

The Russian Pre-Theatrical Actor and the Stanislavsky System

by

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In some cases, a children's game, a folk game, or a village dance brings us closer to answering to the question of what is theater and what it should be than the work of a great playwright.

A.I Beletskii

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To Leta, Lydia, and Vladimir

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Abstract

The present study juxtaposes the “pre-theater” of Russian mummerly and ritual sequences to Stanislavsky’s “System” of actor training. This approach affords an alternative perspective on the place and meaning of traditional performance in Russian theater history. The resulting narrative is based not on “evolution” and simplistic convergences such as the proposition that certain types of performance, such as those bearing a superficial resemblance to proscenium type presentations (mummers’ shows at Yuletide), were more “advanced” than less contained manifestations of traditional performance such as ambulatory rituals. Instead, continuity exists in structural and processual links between pre-theater and the System present in shared techniques for creating and inhabiting a character and the effects on this process of an actor’s relationship to fellow performers, audiences, and his community’s system of beliefs and practices.

While pre-theatrical performance is not analogous to the System acting, traditional performers share many aspects of their approach with System actors. In this study, functional and structural features of each illuminate the other, such as applying Stanislavsky’s concept of “playing the self in given conditions” to describe the participant performer’s work as an actor in the traditional wedding sequence, and

comparing the phenomenon of collective action in traditional performance to the genesis of the System and its transmission in the classroom.

Applying Stanislavsky's System to pre-theater provides a useful theoretical model for mapping a comprehensive description of an actor's process onto certain aspects of performance in traditional communities. This model privileges the role of individual creation as a key factor in the dynamic process of challenging and reinforcing cultural continuity. As such, this study offers an alternative to accounts of traditional culture where impersonal social and cultural processes predominate.

In terms of theater history, this research represents both an alternative to "evolutionary" accounts of Russian theater history and a consideration of the fundamental cultural roots of the System, those aspects of actor training and approaches to embodied performance which transcend not only 20th century acting theory but all of Russian theater as a national variant of the European stage-play tradition.

Introduction

At the center of this dissertation is a notion about the relationship between traditional Russian popular performance, or folkloric “pre-theater,” and some of the most important aspects in modern Russian theater and contemporary acting techniques, specifically Stanislavky’s System for actor training. If thought of as “chapters” in the history of Russian theater, these two phenomena represent extremes or book-ends. Otherwise, they are typically seen to have little in common, at least when considered chronologically. This sort of “evolutionary” model of Russian theater historiography guarantees that materials are organized and interpreted in certain ways. This approach thus automatically excludes from scholarly consideration a number of other questions, hypotheses, and theorems about the nature of Russian theater and the relationship between certain of its manifestations.

What if, however, rather than being placed at opposite ends of a time-line, pre-theater and the System are considered synchronically? What if we dispense, at least for the sake of argument, with all evolutionary connections between the two and focus instead on commonalities based on the actor’s process in the context of society and culture? I accepted this challenge and the present dissertation is the result of where such a “perverse” notion brought me.

A synchronic consideration of pre-theater and the System appears unorthodox at first glance in the light of conventional approaches in Russian theater historiography.

Surveys of Russian theater history begin with a chapter or two on folk theater: mummerly, wedding rites, and calendar and family cycle festivals, along with very speculative accounts of the *skomorokhi*¹ as the reified “face” of Old Russian performance. Then this thread breaks off and another begins with the “importation” of the Western stage play in the late 17th century. This importation was certainly a watershed. The European theatrical tradition was brought by Westerners like the German Pastor Gregory, who staged Russia’s first theatrical performance in 1672 for Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (with German actors).² When Muscovy annexed the Ukraine in the mid 1600s, Jesuit-style School Theater came along with the new lands and subjects. Intriguingly, the Tsar’s court theater arrived within a few decades of edicts against manifestations of native popular-performance culture. As Russell Zguta has written,

[I]n December of 1648 Aleksei issued two famous *gramoty* outlawing the *skomorokhi*, along with a host of other “pagan” traditions and practices. The long and colorful history of Russian minstrels was thus officially brought to an end. (63)³

While “pagan” practices like mummerly, holiday revelry, and rites such as the very theatrical traditional “wedding drama” survived into the 20th century, the *skomorokhi*, at least “officially,” vanished as a class. Once the Tsar had “adopted” the model of the European stage-play, the work of Russian actors, directors, and dramatists would henceforth be understood and evaluated in terms of imported models. “Theater” in

¹ Russia’s popular performers or “minstrels” of the medieval and early-modern era.

² See I. M. Kudriavtsev’s introduction to *Artakserksovo deistvo: Pervaia p’esa russkogo teatra XVII v.* Moscow-Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo akademii nauk SSSR, 1957, and chapter one of L. Starikova’s *Teatral’naia zhizn’ starinnoi Moskvy*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1988.

³ The *gramoty* are reproduced in *Akty, sobrannye v bibliotekakh i arkhivakh Rossiiskoi Imperii arkhograficheskoiu ekspeditsiei imperaterskoi akademii nauk*, Vol. 4: 1645-1700. St. Petersburg, 1836, 138-139.

Russia began its development as a variety of European stage culture of the modern era, sometimes slavishly imitative, at other times leading the way.

What of the “native” tradition? The mainstream view that Russian theater accepted the European stage-play as its model and never looked back implies that traditional performance survived as a living fossil practiced in villages “on the periphery” both in terms of actual geography—remoteness from the metropole—and in terms of the cultural “backwardness” of the performance traditions of the illiterate masses. How were these two “theaters” to be reconciled in the story of the Russian stage? In narrative after narrative, folk performance, although it was still being practiced and attested for centuries after the debut of the Tsar’s court theater in 1672, was put in the only place it seemed to make any sense—at the beginning of the story. Every account of Russian theater I have read locates Genesis for the Russian stage in the late 17th century and proceeds diachronically. Traditional performance has no place in the main current of events according to this scenario. It is therefore tacked on at the beginning as a prologue, only to be swept away, denied further agency, along with the *skomorokhi*, in the forward momentum of Russian performance. Aleksei Mikhailovich, with two signal acts—his edicts of the 1648 against popular performance and the creation of a court theater in 1672—made this narrative very convincing.

But sticking traditional performance onto the beginning of the story in a state of near complete autonomy is not the only solution to the problem of incorporating pre-theater into a narrative of Russian theater. Synchronic consideration of pre-theater and the System makes perfect sense because traditional performance in fact did occur synchronically with a large stretch of the development of the high-culture stage. Serious

ethnographic fieldwork to collect data about traditional performance took place only in the 19th and 20th centuries. They show that traditional performance changed and developed, waxing and waning over time. It did, though, exist concurrently with western-style theater.

It is not my intention to trace a deep, complicitous relationship between pre-theater and the high-culture stage in terms of direct historical influence of one on the other. With regard to the System, it is unlikely that traditional performance factored into the thoughts and actions of its creators in any sort of direct fashion. Rather, pre-theater and the System “drank from the same well,” they shared common traits, influences, and cultural resonances. The actor is the link between the two and the source of continuity in Russian theater. By identifying with the performer, by thinking of performing as a way of being and understanding achieved by assuming a different identity and existing in an alternative situation, I will bring together pre-theater and System from the viewpoint of the actor’s process.

Pre-Theater

Historical surveys of Russian theater typically begin with discussions of traditional play culture—mumming, family and calendar rituals, folk games and various forms of holiday revelry. Although this play culture has typically been treated in the historiography as a prelude to the mainstream development of the Russian stage rather than a viable synchronic contributor to it, some effort has been made to integrate “folk” performance into a comprehensive narrative. Larisa Ivleva, in her book, *The Pre-theatrical Play Language of Russian Folklore* (1998), discusses the various ways that individual elements of play culture have been randomly and arbitrarily selected and

categorized in order to provide classificatory schemes qualifying these phenomena as “theatrical” (23-24). In the overwhelming majority of cases, the inclination in Russian/Soviet scholarship has been to characterize traditional performance as an evolutionary precursor to Russian “theater,” i.e., the professional, Western-looking stage. Exposing the contradictions and inconsistencies in this approach, Ivleva wonders if it even makes sense in the Russian context to study play-based forms of traditional culture in comparison with “theater” (34). She says yes, but only if the “genetic approach,” stated first by Aristotle in Book IV of *The Poetics* whereby theater “evolved” from magic and ritual and gradually lost its vital seriousness over the centuries to become a “pastime,” is discarded and a “typological” (formal) approach is adopted (35).

Ivleva was a student of Vladimir Propp.⁴ The influence of his school shaped her approach. The methodology she adopted allows for a consideration of where traditional play culture differs from, as well as resembles, “theater.” “Russian theater,” she states, “did not grow directly out of ritual or children’s play” (35). Nonetheless, she says, they share key structural characteristics. Traditional play culture and Western stage culture are structurally convergent in a sufficient number of areas to allow for the study of the former in terms of the latter without admitting to evolutionary links between the two. This approach has been called *etnoteatrovedenie*, or “ethnographic theater studies” and is Ivleva’s chief contribution to our understanding of Russian theater and performance.

Ivleva’s approach is important because for the first time play culture in the East Slavic context was studied without having to force it into a narrative scheme in which

⁴ Propp was author of *The Morphology of the Folk Tale*, a seminal text in structuralist folkloristics.

the Western model was the final step in a process of historical evolution. I agree with her rejection of the purely external, mechanical connections between folk play and Russian theatrical culture drawn by her predecessors. This trajectory does not satisfy me because it has been plotted in a simplistic, reductive fashion: “folk play” and “theater” both have costumes, props, dialogue, characters, and action; the later must have therefore “evolved” from the former.

In my view, theater is not characterized by such superficial accoutrements. The lowest common denominator, the limiting factor in theater is the actor. With him the externals come alive in performance, and without him they are at best exhibits in a museum. Therefore, continuity in Russian theater history must be sought in an understanding of the actor’s process: those conditions, habits, notions, approaches, and techniques that might be found in common between two disparate manifestations of Russian theatrical culture. This study juxtaposes acting as described in Stanislavsky’s System and acting in traditional communities, or what I call “pre-theater.”

In the context of east Slavic traditional culture, pre-theatrical acting occurs when a performer creates and animates a character at some distance from the performer’s “self,” existing temporarily in an alternative reality, letting the circumstances of that reality dictate how he behaves. Stanislavsky’s approach also involves believing in a set of given conditions and “acting” accordingly. Both traditional play and modern Russian acting share the same “background” in the form of cultural notions, ideas of and attitudes toward performance in the context of communities, and the dynamic between performance and the process of becoming mature, fully acculturated members of those communities. My proposed juxtaposition attempts to resolve the discontinuity between

“pre-theater” and the Western stage-play tradition by finding common ground between folk performing and theatrical acting.

Pre-theater and Folk Drama

I will follow Ivleva in using the term “pre-theater” to describe traditional play culture. It displays differences from the high-culture Russian stagecraft of the last three hundred years, which are profound and obvious. There is a place, though, where the two would seem to converge. This is the so called “folk drama” or “folk theater” (*narodnaia drama, narodnyi teatr*), a variety of popular performance recorded in Russia in the 19th and 20th centuries and was modeled after the stage culture of the cities. In folk drama, a “script”—typically a variant of *The Boat* or *Tsar Maximillian*, the two most popular texts—was performed in the style of a “play” in a “theater.” Elizabeth Warner has described this genre of folk performance very well in her book *The Russian Folk Theater*, including the important contribution made by soldiers who participated in its development and dissemination when they returned from service to their home villages. Descriptions of acting observed in performances of folk dramas indicate that the stylistic approach was firmly rooted in the heavily French-influenced Russian neoclassical style dominant around the turn of the 19th century.

This fact, and the central importance of a dramatic text, prohibits me from including folk theater in my definition of pre-theater. Folk theater and pre-theater both belong under the rubric of popular performance. However, folk theater is clearly an attempt to recreate in traditional communities the stage culture of the educated classes, itself the deliberate copying of Western models. Defining pre-theater as “indigenous” East Slavic performance is not entirely unproblematic: elements from outside the

parochial world of traditional village life continually influenced its development. Towns and cities, fairs and markets, provincial seats, the capitals and even foreign lands influenced expressions of folk performance as members of traditional communities left their villages for work, trade, and military service only to return with strange new commodities, notions and practices. However, maintaining the difficult but necessary line between the folk drama and pre-theater preserves the latter as a field where the deliberate aping of the “featr” of the educated classes is absent.

