so much else in

this country, the future of Russian theatre depends on its youth. There are so many fossils, petrified in their old ways. Stuck, it seems, in one way to do things. Almost every male Russian actor I've seen on stage displays the same technique of quiet, intense brooding, building up to a bellowing roar. Whatever the role. The old petrified guys in *The Sea Gull* at MXAT, the army of fossils in *Boris Gudonov*, the dinosaurs in *Amadeus*. The women by and large seem to fare better. Perhaps because they're not constrained to play roles society has imposed on them, i.e., the macho, always-in-control, on-top-of-everything Russian male.

FEB. 27

It is all spinning out of control. I don't think I've ever been in such a chaotic situation. The mail crisis. The inability to communicate with anyone. I'm listening to a Chris Rea tape now. Appropriately enough, the song is "The Road to Hell." The set is not getting built. There is crap everywhere in the theatre, and I find shards of broken glass all over the stage as well as nails. And many of us walk barefoot in *Grapes*. There is an error at CMU—according to their records, I'm not registered. I've been told it's being taken care of, but I continue to receive notices from the registrar. Tony McKay calls CMU. "Well, can't you just e-mail the registrar?" says the secretary to me when we discuss my problem. It just shows how isolated we are.

MARCH 4

Sitting in on Tony's class of Russian students. After class, Tony and I ask them where

they want to work after graduation. "Whoever will hire us," they respond. "Yes, but where is your preference?" we press. "MXAT?" There are nervous giggles and glances from one to another. "Come on, speak freely," I say, and get up to close the door to the hall. "No," they finally confess. Everyone says they'd like to work for the Sovremenik, another large, highly respected theatre in the city.

MARCH 8, WOMEN'S DAY

Back to the theatre and work—sweeping, cleaning. Teched Act 1. Jeannie, Alison and I paint the edges of the steps white where the actors must walk in the dark during the play. Tired. 2:30 a.m. Is there such a thing as glow tape in Moscow? Who knows.

THURS. EVENING, MARCH 9

Dress/preview with tech of *Grapes*. Chaos. Long day. Painfully slow. The Russian sound and lighting designers do not have a translation of the play—their cues must all be sight cues.

FRIDAY NIGHT, MARCH 10

Opening night. Finally. There are the inevitable screw-ups with lights and sound. In spite of everything, it is a good show. The theatre is packed. They have to add extra seats. Russian student friends are there, Paul Smith and others from the embassy, faculty. The obligatory extra curtain calls begin, and we are brought out again and again by their rhythmical clapping. They enjoy this and want us to continue reappearing—we see this at every theatre when an audience enjoys the show.

MARCH 13

The first day of acting class. It is being led by Alla Pokrovskaya, a leading actress of the Sovremenik Theatre and a director, and Roman Kosak, her former student at the MXAT school and now a leading director, and, some say, in line for the artistic directorship of MXAT.

There is a quiet intensity—a reverence from Roman and Alla. A seriousness of purpose. There is nothing frivolous about what we are about to do. We are told to find chairs, form a semi-circle and sit. Ragged at first, we are told to try again, to work together and to sit as a group. Quietly. We sit with our feet on the floor, hands on our knees. Relaxing. We begin the process of becoming a real ensemble.

The Russian students I've observed show



Chekhov's looming portrait peers out from the walls of a building across the street from the Moscow Art Theatre.

a respect for their instructors, and there is a formality between them that we do not have. We adopt a more casual relationship, calling them by their first names, while the Russian students always use the respectful form of first names and patronymics.

Half the group is given Stanislavsky's improv (called "etude" in Russian) about the killer madman on the loose in the house. When Roman gives the go, chaos ensues. People scream, give orders, run away. The same thing happened with Stanislavsky's group. "Where are you coming from...who are you...what is your relationship? Cliches...representational acting..." Roman calls out.

"The main problem with bad contemporary theatre," Roman tells us, "is that we don't play the events. There is me before the event and me after. We may not show it [the event] at all, but something has to happen."

MARCH 24

Productive day. Good weather. Two hours of dance class with Larissa—feel like I've had a real workout. With Andrei's two classes this week, I'm feeling the work in my muscles.

