

The Moscow Art Theater

By MAX SHACHTMAN

On June 4, 1897, Constantin Stanislavsky and Nyemirovitch-Dantchenko met in a Moscow restaurant to discuss the Russian theater. The result of this discussion was the organization of the Moscow Art Theater, which was based on the principles of dictatorial directorship and realism of representation. Stanislavsky was elected first director. It was his duty to choose the play, the painter of the scenery, the parts to be taken by the actors and so on. Nyemirovitch-Dantchenko took charge of the financial end.

In 1898, they produced their first play, Alexei Tolstoi's historical tragedy, "Czar Fyodor Ivanovitch," and it achieved an encouraging success.

The group became well-known and it went on with Sophocles' "Antigone" and plays by Ibsen, Shakespeare, Ostrovski and Hauptmann. The latter dramatist's "Hannele" was, by the way, not permitted by the police, due to a protest against its ungodliness by the Metropolitan of Moscow. For a time certain poorly chosen plays seemed to indicate that the co-operative venture would be a failure. Then the remarkable success of Anton Checkov's "Chaika" (Sea Gull) raised the morale and prestige of the players to a high degree. Checkov seemed to fit them excellently and the troupe became known as "Checkov's Theatre." To this day that author remains one of the most prominent and best-liked of the theatre's repertory.

In spite of the Checkov success, the first season ended with a deficit of more than 40,000 rubles, excluding much of the money invested by the artists. Their fortunes varied very much in the next few years, but it may be said that if it had not been for the liberal subsidies of a certain Sava Morosov and other rich men, the players would have had hard sledding.

Their subsequent plays were chosen from many authors from all lands and times. There were, inevitably, alternate failures and successes. There was considerable experimenting with all sorts of theories, some of which were tried to absurd lengths. A few years before the foundation of the Moscow Art Theatre, a troupe of German players from Meiningen under the direction of Cronegk, had achieved a startling success in Russia with their realistic, representations. Their methods were the ones originally followed by Stanislavsky. From that position the theatre went to Naturalism; then to Symbolism, where, for instance, Andreev's pessimistic "A Man's Life" was performed before a black background; from Symbolism to Impressionism and thence to its present form, where it is known as the "Theatre of Poetic Realism."

In the organization there have occasionally been disagreements between individual actors and the benevolent dictator, Stanislavsky. In 1906 Meyerhold, a well-known actor and member of the corporation, left the troupe as a revolt against the realism of the production. He is now known as the theorist of the "Theatre Theatrical," into the details of which we need not go. The spirit of the organization is better shown, however, by the invitation, in 1922, to the American, Gordon Craig, to come to Moscow for the production of "Hannibal," with his own impressionistic "screen settings," a method of presentation which was then at complete variance with the predominating theory of the Art Theatre.

After the Bolshevik Revolution it was prophesied that the "Reds" would destroy the Theatre, that they would kill Art, and so on. But, with the exception of the first few months of the new government, the Moscow Art Theatre, as well as every other center of Art and Science and Culture, has been open and playing to record audiences. The lines outside the theatre were so large, that lotteries had to be established in order to give only a lucky few the privilege of filling up the seats! There were sneering bourgeois who would say that the "rabble" could never appreciate the beauty of the theatre. Yet, the "Terevsat" (Theatre of Revolutionary Satire) which produces more or less purely propagandist plays, is not so popular or well-filled as is the Art Theatre, whose catholic repertory includes plays by Shakespeare and Ibsen, Hamsun and Moliere, Tolstoi, Gorky, Checkov and Andreev!

Where, formerly, the Theatre and

the Ballot were subsidized by the Czar and wealthy "Patrons of Art," it is now given rich subsidies by the government of workers and peasants and soldiers. Where, formerly, the orchestra and boxes were occupied by fat puppets in immaculate evening dress, they are now taken by intelligent workingmen and women, whose rapt attention and recognizable appreciation are the wonder of all visitors. It is a fine tribute to the Russian working class, that, in spite of years of War Blockade, Hunger, Cold and infinite miseries caused by the world's imperialists, their hearts still yearn, and they still find time for cultural advancement.

The Soviet government's arrangement with the Theatre has proved to be a very practical—and significant—one. The Soviets (and the trade unions) take care of the distribution of the tickets and leave to the discretion of the artists everything that takes place behind the footlights. The artists receive their pay from the Soviet and they have shown themselves very happy to perform their plays under this arrangement. That bourgeois-puffed bubble of "No artistic initiative under Socialism" has been sadly pricked.

In bringing the Moscow Art Theatre to the United States, Mr. Morris Gest has not only done a service to Art, but to the betterment of amicable relations between this country and Russia. For this he surely deserves our thanks.

"SECRETS" IS SOOTHING

"Secrets" is a comfortable, reassuring play. It soothes, with just enough excitement to make the soothing pleasurable. And the result is that it is drawing crowds to the Fulton Theater, in W. 46th St., showing that the great percentage of theatergoers go to see plays that transport them away from their daily contacts.

This Harris production offers a wide field for the versatile genius of Margaret Lawrence, who lives before her audience in four periods of widely separated time, as a young girl desperately in love in England, in 1867; as the young wife and mother, in Wyoming, U. S. A., 1870; then as the mother of three grown children and the wife of a British peer in London, in 1888, then as a mother and wife in life's fading years in 1922. It is not often that a stage star attempts such an ordeal.

Thru those 55 years the chain of love continues unbroken, altho it is badly strained on numerous occasions. Tom Nesbitt gives us a vivid portrayal of John Carlton, the London clerk, who persuades Mary Marlowe to elope with him to Wyoming. They survive the pioneer life of the great west and go back home. John to be knighted and peered, and to play fast and loose with women of questionable reputation.

When a wife discovers that her husband has been untrue to her, the business of the legal profession and divorce courts usually begins to pick up. Not so in "Secrets". That makes it comfortable for the Stillmans, the Stokeses, and the large numbers of others of similar proclivities, albeit the final, helpless plea of John on his sickbed, won back from death, calling to his faithful, never-wavering wife, "Mary, come here. I need you."

It is a clever play, catering to our best bourgeoisie, condoning its sins, as well as championing its sincerities. And anything that lauds the best bourgeoisie is sure to be liked by the lesser elements in the same social strata.

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