If the folk drama demonstrates that the theater of urban areas and educated classes “trickled down” to the village, a corresponding influence from “bottom” to “top” might also be postulated. Determining which aspects of the popular performance tradition in Russia influenced the high-culture stage is difficult. The debt “European” theater owes its rustic counterpart is not as obvious as the reverse process. Traditional culture could offer nothing to dramatic literature (aside from its own colorful self occasionally as subject matter). The Western-influenced stage always maintained the paradigm whereby actor and audience were separate, engaging each other only during performance and across the footlights. What exactly, then, do pre-theater and the System have in common? To answer that question, it will be necessary to explore the actor’s work and the cultural and social contexts of his performance in both pre-theater and the modern stage and to compare the two. The acting System of Stanislavsky will be used to interrogate the pre-theatrical performer’s process.

The System of Stanislavsky

The System is an acting technique, a practical methodology actors use to go from first reading of a script all the way through the creative process to keep

themselves artistically engaged with a role, no matter how long the show may run. It is also a way to teach acting. In this sense, it represents both the transfer of knowledge in the narrow sense of how to rehearse and perform “according to the System,” and in the broader sense of indoctrinating beginning actors into the cultural field of Russian theater.

The System exists, on the one hand, in the words and deeds of its creator, Konstantin Stanislavsky. In writing and in speech, Stanislavsky left a record of the System and its development over many years.⁵ Students and followers, too, both those who had worked closely with Stanislavsky personally and those who had little to no contact with him but learned the System “second hand,” have contributed to the body of material that constitutes our knowledge of the System.⁶ Scholars, editors, and critics have also expanded our understanding of the topic.

In this huge body of material there are bound to be contradictions, not just among those who knew Stanislavsky personally and attempted to pass on and interpret the received knowledge, but within the preserved record of the teaching of Stanislavsky himself. Stanislavsky was continually revising and improving his System; contradictions, inconsistencies, and paradoxes will easily be found if there is a desire to

⁵ Two academic editions of Stanislavsky’s collected works have appeared, both published by “Iskusstvo,” An eight volume set (1954-1961) and nine volumes (1988-1999). I concur with the evaluation of the Elizabeth Hapgood Reynolds’s English translations of Stanislavsky’s key works as poor made by Jean Benedetti, “A History of Stanislavskii in Translation,” *New Theatre Quarterly*, 6: 23, 1990, pp. 266-278, and Sharon Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998. Benedetti has recently published new translations of Stanislavsky’s key works on acting, *An Actor’s Work*, Routledge, 2008.

⁶ Just a few examples of the many books about the System written by people who worked directly with Stanislavsky include Gorchakov’s *Rezhisserskie uroki K.S. Stanislavskogo*, Iskusstvo, 1950 (Published in English as *Stanislavsky Directs*, Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1954) and Lidiia Novitskaia’s *Uroki vdokhnoveniia*, BTO, 1984.

find them. For my part, however, I agree with Soviet director Georgi Tovstonogov, who wrote:

The theory of actors' creativity elaborated by [Stanislavsky] deepened, improved and changed in direct interaction with practice. The System in its original version and in the final one articulated by Stanislavsky not long before his death [as reflected in] Stanislavsky's thoughts [on the subject], can, upon superficial acquaintance, seem to contradict one another. In fact, however, the evolution of ideas of the System's creator only confirms their [logical] consistency. (Tovstonogov, 1980 I, 235)⁷

Tovstonogov affirms the consistency of the System based not on the logic of the critic but from the position of a practitioner for whom Stanislavsky's teachings represented the essential, eternally resourceful foundation of his craft.

The illusion of contradiction, therefore, stems from attempts to read Stanislavsky's work uninformed by practical experience with the System. Sometimes the reason lies in ignorance of the System as a working method. Sometimes the reason is a methodology which interrogates the System based only on the written record considered literally and chronologically.⁸ Neither approach provides an integral perspective on the System.⁹ The result is a reading of Stanislavsky and other leading figures in Russian and Soviet theater, which, while "accurate" in terms of documentary "evidence," nonetheless misses the "spirit" of the System, an "atomized" approach. An example of such an approach comes in Robert Gordon's *The Purpose of Playing* (2006), which reifies and sharply juxtaposes people who worked with actors as creators and proponents of specific theories—as partisans or zealots—rather than co-

⁷ Georgii Tovstonogov, *Zerkalo stseny, 1: O professii rezhissera*. Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1980).

⁸ An example is Rose Whyman's article "The Actor's Second Nature: Stanislavski and William James," *New Theatre Quarterly* 23:2 (May 2007).

⁹ The latter approach, though, as demonstrated in Whyman's article, allows for enlightening deconstruction resulting in useful questions, which would not otherwise emerge upon consideration "from within" the System.

contributors, in the case of Stanislavsky and Vakhtangov,¹⁰ for example, to the creation of the System.

This methodology certainly has its advantages: it is important to understand who influenced whom and to chart, as accurately as possible, a chronology of the development of ideas and methods. Often, however, it is not easy to determine who was originally responsible for this or that innovation in acting pedagogy. Stanislavsky wrote the books and oversaw the “field testing” of the System at places like the Moscow Art Theater and its experimental laboratory for research into new acting techniques, the First Studio. But even during its formation, the System had co-creators—Stanislavsky’s associates, assistants, fellow actors, and students—all of whom were co-dependant with Stanislavsky in a meta-ensemble of meta-actors, individuals all involved in some way with developing and refining a better approach to acting. This means that however careful and diligent Stanislavsky was in recording his System for posterity, there exists alongside the written record another dimension, that of lore and practice: the transmittable embodied knowledge of Stanislavsky and his associates, the System as a working theory about the actor’s process.

The System, therefore, is both (1) the approach to learning and practicing the craft of acting that developed as a group effort under Stanislavsky and (2) a cultural artifact, its written account and a transmittable body of knowledge. This second category is what I learned in acting class in Moscow.¹¹ Therefore, my understanding of

¹⁰ Actor, director, pedagogue, and member of the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theater, Vakhtangov was one of the earliest proponents of the Stanislavsky’s System and instrumental in elaborating its precepts in practice.

¹¹ From 1992 to 1998 I was a student of the Russian Academy of Theatrical Arts (GITIS) where I studied opera directing under Boris Pokrovsky, People’s Artist of the USSR, professor, Stalin Prize winner, stage director and director of productions at the Bolshoi Theater for decades, creator of hundreds of productions in the USSR and eastern Europe, author of many books and articles

the System is based on my practical experience with it. In the same way that Tovstonogov dismissed charges of inconsistency, I interpret the data from many sources through my personal experience with the System, and my instincts as an actor and director. I find coherence and continuity there, and this allows me to perceive and reconcile many otherwise confusing details. Like Tovstonogov, I understand that for Stanislavsky, the System was always a work in process. Even after Stanislavsky's death in 1938, the System did not remain a closed book, but continued to develop in a number of directions.

Stanislavsky's experiments and his conclusions about them were shaped, of course, by his own and his contemporaries' aesthetic perspectives. But the System was also influenced by cultural continuity, particularly in the values and traditions already present in the background. My juxtaposition of Russian pre-theatrical performance and the System probes this cultural background, exposing a common heritage of performance in Russia, one that is deeper than the idea, imported from Europe, of "theater" as the scenic realization of dramatic texts and deeper than the notion of acting as an exclusively "aesthetic" activity. Indeed, prerequisites for much of the System can be found in patterns of traditional performance. In both pre-theater and the System, aesthetics exist in a complex interrelationship with ethics. In both, artistic expression and the functioning of communities are complicit.

One of the ways that performance contributed to the functioning of communities in traditional culture was by facilitating the acculturation and maturity of its members.

Although quite different from the goals of 20th century Russian acting training, the

including important contributions to the theory of opera directing, teacher of generations of directors and actors of musical theater. Pokrovsky attended GITIS in the 1930s and began his professional career as an opera director in 1937.

environments where each took place were remarkably similar. In my acting class at GITIS,¹² my colleagues and I got up from our chairs to participate not only in “études” where we enacted some event or scene, but also exercises with music, movement, and text designed to develop improvisation, bodily awareness, ensemble acting, attentiveness, imagination, and other skills crucial to the actor. Likewise, one of the most common venues for the homespun “theater” of traditional East-Slavic communities was an ordinary common room in a village or neighborhood. At winter parties, especially those held during the Yuletide season, teen-agers, usually girls, “rented” a home from someone in their village, often paying the homeowner with chores throughout the year. The area was prepared by freeing space in the center for the performance and insuring adequate light and warmth. The entire village, from swaddled infants to its most venerable citizens, would attend the holiday party that evening, squeezing in and spreading out along the walls of the room. The performers were chiefly young people, young men and women of marriageable age with the occasional participation of younger children and the recently married. The performance, which included dancing, singing, games, and “theatrical” presentations, was entertainment for its audience. But these gatherings also fulfilled important social functions in the life of the community.

Participants sat along the perimeter of the simple, improvised performance space and watched when not specifically engaged in an “exercise,” and during breaks between “acts.” Holiday mummers—groups of disguised locals, or ambulatory masked

¹² Our instructor of acting was Anna Alekseevna Nekrasova, who also studied at GITIS in the 1930s in the same group as Pokrovsky. Nekrasova had been an assistant to Moscow Art Theater actress, director, and pedagogue, Mariia Osipovna Knebel'. Nekrasova also worked as a director at the Central Children's Theater (currently known as the Russian Youth Theater).

revelers from neighboring villages, would burst in unexpectedly, dance around, and perform skits. Girls in their late teens and young children got up from their benches to participate, individually or in groups, becoming part of the imaginary world of the skit. Similarly, at GITIS during acting class we sat and watched our colleagues on our chairs, stepping out into the performance space to join or create fresh imaginary worlds of play.

But it seems that episodes with mummers were only a part of the whole picture of these holiday performances. The village's collective of youngsters of marriageable-age engaged in courtship and the demonstration of themselves to potential mates and others in the community through other activities besides just "theatrical" sketches with mummers. Group performance games featuring movement and music, improvisation and resourcefulness, and the ability to recite or sing texts and reproduce gestures and physical actions functioned to consolidate the group and foster specific attitudes, behaviors, and values. These winter holiday gatherings in traditional Russian communities were extremely modest in terms of material accoutrements. Mummers' masks were seldom more than a rag or scrap of paper with two holes cut out. Often a smearing of the face with soot or flour stood in for a mask. Costumes were taken from grandma's chest or a neighbor's closet—the more out-of-style and eccentric the better. Non-human characters, be it a bear, a boar, a bird, or a demon, were typically dressed in costumes, the basis of which was always the same: a fur-lined coat turned inside out. Scary, fake teeth were made from slices of potato or turnip. Beards were fashioned from straw or flaxen tow. A gypsy mother's "baby" was a piece of wood wrapped in a scarf.

These homespun, threadbare village skits and dramatic games in ethnographic and folkloric descriptions recall the unprepossessing physical circumstances of my acting classroom. In both cases, this poverty of props, costumes, and scenery trains the performer to concentrate on creating and sustaining the imaginary world of the enacted scene. Stanislavsky wrote that in rehearsal “we do not believe sincerely that the Thonet chairs are in reality a tree or a cliff. We believe, instead, in the sincerity of our relationship to the simular objects, ‘as if’ they were a tree or a cliff” (Venetsianova 44; quoted from Stanislavskii II, 78). The sincerity of this relationship makes the actor the center and the sole criterion of the performance. His conviction transcends the limitations of the material environment, creating a different, more compelling reality for himself, his stage partners, and his audience.

Is there anything more to this similarity than sheer coincidence? Could data collected by folklorists and ethnographers be used to add to our understanding of theater-making in modern Russia? Could the sophisticated methodology for learning acting developed by Stanislavsky tell us anything about performance in Russian traditional culture? My training in theater practice situates me to find a more profound connection between the performance of villagers dressed up as “gypsies” making the rounds of their neighbors to collect baked goodies or spare change and the theater of Stanislavsky and other outstanding actors and directors, a theater culture known and respected the world over. I would seek this connection by juxtaposing “pre-theater” and Stanislavsky’s System.