We're all losing weight—the food is bad. Lunches every day at the Actors Club restaurant. At the beginning it was awful, and they just had no idea what to do with the vegetarians. It's better now, although every once in a while we get the odd plate of dried, frozen vegetables. And dinners at the MXAT canteen leave a lot to be desired—kasha or dried macaroni and "mystery meat" and some kind of soup.

We perform *Grapes* every Friday night—one night a week. We meet at 4:00 every Friday afternoon in order to do a group warm-up and to go over the show. We also check props for the show and to make sure the set is up correctly, since it has to be taken down after every performance in order to

put up the set for one of the other student plays—*The Cherry Orchard*, *Buried Child* and, after it opens, *Three Sisters*.

MARCH 27, INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THEATRE

Light snow dusting the ground this morning. Attended the memorial service for Innokenty Smoktanovsky, Russia's great actor who died while we were in Cambridge last summer. His memorial is held on the main stage of MXAT, his theatrical home, and the theatre is filled to capacity.

MARCH 29

Jeannie and I sit in on Anna Nikolayevna's first-year voice class. She's extraordinary, all the Russian students stand when she enters the room. There is silence. Nikolayevna greets the group quietly and asks us to sit. "May we observe class?" we ask. "Of course," she answers. She has a remarkable ease and grace from another era. She reminds me of my grandmother.

She speaks with us afterwards about voice training in the U.S.S.R. from the '20s to today. She tells us that new methods of voice training came to Russia in the '20s, but after Stalin it was forbidden. In those days, she says, training was rigid. You either had a beautiful instrument or you didn't. Those who did not, were out. "How," she asks us, "how can you teach someone to be free in their vocal production if there is no freedom outside? No political freedom. It is impossible."

APRIL 2

Alla's acting teacher, when she was a student at MXAT, was taught by Stanislavsky himself. At that time, she was taken with another young girl to meet Olga Knipper-Chekhova, to give her flowers on her 90th birthday. Olga, sitting imperiously in her sitting room, told the girls they could ask her a question. "What was the dress like you wore as Masha?" "That is not a question to ask..." and she dismissed them.

As warm and loving as Alla is, in class she is very direct. She is not cruel, but she tells us exactly what she sees, feelings be damned. It is just the way the other Russian instructors talk to the Russian students.

Alla has been with us since Cambridge. It is similar to the Russian system of each class having its own master teacher. Other instructors come in to work with the students, but the master oversees the class throughout their studies for all four years. My friends in the second year, Seriozha, Elena, Yura and

the others invite me to the Chopin concert at the Sovremenik Theatre. A piano is set up in a side lobby of the theatre and a young pianist plays beautifully. The concert is organized for the students and is mandatory, part of their education as actors.

APRIL 4

The Maids, directed by Roman Viktyuk. An extraordinary evening. I have to buy a ticket—the most expensive one I've bought here: 20,000 rubles (\$4). The show begins on a campy note—a male revue-like show with the actors lip-synching and dancing to songs (“Cabaret,” Eurotrash) that serves to me as an unnecessary prologue. The mixture of the feminine and the masculine throughout, the slow and easy delivery, the movement. The theatricality of it all—the dark but not opaque curtain drawn part way at the beginning as if we are voyeurs. The games Solange and Claire are playing: their physicality is tremendous—Solange leaping over the crumpled Claire to open the curtains. Madame entering and being given her dress and her fur (“No, I'll only drink champagne tonight...”) and Claire's anguish conveyed by the way the actor throws himself around the barre. Claire offering the cup of tea to Madame—the elaborate dance he goes through to place it at her feet—it takes my breath away. The entire audience—middle class, average looking—is transfixed.

At the end of the play, Claire enters in a white G-string and a white rag skirt and dances—simulated sex, more acrobatics. The whole evening is dazzling. Viktyuk seems to be saying, “We're here—we're queer—get used to us,” in a mainstream Moscow theatre. An embrace of all that is unique and special and good about being gay. In Russia.