Structure of Dissertation

In Chapter 1, I examine the place and meaning of “holiday” in Russian traditional culture, how these cultural ideas inform attitudes to theater and performance in modern Russia, and how continuity exists in Russian performance—between System acting and pre-theater—through the separation of performance from everyday life. In Chapter 2, I look into the pre-theatrical actor’s process using Stanislavsky’s terminology and descriptions, such as “what if” and “given conditions,” to explore how holiday-motivated behavior and folk mythology combine to promote the emergence of imaginary worlds of play in traditional culture. Chapters 3 and 4 explore the importance of collectives, first in traditional communities and then in the System itself. In the latter case, I look at the importance of ensemble in the System both as a functional acting and teaching methodology and in terms of how it evolved in the laboratory setting of the First Studio. Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss the concept of “image of action,” a category for increasing the “artistic integrity” of a production by focusing the actors’ work around a central, creatively productive metaphor that consolidates the form and content of the production. Providing examples of “image of action” in pre-theater, I show how this sophisticated approach to directing and working with actors has deep, meaningful roots in Russian traditional performance.

Thus I present a new narrative of Russian Theater History, one based not on “evolution” and simplistic convergences such as the proposition that certain types of performance, such as those bearing a superficial resemblance to proscenium type presentations (mummers’ show at a Yuletide party), were more “advanced” than less contained manifestations of traditional performance such as ambulatory rituals. Instead,

I find continuity in structural and processual links between the two based on the performer's relationship to cultural and social forces both within and without the specific place and time of the performance.

A Note about Sources

The cultural performances cited as evidence of pre-theater and holiday revelry were recorded starting around 1840, when the study folk culture in Russia began in earnest. By the 1930s, when traditional life-ways began to disappear under the onslaught of modernization, industrialization, Communist ideology and specific Stalinist policies, they had become a rarity. Later in the century, renewed interest in folklore and traditional performance meant that the erstwhile participants and observers, now middle-aged and elderly who were sought out by ethnographers and folklorists, typically in remote areas, proved to be valuable informants. Furthermore, it was observed that many customs had not disappeared, but were in fact still being practiced with a considerable degree of vitality. For example, V.L. Kliaus observed Yuletide “ritual hooliganism” in the village of Ukyr, Krasnochikoiskii region, Chita province on the night of 6-7 January, 1994. E.V. Minenok's account of the Spirit-Day ritual in the village of Troitskii, Kuibyshevskii region, Kaluga province provides evidence that an ambulatory ritual practiced on Trinity Sunday (Pentecost), “not only survives but is actively evolving,” based on observations in the 1980s and 1990s (*Russkii eroticheskii fol'klor* 582-584).

The geographic disposition of sources varies, but is generally confined to the Russian—as opposed to Bielorrussian or Ukrainian—ethnicity. Exceptions are noted. My largest single body of ethnographic material, Morozov and Sleptsova's *Krug igry...*

(2004), is based on contemporary accounts from approximately a century ago, give or take 30-50 years, and more recent informants' accounts of play traditions in Vologda province.

Chapter One. The Holiday Complex

Holiday is deeply integrated into cultural ideas and practices involving performance in Russia. It transcends its source in folk culture, shaping activities far removed from traditional life-ways. While ties between holiday and performance exist in many cultures, in the case of Russian theater as a distinct tradition with deep cultural roots that continue to shape the work of actors and the reception they receive, this connection has a number of specific characteristics; chief among them is the creation of an alternative hypostasis of reality.

“Holiday” has a special place in Russian theater. An actress interviewed on television characterizes her work with a certain director as “a holiday.” A director in rehearsal is described as striving for the creation of a “holiday atmosphere” from his actors. A celebrated production is described as being a holiday in the year’s theatrical season. At the debriefing after one of our acting exams, a GITIS professor praised us for “creating a holiday.” But use of the word “holiday” in the discourse surrounding Russian theater is merely the top layer in a complex set of cultural notions and practices. Often unspoken, “holiday” shapes theatrical culture in Russia in many ways to this day.

For audiences, a night at the theater is a special occasion, an event worth dressing up for, talking about, remembering and treasuring afterwards. It functions as a

holiday because it is something in stark contrast to an ordinary evening. Holiday brings performers and audiences into another world, an alternate reality of play. Not only is life within that world special, but approaching as well as leaving the holiday conditions involves practices which contrast sharply with everyday existence. The cultural necessity of leaving behind the everyday to become immersed in realms of imagination and alternative reality is deeply ingrained. Holiday participation was once a social requirement.¹³ The conflation of holiday and performance has an irresistible influence on Russians even today. Holiday presented the traditional celebrant with an existence different from the everyday. In terms of behavior, food, relationships, and belief, the participant in the holiday complex of Russian traditional culture exists in a different dimension and this shift to another reality has an equivalent in Stanislavsky's System for actors.

At its core, the System involves accepting an imaginary reality—the world of the play, scene or skit. The long and rich tradition of creating and animating imaginary universes of play in Russian traditional culture, where human action performed under assumed identities and under assumed conditions brings those alternative realities to life, if only conditionally, has shaped acting and its reception far beyond the bounds of traditional performance. This aspect of the System, its cultural roots in native holiday practices, can be easy to miss. Stanislavsky and those who helped him test his ideas were not typically conscious of this cultural legacy, which exists as a subtext in Russian theater, the collective “unconscious” of Russian acting.

¹³ In Russian traditional culture, individuals who did not participate in holiday activities, i.e., drinking, dancing, merrymaking, feasting, visiting, caroling, etc., were thought to be not Orthodox, or not “Russian,” i.e., were not members of the community.

Furthermore, the System is usually understood as a Russian contribution to the pan-European movement to modernize theater and drama around the year 1900. P.P. Gaideburov wrote that, “It is hardly necessary to mention that the work of Stanislavsky, as a new phenomenon in the life of the Russian stage, has strong connections to the innovative trends in Western [European] art” (Gaideburov 21). This is true. But it does not mean that Stanislavsky was not also influenced by long-standing, seldom acknowledged native traditions and a cultural “background” for performance much wider in scope than the specifics of the proscenium stage.

If Russians have rarely recognized the influence of the cultural legacy of their traditional performance ideas and techniques, then foreigners wishing to use and study the System have been even less able to discern the submerged roots of Stanislavsky’s innovations. Indeed, the System can be studied and applied to the actor’s process in performance environments beyond Russia. In America, for instance, the System has been adopted; but it is not the same as in Russia. In the U.S. it exists as “the Method,” a child of the System, not its clone. This divergence can be attributed to many factors. Those who originally propagandized it and taught it in North America, namely, Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, while they studied under Stanislavsky and learned the System from him, had their own creative and instructional personalities. They promoted Stanislavsky’s ideas in an environment very different from the Russia of the early 20th century. The same can be said of those they taught, such as the leaders of the Group Theater, individuals with their own creative influences and artistic programs and even less knowledge of Russia’s performative past than their émigré teachers.

Understanding how techniques and attitudes about performance originating in Russian traditional culture influenced the System will shed light on its beginnings and how it works in its Russian context. Furthermore, these cultural connections, when acknowledged, will reveal a distinctively Russian subtext to the System. While the System is sufficiently “universal” an approach to acting to be useful in a variety of cultural environments far beyond its place of origin, as its extensive popularity demonstrates, knowing this specific cultural subtext will only increase the acceptance, usefulness, and understanding of the System where it is applied, and especially in places other than its “native environment.”

In the present chapter I will explore the importance of holiday in Russian performance culture and how it shapes attitudes towards acting. Chapters that follow will explore the actor’s process in greater detail, specifically in terms of questions of belief and imagination as well as the role that community plays in the Russian acting. By emphasizing the actor’s process from within—the techniques, the customs, and the cultural and social specifics of Russian pre-theater, I will reexamine previous conclusions about the function of performance in traditional culture, what can be known about it, and the nature of the connection between pre-theater and theater proper in Russia.

There are two interconnecting aspects of the approach to holiday in traditional culture which bear on contemporary Russian theater practice. One is the juxtaposition of celebration time to everyday time. The other, related aspect concerns the realization of this difference in the thinking, speaking, and acting of holiday participants. In addition to these two specific qualities, a discussion of “the holiday complex” in

traditional culture will provide necessary background and context for chapters that follow.

The dialectic of holiday and everyday is not specific to Russia. Many if not all of the individual facets of the holiday performance dynamic can be found in other cultural traditions. While hardly unique, the holiday complex is nevertheless crucial in pre-theater and is one of the elements transcending the western stage-play model in modern Russian theater. It is a common denominator in Russian performance. Therefore it is necessary to explore the holiday complex as a cultural phenomenon and discern what is common in its pre-theatrical and modern theatrical manifestations. I begin with my own indoctrination into the meaning of holiday in Russia.

My Russian Holidays

My days at GITIS were well filled with practical and theoretical subjects: directing, acting, analysis of musical dramaturgy, dance, stage movement, scenic speech, history, literature, and music. My classmates were Russians; I had little time and no inclination to seek out other expatriates. The challenges I faced both educationally and in the course of everyday existence were daunting, but I met them head on. Busy negotiating post-Soviet existence and mastering my profession, I was very seldom homesick. In later years, when the initial excitement and the challenge had receded, I was sometimes overwhelmed by the strangeness, the difficulty, and my isolation. But most of the time I was riding high: I was succeeding in a highly challenging program under difficult circumstances.

Only when these challenges disappeared did my world start to fall apart. This occurred periodically, even during my first year, and for several days at a time. My

everyday existence was interrupted and replaced with a depressing void: holidays.

There was no one with whom to share my American holidays. Instead I shared a typical work day with my colleagues. Red letter days on the American calendar passed as non events. Local holidays were worse because the institute was closed. When I wanted to arrange a rehearsal of my scene from *The Bartered Bride*, my soprano responded, “Are you kidding? We have a three-day holiday!” She was looking forward to a break from classes, from the everyday, to spending time with her family, if she was a Muscovite, or her peers in the dormitory.

Victor Turner wrote about the balance between structured social relationships on the one hand and the egalitarianism of liminal periods on the other.¹⁴ But not just relationships are turned on their head during holiday-liminal periods—the organization of time itself is transformed. People behave differently during holidays because their relationships to each other have changed. The hierarchy of everyday relationships, the structure essential for economic production and a well ordered society, is thrown out during holidays. These liminal periods are focused on other goals, such as repairing and improving social networks. The structure of my life and studies in Moscow was periodically dissolved with each holiday. Locals transitioned immediately into liminal, holiday time and renewed themselves and their bonds with their fellows made possible during breaks from the everyday order. I was left merely in an unstructured void. As I would learn during my six years living in Moscow, holiday structures peoples’ lives by means of its anti-structure, its *communitas*, as much as everyday social relationships and responsibilities structure everyday existence.

¹⁴ See “Liminality and Communitas” and “Communitas: Model and Process” (Turner 94-165).

The observance of holidays in Moscow during the 1990s was caught between a relatively stable late-Soviet culture and what finally emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as questions of what to celebrate, when and how were negotiated. For instance, during my first autumn in Russia, no one seemed to be sure if the commemoration of the 1917 Revolution would be observed. For ideological reasons, the government must have been at best ambivalent about this holiday. The country waited, as I recall, until practically the last minute, for a directive about whether or not it was to be observed officially, i.e., with time off.

Even with a valid calendar, holidays were hard for me to pin down. I assumed that a big weekend would start Friday after work, as they did in the States, but people often started “observing” on Wednesday or Thursday. I could not find the person I needed at work; the business or institution or wanted to visit was closed. Instead of a succession of long weekends book-ending a short work week, May 1st, or Labor Day, and the 9th, or Victory Day, meant the total suspension of public life for two solid weeks. The relationship between work and play, the structure of the everyday and the liminality of the holiday was to me inscrutable: something not to be defined or apprehended by anything other than native fluency in the culture.

The early and mid-nineties were a period of economic depression in Russia. My impression at the time was that many people were not particularly eager to work. In fact, though, people were tired, trying desperately hard to earn a living while adapting to the shock of existing in conditions very different from what they were used to from Soviet times. Likely they were relieved when opportunities came to avoid participating in the situation summed-up so aptly in the Soviet-era aphorism, “We pretend to work;

they pretend to pay us.” Only now, in post-Soviet times, pay was inadequate to cope with monetary inflation. Moreover, pay was often weeks or months late. In this situation, working hard at one’s job or not working at all, at least one’s official job, seemed, in many cases, to matter little. No wonder so many Russians were glad to get a break from “pretending” that they were earning an adequate living. At the time, my judgments about Russian life in the 90s were often uncharitable. Today I see that the role of holidays and holiday behavior provided Muscovites with a much needed element of continuity in an extremely unstable period of transition. If everyday existence in the 90s was uncertain, then extraordinary existence at New Year’s, in early May, on November 7th and other dates throughout the year, was something familiar and reassuring: assemble a feast, gather with friends and family at the table, watch sentimental programs on the television, and call those you could not see in person with holiday greetings.

The continuity of holiday practices is deeply ingrained in Russian contemporary life; its roots extend into pre-industrial, perhaps pre-modern existence. These connections are often very hard for non-Russians to perceive. Russians, too, may often underestimate the continuity of holiday practices extending back hundreds of years.

Here is an example.

Holiday Continuity: Fights

In an article from the BBC news entitled “Moscow braced for football riots,” Rupert Wingfield-Hayes describes the contents of a video found on YouTube called “Russian football hooligans,” featuring

dozens of home-shot videos of violent clashes between gangs of young men, [...]. One of the most popular shows a battle between gangs

outside St. Petersburg in 2005. Two groups of roughly 100 men run at each other fists and feet flailing. In the ensuing maelstrom some are knocked unconscious; others stagger away with blood pouring from cut faces and heads. The fight is highly organized and extremely violent. (Wingfield-Hayes)

“Ironically,” Wingfield-Hayes continues, “the inspiration for it comes from England.”

While the immediate inspiration for rioting at soccer games may be English, fights between groups of young men like those described above have an extensive Russian pedigree.

Even a certain Russian named Ivan, a former football hooligan interviewed for the article, seems ignorant of the Russia roots of the gang fights under discussion. “Ivan and his fellow Russian hooligans see themselves as the inheritors of Britain's infamous football gangs of the 1980s,” Wingfield-Hayes declares, informing his readers that, “Every major Russian football club has its own ‘firms’ or organized group of hooligans.” Each “team” of fighters has a leader. Ivan introduces the journalist to one of these “captains”:

I am led down a stairway into a dark basement pub on the Moscow ring road. Sitting at a table wearing a ski mask is Vasily. His nickname he tells me is "the killer" and he is the leader of the Spartak Moscow Gladiators. "Russians are the strongest hooligans in Europe," Vasily says, staring straight into my eyes with a cold gaze. (Wingfield-Hayes)

Teams of fighters, led by a brave, boasting chief seeking to demonstrate their superiority in clashes, which the author stated “happen almost every weekend somewhere in Russia,” have a venerable pedigree in many local traditions.

Violent conflict was an important element in “the system of traditional communication” contained in traditional holiday practices according to ethnographers I.A. Morozov and I.S. Sleptsova, authors of *Krug igry... (The Circle of Play: Holiday and Play in the Life of the Northern Russian Peasant, 94)*. The communicative aim of holiday fighting was to clarify actual positions among competing groups and define or affirm the borders of their territories (94). Organized, violent collisions between groups of young men are an important part of traditional holiday culture. There were essentially two varieties. *Kulachnyi boi*, or the group fist fight, was a “hand to hand competition without weapons, a holiday entertainment for lads and young men” (*Russkii prazdnik 299*). The fist fight followed certain rules, which the other variety, the *draka* or street-fight, did not (*Russkii prazdnik 230*). The *draka* was an altogether more dangerous and violent affair, although both took place at holidays during *gulian’e*, outdoor festive gatherings. Participation in a fight was a sign that a boy had come of age, a venue where he could “demonstrate his strength, bravery and valor... [and was an important element] in the formation of male behavior” (*Russkii prazdnik 137*). Such conflicts were “an important mechanism for regulating relations both within and between groups of youth” (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 192).

Fights were such an important part of holiday outdoor gatherings that their absence was interpreted in some local traditions as a sign that a holiday had not been a success. “They were often seen as the culmination of the entire holiday celebration” (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 192). “What kind of holiday was that,” Morozov and Sleptsova quote an ethnographic report about life in Vologda province from the end of the 19th century, “if nobody got killed!”

The BBC reporter attests, unknowingly, to the continued holiday significance of gang fights in Russia by mentioning that they “happen almost every weekend.” Instead of rallying around sports teams, as they do today, fight gangs in traditional Russia were based on territorial units of young men from the same village, parish, or neighborhood. Inhabitants of a number of small, neighboring villages could unite “under a single name formed, for instance, from the name of the river along which the villages were located” (*Russkii prazdnik* 137).

The leader, or *ataman*, was as important in tradition holiday culture as “Killer” is to the Moscow Spartak Gladiators. Youth folklore, “idealized the figure of the *ataman* as a brave, uncompromising fighter, the just protector of ‘his own’ . . . If the fight was prepared ahead of time, the *ataman* worked out the battle plan (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 201). Often, such plans were made in order to exact revenge for a previous defeat (*Russkii prazdnik* 138). Like today’s rumbles, traditional fights were “highly organized and extremely violent.” An entire gang would sometimes ambush a few of their adversaries with specially prepared weapons. “However, revenge was only extracted during holiday outings. On weekdays, defeat was not avenged and lads from warring villages could freely visit each other” (*Russkii prazdnik* 138). This final observation provides further testimony to the qualitative difference in “reality” between holiday and everyday, in this case expressed through interpersonal relationships: this kind of behavior was only appropriate on festival days. Similarly, I remember seeing groups of rough, belligerent-look youths in the subway and on the street and hearing news reports about clashes on days when matches were held.

Ivan's ignorance of the deep roots of this practice in traditional Russian culture suggests that many holiday customs, while often not understood in historical perspective by contemporary practitioners, nonetheless continue to influence behavior. Another contemporary behavior with deep roots in traditional life-ways and holiday culture is alcohol consumption. Since drinking is an essential component in Russian celebrations past and present, some background will be helpful.

Holiday Continuity: Drinking

While some of today's drinkers may imbibe for reasons other than and in addition to the social aspect that lies at the root of traditional alcohol consumption, drinking habits for all but the most degenerate alcoholic usually preserve customs of the original holiday context of drinking. My observations of Russian drinking habits show many consistent features. While the quantity of alcohol consumed was often in excess of what would be common in a similar situation with regard to the age of participants, and the setting in terms of time and place compared to equivalent situations in America, there are nonetheless a number of precise and carefully observed cultural injunctions associated with drinking.

The enduring model for drinking in contemporary Russia is still traditional culture's holiday feast, *prazdnichnoe zastol'e*, described by the ethnographers Morozov and Sleptsova as "an important, stable locus reflecting the 'other reality' of holiday" (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 51). "The *zastol'e*," they affirm, "was an essential element of all traditional holidays," where "the principal goals of holiday communication were realized on the basis of the unification of all participants through sitting at the same table—*za odnim stolom* (from whence the term *zastol'e*) and through

common food” (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 209). The message, they explain further, was not just “physiological” in character, “the collective eating of the ritual dish and associated events of play intercourse (merriment, laughter, joking, singing, dancing and games),” but also involved the symbolic meaning of sharing or joining in the same *dolia*—fate, portion or life share and its apportionment among all present (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 209). This custom involved family and guests sitting at table with both food and drink for the purpose of commemorating some *occasion*.

In traditional communities, alcohol and certain rich foods were typically not consumed every day, but during special times outside the context of the everyday, at holidays. Holidays always were dedicated to the observance of an event or occasion, such as Christ’s Resurrection, a daughter’s betrothal, or a funeral meal. In traditional culture, red-letter days on both the church-agricultural calendar, such as Christmas and Easter feasts, and the so-called life-cycle calendar, like the observation of weddings and funerals, provided the occasions to be celebrated via shared consumption of food and drink. Here the Orthodox faith of the Eastern Slavs played a crucial role in shaping drinking habits. The church calendar, from the point of view of the consumption of food and drink, alternates feast and fast throughout the year. There are weekly fast days of Wednesday and Saturday. There are extended fasts of a month’s or more duration, such as the Lenten Fast. There are even periods of no dietary restrictions for a week or more, such as Yuletide or *sviatki*, the time between Christmas and Epiphany. Fasts vary in terms of strictness from the strictest austerity of Holy Week, to other times where meat is prohibited but wine allowed.

Fasts occupy a place opposite holidays on the continuum of the traditional calendar. With their restrictions on behavior and consumption, they function as even more austere versions of everyday existence. On the other hand, they, like holidays, call for modes of existence contrasting sharply with the everyday. Both permissive holidays and fasting periods call for a special relationship with the next world realized through behavior (action). The specific circumstances of discrete calendrical periods dictate exactly what actions members of traditional communities take in terms of consumption, behavior, their relationships vis-à-vis their peers and other members of their community, and even their actions as embodied characters from alternative realities of play.

Permissive holidays and fasts share a sense of *occasion* missing from everyday existence. Again and again in my dealings with Russians I observed the connection between drinking and occasion. Quite common is the practice of *obmyvanie*, from the root verb *myt'*, to wash. Justification for having a shot or two or more can be anything from a newly purchased washing machine to a friend's new job. Of course in this case the drinking may not coincide with any traditional holiday, but the custom of imbibing to commemorate something survives. Examples of this behavior from traditional culture are the *litki* and *magarychi* described by Morozov and Sleptsova in *The Circle of Play*:

drinking sessions in close male company [...] symbolizing the unity of the male group and effecting its consolidation. Practically every public affair was accompanied by *litki*: the hay fields were leased, a section of a forest was sold [meant] wine; a *sotskii* [a helper to the police from the local peasantry] was hired, [or] a scribe, an elder was chosen: [this called for] *likti* [literally: pouring]. (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 51-52; quoting an archival ethnographic description of peasant life in Novgorod province from 1898)

The same cultural logic applies when it comes to toasts. Whether a gulp of beer or wine or a shot of vodka, I have observed over and over that Russians drink together, in both space and time. The toast commemorates something—the specific occasion (usually the first toast), a specific person, the hosts, the guests, parents, children, success, the drinkers themselves, *ad infinitum*.

Even in situations where the purpose of drinking is drinking, that is, when participants gather for no other purpose than to consume alcohol, elements of the traditional *zastol'e* are still present. For instance, there is a cultural prohibition against drinking alone. I heard on several occasions that isolation, rather than amount or frequency of alcohol consumed, makes a person an alcoholic. This is what motivates the eager drinker in a popular anecdote:

A man is desperate to drink but has no one with whom to share his bottle. He therefore catches a cockroach, ties one end of a length of thread to it and the other end to his finger. “Bon-voyage” he toasts as he lets the insect run off. “Welcome back” he toasts as he reels it in, repeating until the bottle is empty.

While to others he may be an alcoholic, in his own estimation our hero is not, because he is drinking “in company.” The behavior satirized here originates in the communal aspect of holiday, the practice of families and communities coming together around the table to observe something important to them as a collective. Drinkers in Russia will often seek to sit around a table or something functionally equivalent, in imitation of the holiday feast table, whenever possible, reproducing these conditions as far as specific conditions will allow, whether deep in the forest, at a construction site, in the bath-house, or elsewhere.

The importance of drinking together is an aspect of the communal nature of holiday culture. It is an example of the way social cohesion is maintained and consolidated through festive practices. The role of the collective in holiday performance will be explored in detail in chapters three and four. Behaviors such as holiday group fighting and drinking have been adapted and transformed over the years from practices and beliefs originating in much different social, economic, and political conditions. Any sense of continuity and change will become clear only upon an understanding of the holiday complex in traditional culture.

Landmarks of the Traditional Calendar

In Russian tradition, holidays were determined by each community's folk calendar or yearly cycle.¹⁵ Local peculiarities of economic production intertwined over the centuries with the Russian Orthodox Church year, with its movable and immovable feasts, to form the structure for existence in traditional communities, determining both workdays and holidays. The church year gave shape to the work year. In popular belief, the vagaries of the church year were not abstractions but milestones inseparable from agricultural and life cycles, temporal landmarks that determined the appropriateness of any given action at any given time: when to fast, when and what to celebrate, when to wed, when to sow and when to reap, and how to behave.

The specifics of the yearly sequence of tasks executed to sustain the community as appropriate to local conditions guaranteed that calendars varied, however slightly, from region to region. Dates for planting or sending livestock out to pasture for the first

¹⁵ The popular calendar has been an object of study among ethnographers and folklorists for close to two centuries. F. F. Bolonev gives a concise account of this scholarship from the 1830s through the 1950s in the introduction to *Narodnyi kalendar' semeiskikh Zabaikal'ia*, Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1978, pp. 3-22, his study of the folk calendar Old Believer communities in Eastern Siberia.

time in the spring, for example, depended on local climatic conditions. An example is *Egorov den*, St. George's Day, the 23rd of April according to the Orthodox Julian calendar (May 6th per the Gregorian calendar). Bolonev, describing traditional communities of the Trans-Baikal region of Eastern Siberia, writes that "on the eve of St. George's Day and afterwards," (as was typical for major holidays, no work could be performed on the day itself), "[people] planted wheat [...]. In [European] Russia's mid-zone, the planting of wheat was fixed to [the holiday of] Saints Boris and Gleb [May 15th (2nd)]" (77). Important life-cycle events also occurred at specific periods, making the folk calendar even more complex. For instance, weddings could not take place during Lent or other extended fasting periods, as dictated by the Church.¹⁶

Popular calendars are important for the study of Russian ritual performance because a community's rituals took place according to its folk calendar. Besides providing a given ritual a specific temporal location, the popular calendar established the context for the ritual. How a certain period relates to the rest of the year in terms of both agricultural production and spiritual concerns is very important for understanding both the meaning and execution of the customs that take place at that time. For example, a clear picture of Yuletide revelry does not emerge without consideration of the place this period occupies between the important holidays of Christmas and Epiphany, the prohibitions on work that attend these two weeks, and the relaxation of the dietary restrictions dictated by the church during the previous month in the form of the Christmas fast.