APRIL 13

Hillary Clinton's advance people come to the school today to check out our facilities, for a possible visit by the First Lady during the upcoming summit in May.

MAY 9, VICTORY DAY CELEBRATION

President Clinton is here. There is a buzz in the air as the big day has finally arrived. In the morning, I watch the parade in Red Square on television. Michael and others run off to see the tanks and other heavy artillery in a second parade. There is a festive air to the day—people are genuinely happy.

Veterans are everywhere, proudly displaying their medals.

MAY 12

The time is flying by, as I knew it would. The White House visit is harried. An excerpt from *Three Sisters* is presented, followed by a meet-and-greet session with the First Lady and Mrs. Yeltsin. Mrs. Clinton asks a few questions, we are photographed with her, and she is whisked away. She is gracious, charming, intelligent and shows a real interest in the exchange aspect of the program.

I saw *The Passion of Boombash* at the Tabakov Studio and *The Marriage of Figaro* at the Lenkom. Both are delightful—beautifully produced and well-acted.

MAY 22

Smeliansky's last class. Some of his closing remarks: “MXAT is not a building or a stage or historical walls. It is the idea of doing theatre, of living in theatre, of creating something. MXAT is an idea. I have believed it all my life, and I believe it now. The concrete MXAT is dead, and I don't know when it will be restored. I do believe in the idea—they [the Soviets] could not kill that. I don't believe circumstances can kill talent, because talent is your way of loving your heart, body and mind. There are no fire extinguishers to kill talent. It is the same for MXAT. We killed it, unfortunately. New generations will inhale—it is in the genes of our nation now. They cannot kill it. Every day we have to choose to live or to die. We must learn how to choose life.” That's it. *Eta vcyo*.

MAY 26

Last night of *Grapes* in Moscow. The show goes well. It hits me right at the top with Eric in our scene—“...it's love...I love people so much...maybe it's all men and all women we love.” Afterwards, we drink champagne courtesy of Tanya, our translator, who also gives us small gifts. Some of us end up at the Cafe Margarita where I play a ragged “Red River Valley” on the harmonica.

JUNE 1

Another extraordinary day, starting with our friends in the second year doing scenes from Shakespeare. Seriozha's Hamlet and Lena's Rosalind from *Kak Vi Xatitie (As You Like It)* are especially good.

Then our actual graduation ceremony in the foyer of MXAT. We buzz about inside, putting on our caps and gowns and taking pictures. With no school band to support us, and with tongue in cheek, we march in humming “Pomp and Circumstance.” We are all moved by Lis's words, welcoming the group to the community of theatrical artists. After the ceremony, Tina suggests we walk down to Red Square to have our photo taken as a group, in our caps and gowns in the square. The photos are taken in the 90 degree heat. Later, at the graduation party, I tell Roman about our plan to present *Grapes* in New York City: “We're doing it in New York. It'll be in a church, without a set.” Roman responds, “But you'll be doing it with God.”

JUNE 3

The night before we leave Moscow to return to New York, I invite everyone to my room. Russians and Americans come and go. Vodka (it goes without saying), food, music, conversation, laughter, gift-giving. Still not packed at 3:00 a.m., I have to ask everyone to leave in order to get it done. No problem, my Russian friends say, they will take a walk through the streets and look in on me later. I pack from three to five, throw things away, give things away and am finally ready. I lie down to rest and fall asleep.

At 6:30 I awake and wonder if my friends are anywhere nearby. I open the door of my dorm room and am left speechless by the sight that greets me. Stretching from my room down the hall to the landing is a path of greenery and flowers that extend down the staircase to the entrance on the first floor. I walk to the landing where Seriozha, putting the final touches on the display, senses my presence, turns around slowly, smiles and says simply, “This is how much we love you.” Ksusha walks up the stairs, hands me a bouquet of camellias and says with a comforting tenderness, “We took a walk through Moscow and we were your eyes.”

For the next two hours we talk, we drink more vodka, more toasts to friendship, to love, to Russia and America, and to all of us. When the bus comes, we hug and say good-bye. It is not an easy departure.

Anthony Newfield is an actor and teacher based in New York City