¹⁶ The beliefs and practices of neighbors—Catholics, Muslims, various Finno-Ugoric peoples, and the natives of Siberia, depending on location—also shaped the composition of a community's folk calendar.

Keeping and breaking church fasts was a very important mechanism in traditional culture for marking holidays. Boris Strakhov in *Noch' pered rozhdestvom* (*The Night Before Christmas*) gives a number of examples of the earnestness with which Orthodox Slavic peasants honored the fasts enjoined by the Church—the sentiment that it was better for a sick person to die during a fast than eat non-fast food, the ceremonial discarding of non-fast food on the eve of Lent by burning or feeding it to domestic animals, and the custom of washing every last particle of non-fast food out of one's mouth before Lent (with vodka!; 289, 293). Thus, fasting should be understood as one of the most viscerally immediate expressions of spirituality in popular belief.

Customs of food and drink consumption were a factor in the division of time in the world of popular Christianity into holy and unholy periods. Strakhov affirms that in Slavic Orthodox Christianity fasting was directly linked in the popular imagination with holiness and spiritual health. Correspondingly, periods of non-fast consumption were attended by increased activity on the part of demonic forces (290-293). Therefore, one of the reasons that Yuletide was considered "dangerous" and "unclean" according to Russian popular belief is because the two weeks following the Christmas Fast are the most permissive of the entire year in terms of diet. During this period, even the injunction to fast every Wednesday, the day of Christ's condemnation, and Friday, His death, are lifted. For people accustomed to express piety through dietary restrictions, these two weeks were clearly different from the rest of the year. The easing of dietary restrictions before Lent, during the period known as Shrovetide in the West and *Maslenitsa* in Russia, does not compare. Wednesday and Friday fasts are abrogated

during this time, too, but only for one week, and, in contrast to Yuletide, meat is not allowed.

Indicative and Conditional Modes of Existence

Dietary regimes were one of many ways that traditional communities contrasted ordinary, workaday, *indicative* reality to special, holiday, *subjunctive* or *conditional* reality. This dialectic is characterized by the difference between the normal and alternative situations. What is an “alternative” situation? Quite simply, it means existing in some way different from the normative pattern of life in a community. If “normal” means, as it does in most communities, that adults engage in economic production and caring for children, and if the individual has a strictly determined, hierarchical place in the family and the community, then alternative modes challenge and often (temporarily) overturn these structures. Indicative modes, it follows, are the rule; alternatives to them are the exception: thus there are usually fewer days-off than workdays. Holidays, celebrations, performances, and many exercises in spirituality (such as going to church) offer possibilities for conditional existence: the regime of daily life is changed; social relationships and roles can be renegotiated.¹⁷ Conditional existence matters to the performer. Only by suspending the indicative dictates of identity, social position, relationships, and normative behavior can acting occur. The process of creating and sustaining the imaginary world of an enacted scene by entertaining a set of “given conditions” is possible only as an alternative to indicative reality, as an exercise in conditional existence.

¹⁷ My thinking here has been heavily influenced by Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, among others.

Alternative universes of make-believe afforded many advantages over indicative reality while negotiating relationships and facilitating transitions from one life state to the next. In conditional realities, words could be uttered, actions could be performed, lessons could be taught, “proper” behavior encouraged and “improper” behavior discouraged on a level difficult or impossible to reproduce under “everyday” conditions. Participants were masked or disguised—not themselves, but other beings. Jest, teasing, and even ritual violence were acceptable. Behavior unacceptable in terms of the indicative rules of existence was confined to holiday time, kept in its conditional “box” by the opposition of holiday to everyday and by specific rites such as ritual ablution during Epiphany, which “washed away the sins of Yuletide masking.”

Language, work, and social interactions also are conditioned by the folk calendar, which dictates how members of communities act and how they believe. Even the supernatural world operates differently during holiday time, when exchanges with the supernatural in popular belief were brought to the fore. One of the ways members of traditional communities experienced such exchanges was through performative enactments. Under indicative, non-holiday conditions, intercourse between this world and the next was limited, unlikely.

During holidays, the supernatural was immediate and accessible, no farther away than the embodied performance of an unclean spirit or a tale of humans and demons crossing paths set during holiday time. Larisa Ivleva has argued that contact between this world and the supernatural was embodied performatively in traditional culture through the practice of mummery (1994, 1998, 2004). Traditional Russian

mummary was never more common than during the social gatherings at Yuletide in many traditional communities.

Sviatki

The Yuletide complex or *sviatki*, lasting from Christmas until Epiphany, was an extended “subjunctive” alternative to “indicative,” everyday existence in the lives of traditional Russian communities. The folk calendar made these two weeks in mid-winter so special. This was the low point for most traditional forms of economic production. What work there was to be done consisted of taking care of livestock and indoor tasks such as spinning, weaving and maintaining tools. These jobs were often discharged in communal settings which gathered together girls by age-group for spinning flax, women for salting cabbage, and so on.

Yuletide and other holidays altered but did not eliminate these work-bees and social gatherings (*besedki, posidelki*). Red letter days on the Church calendar changed the behavior of members of traditional communities. Where everyday food-ways had been in effect, holiday meant fasting, or its antithesis, seen at Yuletide for instance—the unrestricted consumption of non-fast fare (*razgovenie*), including alcohol. Thus everyday tasks and responsibilities were replaced with their opposite—the general freedom work and often the strict prohibitions against specific tasks such as spinning.

The yearly work cycle and the Church calendar also conspired to make Yuletide a special time for the young people of traditional communities. The relaxation of restrictions on food, alcohol, work, and behavior afforded by the holiday meant that young people were able to interact and mingle in a way hardly seen at other times of the year. The venue for these contacts was the indoor work-bees and evening gatherings of

the fall and early winter season. In many communities girls would gather according to age groups to keep each other company while spinning flax, with boys joining them to complete their own chores or keep them company. The entertainment young people provided each other in the form of stories, jokes and songs, made the work seem less onerous. Under holiday conditions, if work like spinning was practiced at all, it was usually only a pretext for social gatherings. Thus village *besedki* and *posidelki* were transformed into *vecherinki*, or Yuletide balls.

From the point of view of the traditional life cycle, the transformation of these social gatherings made perfect sense. The pre-Lenten season that would follow in a month or two was one of the aptest times for weddings in traditional communities since it came before the Great Fast and the long stretch of seasonal agricultural work that began in the spring. The fortnight of revelry at Yuletide allowed for a degree of heterosexual fraternization among youth otherwise seldom seen in traditional communities. Thus, the socialization important for establishing pre-marital contacts between the sexes with the obvious goal of establishing marital pairs, which had been present more or less in the background while labor had been the principal justification for village youths to gather under one roof, now came to the forefront as young people continued to gather on a holiday evening but now with the explicit purpose of meeting potential mates.

One final feature of the Yuletide period raised the intensity of this fraternization by several degrees. Yuletide, like its calendrical antipode, Midsummer-St. John's Day, was a time of increased activity by demonic forces, or at least increased attention to this area of folk belief by members of traditional communities. The presence of

otherworldly forces in the “white” world of the living reinforced and augmented many aspects of Yuletide. Demonic forces were said to be responsible for enforcing holiday prohibitions on work. Girls were told to put away or finish spinning their raw flax or else a *kikimora*, a kind of demon, would pee on it (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 755-756). Unclean spirits were responsible for the messages giving information about their futures sought by young girls engaged in prognostication, a popular activity during Yuletide and one very apropos in view of girls’ nervousness and concern about their fates. Yuletide spirits were blamed for the late-night pranks and vandalism practiced by village youths against their neighbors known as “ritual hooliganism” (*obriadovoe beschinstvo*). But of course members of traditional communities did not just attribute actual or potential phenomena to the activities of unclean spirits—they enacted and embodied supernatural beings and other characters (cross-dressing was common) through cultural forms like mummery.

Holidays and Social Consolidation

Many culturally specific behaviors in modern Russian life originated long ago under very different social and economic conditions yet still retain aspects of their original connection with traditional holiday customs. The specific spiritual content of many activities may have transformed or disappeared completely during the change from pre- to post-industrial existence, but communities still reinforce, reestablish, and renegotiate their connections to each other, individuals and groups within communities still reaffirm their relationships to each other and to the past, and the continuity of cultural traditions is preserved through the constant recreation of behaviors associated with holiday culture.

As mentioned above, the sharing practiced during holidays involved more than joint consumption of food and drink. Games, songs, laughter, and other performative elements, including the impersonation of others, were also part of the collective consolidation that happened during holidays. Both observing and participating in holiday performances, including caroling, mumming, fighting in groups, singing, and the demonstration of holiday attire served to integrate members of traditional societies by placing them in liminal states, however temporary. In the same way that the first rehearsal in costume can help actors better identify with their characters, how they ought to move, and the setting of the play, festive behaviors like those listed above both contribute to and are provoked by the holiday complex.

A further instrument of consolidation was the subject matter of many mummers' performances, which frequently involved making fun of an "other." As Morozov and Sleptsova explain, "the latent aim of these scenes and performances [based on humorous folklore], was the consolidation of the group on the basis of mocking the 'other'" (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 228). Often the locus of this mockery, the "other," could be actions frequently taboo in everyday life, such as the use of obscenities, undressing and nakedness, and ostensibly blasphemous recreations of sacred rituals (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 228).

Anti-Behavior

Such actions, clearly juxtaposed to what is considered ordinary or normative in traditional communities, fit into the field Boris Uspenskii defined as anti-behavior in his essay entitled "Anti-behavior in the Culture of Old Rus'." Defined as "opposite, reversed, [or] upside-down behavior," this category realizes the same general model of

“substituting certain regulated norms with their opposite” in its myriad forms and expressions (320). Anti-behavior is applicable to both the culture of Old Rus’ (medieval East-Slavic civilization) and traditional culture of the modern period.

Anti-behavior is the enacted result of notions in East-Slavic traditional culture of an anti-world, an alternative universe where up is down, right is left, and mockery is reverence. As Uspenskii points out, ideas about the world beyond our own, “a world of opposite (reversed) relationships, are especially apparent in Slavic funeral rituals” (322). Funerals represent the passing from this world to the next for the departed and also a period of exposure to the other world for inhabitants of both sides of the divide.

Examples of funerary anti-behavior include dressing the corpse in clothes turned inside out, preparing those clothes in a way the opposite of the normal fashion, i.e., sewing with the needle pointing away, instead of towards the sewer, and preparing the coffin in similar fashion, i.e., planing wood away instead of towards the carpenter (322). In the anti-world, sloppily executed tasks become examples of careful craftsmanship. The decrepit, the worn-out, and the broken appear as new and whole in the anti-world. The same dynamic of opposites explains the jovial funeral customs of the Carpathian region described by Ukrainian ethnographers such as Hnatiuk where village youth played games with the corpse and engaged in other activities seemingly irreverent in this world, but which, according to the logic of the supernatural universe, were respectful and proper. Anti-behavior and the inversion of normative qualities attached to everyday objects are performative, theatrical manifestations of the holiday complex. This inversion allowed members of traditional communities to enact holiday

time in their bodies, through their relationships to each other, their culture, and their environment.

Summary

Thus holiday, in the widest sense of any interruption in the normative course of existence marked by a watershed in the spiritual, economic, or life cycle of a community or family, stands in stark contrast to the everyday. This juxtaposition is achieved through the enactment of “alternative” situations: behaviors and the belief systems underpinning them by which holiday reality is recognized and realized. For the theater makers and consumers of Stanislavsky’s day and our own, holidays have less of a direct connection to the agricultural cycle than for members of traditional communities. We maintain many of the dates and traditions, even when their meanings and origins have become obscure. But our holidays, in the way they provide a release from normative relationships and behavioral expectations, give us the same launch-pad into subjunctive existence that our ancestors enjoyed.

Holiday has the power to transform relationships, behavior, and expectations. It allows pre-theater to emerge from traditional culture by framing performance as something special, imaginary, imagistic, exciting, terrifying, funny, strange, sometimes dangerous, but always temporary. The extraordinary creatures and characters found during holidays go back to being ordinary people with the shift back to indicative existence. Holiday is the fertile ground from which pre-theater sprouts; it establishes the proper environment for other aspects of the process of pre-theatrical acting to appear. These aspects will be explored in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two. The Actor and Imaginary Worlds of Play

In this chapter I look inside the East-Slavic pre-theatrical actor's process. Using Stanislavsky's System as a model for how actors approach their roles in make-believe play situations, I explore how certain beliefs and practices underpin specific mechanisms used by performers in traditional communities. Exploring the convergence between homespun village rituals and mummers' shows on the one hand, and the modern theater's most sophisticated, detailed description of the actor's process on the other, depends on asking the right questions. Why do members of traditional communities perform, and what does embodied performance give them that other varieties of social interaction do not?

Creativity Begins with “What If”

If I had to pick one single sentence to convey the essence of the System, it would be Stanislavsky's utterance, “Creativity begins with ‘what if’” (Stanislavskii I, 304-305). The performer's relationship to the “subjunctive” world of the imaginary universe of play is the cornerstone of both System and pre-theatrical acting. In order to enter a conditional, subjunctive reality and function in it, the actor needs to leave behind indicative reality. This happens by embracing “what if.” Stanislavsky describes “what if” in this passage from *My Life in Art*.

As long as indicative reality [literally “real reality”], actual truth, in which a person cannot not believe, exists, creativity has not yet begun.

But then the creative “what if” appears, that is, an illusory, imaginary truth, in which the actor is able to believe just as sincerely, but with even more enthusiasm, than in genuine reality. [...] From the moment “what if” appears, the actor is transferred from the plane of actual, real life to the plane of another, created, imagined life. (Venetsianova, 143-144; quoting Stanislavskii I, 304-305)

According to the System this involves a conscious decision to relocate into an imaginary world of play.

We recommend that students ask themselves, “what would I do, if I found myself here, today, right now in the situation of the character [I am] portraying?” (Venetsianova 146; quoting Stanislavskii III, 408)

Thus the performer consciously places herself into an imaginative world.

In order to put oneself into an imaginary universe, that world needs to be imagined. The sum of this information is known as “given conditions.” Stanislavsky describes given conditions as,

The plot of the play, its facts, events, epoch, the time and place of action, conditions of life, our understanding of the play as actors and directors, what we add to it from ourselves, blocking, the production, the sets and costumes, the props, the lighting, noises and sounds, and everything else that actors are given to pay attention to during their creativity. (Venetsianova 305; quoting Stanislavskii II, 62)

To put it another way, these are all the stimuli, both internal and external, that could potentially influence the behavior of the actor-character. These are both things she imagines within herself and phenomena from without that are transformed through imagination.

An example of the first, “internal” group comes from the category known as “physical sensations.” If a scene or skit is set in a cold environment, for instance, the actor must “feel” or “be aware” of the cold, no matter what the temperature in the

rehearsal room or on stage. The stimuli in this case are internal, proceeding directly from the performer's imagination. The other group involves stimuli that originate from outside the performer but are transformed by the actor's imagination from elements of the indicative universe into elements of a conditional universe. These include all the physical manifestations a performer can encounter, such as objects (props) and other human beings (stage-partners). Everything is (ideally) transformed and brought to the same level of imaginative perception. The actor-character reacts to this creation, the imaginary world of the scene. According to the System, the more the actor's awareness of his given conditions deepens and becomes more precise, the better.

“What if” and given conditions are related but separate categories. According to Stanislavsky,

“Given conditions,” like “what if,” is a hypothesis, a “figment of the imagination” ... “what if” always begins creativity, [and] “given conditions” develop it. One cannot exist without the other. But their functions differ somewhat: “what if” gives a push to the slumbering imagination, while “given conditions” substantiate “what if.”
(Venetsianova 306; quoting Stanislavskii II, 62)

On the stage, given conditions are all the accepted “facts” about the play or skit in performance. Actors and members of the production team can and must embellish with their own imaginative contributions the imaginary world the author created. While the creator of the play-text is the ultimate source for the given conditions an actor must consider, no amount of stage directions by the playwright could answer all the questions about life in an imaginary world embodied in performance. And no amount of prompting from the production team will ever be sufficient for the actor hoping to engage fully with his given conditions.

Elements added by the production team, even if they are aimed at helping the actor, are meaningless, if the actor does not to deepen his existence on stage, in the imaginary world of the scene. Soviet director Georgi Tovstonogov, in his book *Besedy s kollegami (Conversations with Colleagues)*, gives the example of the squeaky door in his production of Gorky's *Philistines*:

If I insert into [the stage life of the actor playing Bessemenov] this squeaky door, which is an irritant, reminding him every time [he hears it], that he should have fixed it or oiled it long ago, but he never finds the time, then this means that the squeak helps him obtain the correct inner feeling (*vernoe vnutrennee samochuvstvie*). (62)

One of Tovstonogov's discussion partners asks if this system of irritants in sound and light is for the actor's benefit. Tovstonogov answers,

Without a doubt, this system gets inserted into his stage life. If it is not inserted by the actor, then it becomes a naked metaphor, which I personally do not accept in theater. In such a case, an audience member has to engage in a game of charades, "Oh, that's what the director wanted to say!" (62)

Thus it is up to the actor to absorb details supplied by the production team, making them meaningful components of the character's scenic life.

Pre-theatrical actors' process was analogous. N.S. Preobrazhenskii's description of a Yuletide party in rural Vologda province published in 1864 describes what can be understood as a director working with his actors," and how the latter dove whole-heartedly into their given conditions. A certain man, Preobrazhenskii writes, gained the trust of the young boys at the party. They could participate in a hilarious skit: the man would undertake the role of a hunter while the boys would play his dogs. Upon seeing a bundle of straw on the wall they were to bark at it as if it were a fox. When it fell to the floor "dead" following the "shot" they were to attack, tearing it apart

with their teeth. The lads were conscientious System actors. The door opened. In came the “hunter” with a stick for a gun followed by two dozen dogs, that is, boys on all fours. As soon as they set eyes on the “fox” they lifted their heads and began barking.

The bundle dropped. Before it even hit the floor the kids threw themselves at it with dog-like fury, tearing it apart in an instant. The audience laughed and the kids basked in their success. But you can just imagine their hurt and outrage when they were made to understand in the most incontrovertible manner possible that they had torn into not only straw, but straw mixed together with the most disgusting filth.
(196)

Had they not been so deeply invested in their given conditions, is there any doubt that the boys would have noticed something amiss with their “catch” before it was too late? These boys surrendered themselves wholly to their scenic task, taking what their “director” had given them and making it their own.

Contributions by directors and designers serve to excite the actor’s imagination, not to replace it. If the actor does no more than absorb what he is spoon-fed by members of the production team, without engaging his own imagination, there is no spark to his performance, no personal creative engagement with the material.

A Lack of Engagement with Given Conditions: Clichés

When faced with an inadequately determined, shallow, superficial set of given conditions, “what if” will be nothing more than an empty formality, insufficient to provoke genuine creativity. The actor’s character will be underdeveloped and unconvincing; the actor will typically rely on scenic “clichés” as a crutch.

Stanislavsky described clichés as,

[V]ery primitive, formal, external representations of feelings foreign to the role, not experienced [by the actor] and therefore not cognized by the actor executing the role. They are simple imitations. (Venetsianova 487; quoting Stanislavskii II, 35-36)

Clichés stop living communication dead in its tracks, as in the following examples.

Eyes bugging out in horror, the tragic wiping of the forehead, gripping the head with the hands, running the fingers through the hair, pressing the hand to the heart: all these clichés are three-hundred years old. Now let's get rid of all this junk! Out with all clichés! In their place give me tiny but genuine, productive and expedient [bits of] Action, truth and belief. (Venetsianova 489; quoting Stanislavskii II, 195)

The more an actor is able to come up with meaningful, productive given conditions for his character, the more he will be able to use them, the more he will come to rely on them. The reverse is also true: the actor who is unable or cannot be bothered to elaborate rich, detailed, and personally meaningful sets of given conditions will be satisfied with a performance that is pale and bloodless.

Clichés *per se* are not an issue in pre-theater: the aesthetic demands that condition the modern stage's accent on the performer's originality are absent in traditional culture. Nonetheless, the issue of clichés is relevant to understanding the process of pre-theatrical acting. Traditional performance operates with a set of standards concerning "originality" that differs greatly from expectations about acting informed by the System.

To find correspondences between pre-theater and the System, we need to understand what generates clichéd acting: how it figures in the actor's process.

According to Stanislavsky,

[Using] clichés is always easier than acting correctly. Clichés are always at hand, but genuine, productive and expedient Action, prompted from within must be acquired. (Venetsianova 489; quoting Stanislavskii IV, 322)

The presence of scenic clichés, therefore, cannot be determined by applying one set of aesthetic criteria (20th century professional acting) to another (pre-theatrical performance).

According to Stanislavsky, clichés emerge when an actor encounters a scenic task that is beyond his abilities. When an actor strives to do something that is too difficult for him, Stanislavsky said, he falls into a quagmire of external, mechanical, and uninspired clichés, which are the result of his artistic helplessness (Venetsianova 487; quoting Stanislavskii II, 179-180). Clichéd acting, whether on Stanislavsky's stage or in pre-theater, occurs when an actor takes shortcuts—either out of laziness or inability—rather than face honestly and conscientiously the demands of his scenic task. The issue, therefore, in both the System and pre-theatrical acting is one of the performer's sincerity.

Demidov's Tale of *Tsar Maximillian*

Professional stage actors from Stanislavsky's day and onwards typically viewed traditional performance in Russia, both pre-theater and the folk drama, as clichéd. As the following example illustrates, if the issue of "clichés" serves to disassociate traditional performance from modern acting, the sincere acceptance of given conditions on the part of both actor and audience brings them together. Clichés, although described by Stanislavsky in terms of a performer's abilities, ultimately reflect aesthetic judgments, whereas sincerity is more indicative of internal process.

A passage from *The Art of Acting: Past and Future* by Nikolai Demidov, an important but forgotten collaborator of Stanislavsky and editor of the latter's *An Actor Prepares*, illustrates typical views of traditional performance held by those observing

the phenomenon from the outside, from a different aesthetic stance. Demidov cites a performance by “four or five lads” of the folk play *Tsar Maximilian*, which he saw, “as a child at the end of the [19th] century in the provinces [...] at Yuletide (Demidov I 50). The folk drama, as I discussed in my introduction, is not pre-theater, but a variety of folk performance influenced by the Russian high-culture, European-influenced, professional, urban stage. According to descriptions of folk theater acting by Demidov and others, it was often performed in a style that had been out of fashion on professional stages for a century: namely, one influenced by the aesthetics of neo-classical theater. In the present example, the divide between folk drama and pre-theater is unimportant because my point is to juxtapose folk performance in general with theatrical acting. Demidov characterizes the style of acting as follows:

An exchange ensues between father and son, from which one is able to determine, with a certain degree of difficulty, that the Tsar wants Adolf to marry. [The son] refuses; the Tsar gets angry and sends his “recalcitrant” son into exile. All this was said with foot stomping, incomprehensible yelling, [actors] never looking at each other but rather staring off somewhere into the ceiling. (Demidov I 52)

Demidov then describes the reaction to this performance he has typically observed from his contemporaries, a mixture of amazement and condescension:

If this “performance” were shown to any of our readers [i.e., urban cultural and intellectual elite, the sort of people who might show an interest in a new book on acting], that person (unless he suffer from some particular interest in ethnography) would laugh out loud. Or perhaps he might get sad and depressed. When you stop and think: how silly those women were to cry [at the hero’s “effective” final exit]! What trash, what nonsense! How could grown lads act out such nonsense and so poorly? How could they not be ashamed? (Demidov I 52-53)

Demidov’s own point with this recollection is that everything is relative. Stupidity did not prompt the women spectators’ reaction, but rather their thirst for beauty and

romance. Furthermore, neither the actors nor the audience had ever seen anything better. “You and I,” Demidov polemicises with his contemporaries, “have seen [real] theaters, and for us this treat would be hard to bear, but for them it was a luxury, a holiday!” Demidov’s opponents, professional actors, responded with amazement, “Incredible! What backwardness! How infantile! How is that possible? Can none of them have ever seen theater? At the very least [some kind of performance] at the fair?” (Demidov I 53)

Far from relishing a condescending look down his nose at traditional performance from the refined heights of professional achievement, Demidov instead states that everything is relative. The work of his contemporaries, he states, is often not much better than the performance of *Tsar Maximillian* he saw as a child. In both cases, audiences were transfixed by the spectacle. The response of an audience, he says, should not be for the performer an indication of the quality of the performance. Demidov describes how he often would think of *Tsar Maximillian* while observing professional actors on the contemporary stage, “in spite of [their] poor acting, sensitive audience members pull out their handkerchiefs.” He asks how this sort of hack work is possible with “professionals,” “for they have seen not merely good theaters, but the best of the best: the greatest actors, geniuses of the stage.” Demidov draws a distinction between the actor as celebrity, the spoiled darling of his devotees, and the actor as the guide into imaginary realities for his audience, which consists of people who hunger for artistic tales and who play out in their own imagination what the actors have omitted or portrayed haphazardly (Demidov I 53). Audiences’ willingness to accept poor, sloppy acting stems from the universal human capacity to fill in what is missing in a

performance, to give the actor the benefit of the doubt. Audiences accept inadequate acting because of their desire to be invested emotionally in what they see. Their own participation is full and genuine because it stems from their total imaginative engagement with the material.

There are several points to note here. First is the power of spectators' imagination to make up for the shortcomings of performers. This happens because audiences accept the given conditions of the scene or skit completely. Their emotional engagement is total. This is not to say that the naïveté of, say, Don Quixote at the puppet show, is the only way that traditional performances were viewed, to say nothing of the Russian professional stage in the 20th century. Naïve viewers are not the point of Demidov's argument, but rather actors who mistake the adoration of their audiences for genuine artistic achievement. Naïveté about one's doings within a set of given conditions is required of the actor. While audiences can take an ironic view, actors must maintain a certain degree of sincerity about the lives of their characters within the given imaginary universe of play. The alternative is as nonsensical as the athlete or politician not playing to win.

An Engaging Performance Requires an Engaged Actor

Pre-theater often fails to answer modern theater's demands for originality because the same scenarios and situations were repeated year after year, season after season. Traditional performers and audiences did not share the modern theater consumer's demand for "new material." Still, this begs the question: how could audiences, even those starved for entertainment in provincial villages, be satisfied with

the same performances time after time. The answer is that they were not. Furthermore, reproduction of the same thing time after time is not possible.

Something was needed to keep the interest of performers and audiences year after year. If the material itself could not provide novelty, there must have been something else at work. That something else was the personal relationship of each performer to the material being performed. We have seen how a formal, anonymous approach to given conditions, the refusal to take stimuli or “irritants” personally results in non-personalized, anonymous, “clichéd” acting. Without the performer being personally engaged, it is hard for an audience to feel engaged in the performance.

There must be something that allows for personal, individual approaches to existing within the given conditions of the pre-theatrical play situation. “What if” is how the performer enters the imaginary world, the way he transforms the execution of a sequence of actions (fulfilling ritual or scenic tasks) into scenic action. “What if” in the System is incomplete without the personalization of the question: “if *I* were in the following given circumstances, what would *I* do?”

There is no better indication that an actor has accepted the given conditions of his imaginary universe of play than when he “stands with his back to the event.” This is a phrase used in the parlance of theater pedagogy in Russia today. It means the actor’s character responds totally and sincerely to changes in his imaginary circumstances when and only when he becomes aware of them. While this seems obvious, actors often fail to follow this dictum; they “play” events before they happen, do not adequately respond to changes in their circumstances, or both. “Standing with one’s back to the

event” is widespread in pre-theater. A clear example comes from the so-called “wedding drama.”

The Wedding Drama

The wedding ritual in all its local variants throughout the East-Slavic world consists of a cycle of performances over several weeks or months, including matchmaking, agreeing to the terms of the union, bathing and dressing the bride, fetching the bride, the trip to the church, “performative” obligations during and following the wedding feast. The term for all of this in Russian is *igrat’ svad’bu*, to “play” a wedding, the same verb used to describe other kinds of play, including playing musical instruments and playing characters. The “roles” involved—bride, groom, their parents, the matchmakers, the master of ceremonies, and so on—are all “scripted” by the local tradition.

The complex of ceremonies and events that made up the traditional wedding of East-Slavic pre-industrial communities has been described as “the wedding drama.” While each local tradition practiced its own unique variation of this mega-ritual, the overall contours were generally quite similar throughout the East-Slavic lands. One widespread episode was the bride’s lament following the official agreement to marry. I offer here not a description of an actual performance, but a reconstruction based on attested ethnographic and folkloric data found in P.I. Rybnikov’s description of the wedding ritual in the Russian North (*Pesni* 4-5).

The matchmakers have come to the house of a teenage girl in the Russian North in the 19th century. The usual verbal formulas are exchanged and the guests are given refreshments. The girl’s father accepts the matchmakers’ proposal. The two parties

shake hands and set a date. Although certainly there were marriages arranged contrary to a bride's wishes, quite often young people were able to choose their own mate.¹⁸ In the present case, let us assume that this union is the choice of the future bride and groom.

So far, the principal actors in this "marriage drama" have been the bride's father and the groom's people. But now the bride has a monologue, an aria, her lament for her lost maidenhood. Such songs have long been of great interest to folklorists, who have collected many examples and studied them as literary texts. The bride here, however, by performing this bit of folklore, is an actress as much or more than she is "the bearer of tradition," i.e., a vessel for oral literature.

Unfortunately, collecting oral culture in Russia has overwhelmingly been the work of philologists, folklorists, and literary scholars whose interest has been texts—the *what* at the expense of the *how*. Nevertheless, many collected texts associated with ritual or ludic action practically explode off the page with dramatic potential: a character having a goal and pursuing it. Stage action is purposeful, not merely movement. Stanislavsky wrote,

Never run for the sake of running, suffer for the sake of suffering. On stage don't act "in general," for the sake of action, but act with substantiation, purposefulness, and productively. [...] Genuine action is action with foundation and purpose. (Venetsianova 84; quoting Stanislavskii II 50)

Scenic action always depends on the context, the specific circumstances of both the character and the situation she finds herself in.

¹⁸ This happened at the many parties and gatherings that allowed young people to socialize and explore potential partnerships.

In song No. 2 from Rybnikov's collection "Let me stay a maiden," our heroine implores her parents, "Until I'm twenty." Her goal in the song is clear—to get her family to reconsider, to delay, if not refuse, the proposal outright. In song No. 1, the girl pleads, "Put it off." She tailors her approach to each specific scenic partner. She praises: "Brother, my bright sun, my trim, thin one." And she cautions against too hasty a decision, appealing to her father's sense of fairness and clear-headedness, "Your momentary thought, My whole life." In song No. 2, however, the bride's approach is quite different, she tries to bargain: she'll work for her family as a servant if they do not 'sell' her into a strange family (*Pesni* 6-7).

This "haggling" is what Stanislavsky would call a *prisposoblenie*, an "adaptation," a contrivance, either internal or external with which people adapt themselves to each other during personal contact and used to assist in influencing an object. Sometimes a device helps one to attract the attention of the person with which one wishes to associate, whose favor one wishes to gain (Venetsianova 321; quoting Stanislavskii II, 281).

As an "actor" and member of her culture, the bride of course has long known that the day of her betrothal will come. She knows in the abstract that this is an episode that young brides must face. She knows this from the example of older sisters and from the descriptions given by friends and relatives. She knows that she, personally, will encounter this change in her circumstances, knows that this "event" awaits her. She chooses to meet it with her back to it by responding to it fully, when and only when the agreement between the two parties has been reached. She responds to this news,

“spontaneously” crafting her reaction to the “unexpected” turn of events by choosing the most effective approach that she can conceive to those who control her fate.

While there was nothing unexpected here from the indicative perspective outside the given conditions of the wedding drama, within that imaginary world of emotional ups and downs, conflicts, ruptures, and reconciliations that concludes with marriage vows, the wedding feast, and conjugal union performers had the option of executing their “roles” with sincerity or with clichés. The clichéd bride approached her scenic task as a formality, sang her lament dutifully and failed to use the opportunity to connect with her loved ones on a “safe” level of exchange beyond that of everyday, indicative reality, interacting in a mode of existence where conditions were different but emotions could be just as genuine.

The conscientious pre-theatrical actress, on the other hand, was careful in the selection of her recited text. If her local tradition could not afford her a choice of possible laments, she nonetheless personalized her delivery. Even if she was in love and eager to marry, she still could very well have had fears and regrets about separation from her family and what would await her after marriage. The genius of Russian traditional performance was that it gave participants in this most epochal of life-cycle transformations the opportunity to explore and experience all the emotional twists and turns of this process safely, within an imaginary universe of play. The failure of Russian folklore studies is that far too often such episodes were seen only as texts, abstracted examples of “genres” with no value placed on the specifics—the given condition—of each unique situation, a Rubicon in the fate of a specific young woman.

It is impossible to say when, where and how often exchanges from family-cycle ritual were performed “sincerely” and when they were “clichéd.” We should assume that sometimes one occurred, sometimes another, just as it happens on the modern, professional stage. Sometimes performers accept their given conditions after having explored them with a degree of detail that allows them to exist in imaginary worlds of play that then become more real than real for them. Sometimes, performers fail to rise to this challenge, retreating into clichés and reproducing formally the outer shell of their roles with no spiritual, meaningful emotional engagement with the material.

When examined through the lens of “progress” produced by ideas of an ever greater aesthetic perfection of the performing arts, pre-theater, indeed, has very little in common with the kind of acting that Stanislavsky promoted and the System made possible. However, if one considers an internal connection between the two based on the actor’s process—how she approached her work as a performer by following her imagination into an imaginary world of play, letting sincerity and honesty guide her actions and reactions within that realm—then there exists a close connection between pre-theatrical performance and the System. Both allow and require actors to “believe” in conditional realities, not just in their minds but through their actions.

Imaginary Worlds of Play

So just what constitutes the imaginary worlds of play in pre-theater, the given conditions of traditional performance? Pre-theater cannot offer a very impressive body of play texts, at least compared to the dramatic literature of theater proper. This fact has been used to justify the allegedly “less-developed” evolutionary status of pre-theater.

There exist quite a number of scenarios, usually of Yuletide mummery as attested to by participants or observers. But they are rather simplistic, at least when considered as discrete entities. Usually, the bear, the demon, or the bizarre animal comes in and chases those in attendance at the holiday party around the room—scaring, physically abusing, or smearing them with soot. Perhaps the most dramaturgically advanced version of this scenario is the case of the faux deceased, whose performance also concludes with running after young women and children. However, a “play,” in the form of an irreverent re-creation of the Orthodox funeral service, precedes the merry chaos of the finale.

Another kind of skit involves a bull played by a mummer wearing a coat fur-side out and a pot over his head. He is “killed” by a blow to the head, upon which the pot is shattered and his “hide” stripped and “auctioned off” to members of the audience. “Receiving” the goods in this case typically meant receiving lashes or blows from mummers. All this is rather quaint and simplistic when compared to even the most ingenuous dramatic text, such as the folk play *Tsar Maximilian*, to say nothing of the dramatic texts of the high-culture theater.

Most mumming skits, in common with traditional games for children and youth, have sets of given conditions that offer little more than a pretext for game play, rather than the basis for fully fledged alternative universes of theatrical action. Something more is needed to provide the necessary richness in terms of given conditions to allow performers the opportunity to exist in adequately detailed worlds of play. Traditional culture provides this widening of the given conditions of performance beyond the narrow parameters of the discrete play scenario or skit. These meta-given conditions

include the holiday complex and traditional notions of alternative realities. This is the “back-story” of all pre-theater, something traditional performers know, at least instinctually, and something that scholars ignore at their peril when they look too closely at discrete instances of traditional performance and miss the big picture.

The conditional realities of East-Slavic pre-theater, those imaginary destinations for performers and audiences alike, are rooted in traditional culture. These worlds of play issue from the folk beliefs and practices that govern life in traditional communities. Life in all its diversity feeds this collective creation: economic production, the life-cycle of birth, marriage, and death, family and community relations, mythology and popular religion. Every aspect of life in traditional communities can be found in pre-theater: the performative expression of these imaginary worlds, these realms of “what if.” The materials of traditional performance are the same as those of everyday life, but the presentation is different. Pre-theater “distills” the elements of traditional life-ways into cultural creation.

It is no coincidence that holiday is the venue for pre-theatrical expression. Holiday, like pre-theater, uses the materials of everyday life but transforms them, changing sets of rules on behavior by assigning new categories and combinations to people, places, actions, and even time. Entering the realm of holiday is a community’s first, collective step into the imaginary realms where performance happens. Holiday is a community’s unanimous, unconscious statement of “what if the everyday order of things were not the only way to exist?” There are several ways that alternatives to indicative reality are posited through play in traditional culture.

One way that members of traditional communities pose the question “what if” is through the performative embodiment of notions of the supernatural. Starting with “what if there was a realm where the present world and the next world collided, where supernatural creatures existed among the living, sometimes helping, sometimes causing mischief,” performers and audiences of pre-theater impose further given conditions on these collisions based on time and space. The mythological characters and otherworldly dramatic situations of pre-theater both shape and are shaped by these chronological and spatial parameters. Unclean spirits exist in a symbiotic relationship with the holiday complex. Each needs the other. Each augments the other’s potency and, in many cases, helps determine the other.

The Supernatural World and the Holiday Complex: Time

Notions of the supernatural were closely tied to the reckoning of time in traditional communities. Specific holidays are known for a spike in the activity of certain evil spirits. Even the time of day or night has a bearing on the probability of an encounter with a supernatural creature. In her article “Demons as Characters in Calendar Mythology,” T. A. Agapkina asks how demons, who come to the calendar system from the mythological system, participate in calendar beliefs and rituals. Which calendar ideas do they express? What is the overall cultural function of demons, as realized through calendrical and mythological notions? (213) Supernatural beings, she argues, help determine the terms of calendrical periods, enforce behaviors appropriate to specific days and times of years, and embody anxieties about daily life and economic production.

Once demons, “enter orbit,” in Agapkina’s words, “around calendar rituals and beliefs,” they become a structural part of calendar mythology, the “bricks” with which important calendrical mythologemes are embodied. They are especially important in marking calendrical transitions, “signaling changes of season and cycles of economic and cultural activity” (Agapkina 213). A good example of this is the *rusalka*. T.A Zimina writes that the *rusalka* was, “a female demonic character in East-Slavic mythology” (487). *Rusalki* (plural) were usually found around water (“the depths of rivers, lakes, weirs [and] swamps”), but also haunted fields of rye in bloom (487). Their activation occurred during one of the spring holidays, “the week before Trinity, *Semik* (the seventh Thursday after Easter, three days before Trinity Sunday, Trinity Sunday or Spirit Day (the Monday after Trinity))” (487). Soon afterwards they returned to their non-active state, underground or underwater, out of contact with people and the “real” world of indicative reality. Thus *rusalki* helped “embody” the time around Trinity Sunday. They were the mythological creature associated with an important seasonal transition.

Calendar holidays, which mark transitions in the yearly cycle, alter the relationship between this world and the next. The supernatural is brought closer, made more immediate. Each calendar period typically has its attendant demons. The domain that supernatural beings inhabited during their time of closest contact with the natural world was not coincidental. *Rusalki* appeared at the beginning of the growing cycle and when bodies of water had thawed after winter and the ground around them had dried out enough to make approaching them practical. After being frozen or impassable for many months, bodies of water were suddenly accessible and dangerous. Stories of

rusalki, active during just this period, functioned to keep children and others on their guard around rivers and lakes, or better yet, encouraged them to avoid these places entirely.

According to popular beliefs, changes in levels of activity of supernatural creatures and their relative proximity to the human world were often determined, as L.N. Vinogradova writes, by “specific seasons and holidays of the yearly cycle” (166):

In Slavic mythology [...] the periods of the summer and winter solstices, when, according to folk beliefs, “the heavens open up” and supernatural forces intrude upon [this world] are especially significant. (167)

Thus at certain times of year the supernatural world was thought to be much more active than at other times.

The Yuletide period provides especially vivid examples of how temporal watersheds in the yearly cycle and ideas about supernatural beings support and augment each other as seen through beliefs and practices in traditional communities. Sergei Maksimov offered an especially colorful description of the most “demonic” stretch of the Yuletide season, the second half, when “the heavens open up.”

On New Year’s Eve night countless multitudes of demons come out of the abyss and freely walk the earth, scaring all Christian people. Beginning on this night all the way to the eve of Epiphany, unclean forces play dirty tricks on Orthodox folk with impunity, having their fun at the expense of anyone who forgot to protect his [...] house by drawing a cross on the door. During these *fearful evenings*, popular legend has it, God was so happy that he had a Son that he opened all the doors and let the devils out for a stroll. (Maksimov 321; my italics)

The appearance of Northern Russian demons, known as *shulikuny*, in the human world and their subsequent disappearance is strictly regulated: they come out of bodies of water on Christmas Eve and return there on the eve of Epiphany (Vinogradova 168).

The connection between supernatural creatures and the folk calendar is expressed in language: “A collective name for evil spirits, the appearance of which occurs during Yuletide, (*sviatki*), is the Northern Russian term *sviatki*, *sviat 'yo*” (Vinogradova 169; quoting Morozov and Sleptsova 1993, 250).

Traditional notions that unclean spirits are especially active during the Yuletide period also find expression in performance. According to Vinogradova:

Judging from many ethnographic accounts, the folk acknowledge a direct connection between Yuletide mummers and beliefs about increased activity on the part of the dead and unclean spirits: “In the evening of that day (Christmas) they begin [their] ‘demonic fun’;” [...] “on that night (New Year’s Eve) the dead awaken, take the form of various animals and walk the earth.” (Vinogradova 169; quoting Ivleva 1994, 53-54)

Mummery, of course, was practiced during Yuletide, one of a limited number of times during the year when it was culturally acceptable.

The following example from Larisa Ivleva’s field notes attest to how the dead, unclean spirits, and various animals were represented widely during Yuletide festive performances in a great many local traditions:

Sviatki [Yuletide] are the two weeks before Epiphany. [We] went to holiday parties, dressed up in costumes however we desired: animals—bears and other kinds; the bear would enter on his hands [and knees]. A coat with the fur [lining] turned inside-out was put on him. [His] handler comes [along with the bear] on a leash. The bear crawls, grabs a girl by the leg. If you don’t give in, it will be worse [for you]. [Some] dressed as cranes. They put on home-made costumes. [Others] masqueraded as a horse. (20)

The demonic creatures of folk belief made an appearance at Yuletide not just in tales, memorates, and other narratives, but in the flesh as well—embodied by members of traditional communities.

Time, Perception, and the Supernatural

Yuletide and its warm weather equivalent, Midsummer, are the two periods of the highest supernatural activity, according to East-Slavic popular calendars. These are both times of important transition in the yearly cycle—the winter and summer solstices: liminal periods in the “life” of the year or the sun. In terms of popular religion, Christ’s birthday in December is balanced out by his precursor’s festival in late June—St. John’s Day. Just as God opens the heavens for Christ’s birthday, as we learned from Maksimov, much the same is believed to happen at midsummer, according to many folk beliefs.¹⁹ Both these times of year “play” with a person’s biological clock: in most of Russia, the sun either barely sets or barely rises. Perhaps this explains why encounters with supernatural creatures are so common during these periods.

Just as the year has its “liminal” stretches, the day does also. Midday and midnight are liminal—in between morning and afternoon, yesterday and tomorrow. Twilight, too, is a time when objects are often seen imperfectly, when the imagination can outstrip the eye’s powers.

As R. Natadze has written in his study *Voobrazhenie kak faktor povedeniia* (*Imagination as a Factor of Behavior*), sometimes senses betray us; we see things that are not there:

[...] The imagination participates in processes of perception, filling in sensory data [that make up] the contents of perception or distorting, even to the point of illusion, the image of the perceived, especially under unfavorable conditions (poor visibility and audibility, suddenness of perception, and so on) [...]. (6)

¹⁹ See chapter one of B. Strakhov’s *Noch' pered rozhdestvom*.

Imagination has to make up for what vision cannot supply to the brain, much the way the spectators at Demidov's folk play performance filled in what was lacking from the performers.

In traditional East Slavic culture, knowledge of the supernatural world is closely connected to conditions highly favorable to the distortion and augmentation of sensory information. L.N. Vinogradova has written about how ideas of time contribute to the definition of the supernatural world in traditional culture. According to folk demonology, the behavior of unclean forces varies, she maintains, according to the vagaries of time. Thus specific times of the day and night, the seasons, and the holidays of the yearly cycle determine demons' ability to cause harm, the term of their stay on earth, and the nature of their contacts with humans. Periods belonging to people are known as "clean time." Dangerous periods belonging to supernatural forces are known as "unclean time," for example, the "fearful evenings" between New Year's and Epiphany during Yuletide. People have daylight; the night (including dusk) belongs to unclean forces (166-167). According to Vinogradova:

Thus within the bounds of the 24-Hour cycle, not just twilight and midnight were considered dangerous, but also the zenith of daylight—mid-day—when according to folk belief, evil spirits became more active. (167)

Vinogradova then gives an example of how specifics of time and space intersected in beliefs about a particular mythological character:

According to Russian superstitions, the *vodianoï* (water demon) is more active at midday and midnight ([when he] scares [people] and tries to drown [them]); similarly peasants of the Russian North were afraid to swim and fish at midnight and midday (167; quoting Krinichnaia 1994, 121)

Darkness and twilight, of course, facilitate distortions in sensory perception: people are more likely to “see” supernatural beings when their eyes could play tricks on them due to a lack of light.

Popular ideas about mid-day confirm the theory that folk demonology is at least partially the product of distorted sensory perception, rather than the application of a simplistic dualism of day—good, night—bad. In the same way that lack of light could cause misperceptions, the sun’s position directly overhead at midday is the most likely time for sun-stroke and other sun-related accidents and disorientation. Certain dialectal names for mummers, who performatively embody supernatural creatures, attest to the issue of distorted perception. As G.V. Lobkova has written, there are local terms for mummers based on the roots for to wonder, to marvel, a prodigy, and to scare. These names, on one hand, point to the strange behavior and an appearance of the mummers, and on the other hand, reveal their unusual nature via perception: what seems, is imagined, and fancied (38-40.).

Two things are worth noting. First, Russian has a highly developed vocabulary for describing how the senses are misled. Second, all of the verbs that describe this process use impersonal constructions, i.e., contain no grammatical subject, only a recipient of the action in the dative case. Phenomena appeared *to* the subject, rather than being seen *by* the subject; phenomena appear as if from without, from beyond the subject’s own being, projected or materialized from somewhere else.

The Supernatural and Existing Within Given Conditions

In addition to being the source for a great many imaginary universes of play, the function of the supernatural in pre-theater also illuminates another aspect of the actor's process—the manner by which performers exist within sets of given conditions.

Before exploring how this occurs, we must define how the supernatural is experienced in traditional culture. There are two avenues for “knowledge” of the supernatural to be transmitted—narrative and performative. Performance is embodied knowledge, where exchanges between this world and the next are “acted out” in real time, inscribed, as it were, on the bodies of performers. There is also narrative knowledge—tales, memorates, and other genres of folklore that purport to reproduce experiences and confrontations with and information about supernatural beings via the intermediacy of oral culture. Students of Russian traditional culture are fortunate to have at their disposal an extensive body of scholarship concerning ideas about the supernatural and their various expressions in the many genres of folklore.

While narratives about the supernatural realm in traditional culture are crucial to an understanding of the phenomenon, so are its performative manifestations. In performance, ideas about the supernatural are presented not through narrative, as they occur elsewhere in traditional culture, but appear “in the flesh.” Encounters with the supernatural world are typically expressed in a highly “theatrical” fashion, via dynamic exchanges between “characters.”

Determining which form of knowledge—narrative or performative—is anterior to the other is impossible. Folklorists privilege the narrative, believing that performatives are secondary to narratives—there must be a “story” before someone can

act it out. Perhaps the model from literary studies of the pre-existing literary source, the pre-existing play-text, influences their thinking in this regard. However, original knowledge of the supernatural can be created for the first time in performance, in other words, performative knowledge of the supernatural does not have to be posterior to narrative knowledge.

Both varieties of knowledge depend on members of traditional communities exercising their creative faculties—positing a “what if” universe. But just how does the creation of the world of the supernatural occur? The “natural” is the foundation for the “supernatural.” While this may seem axiomatic and therefore trivial, it is of supreme importance in the actor’s process. Supernatural “reality” exists above, beyond and often in contradiction to the rules of this universe; it does not function *outside* of the natural world, but *in addition* to it. A supernatural, “what if” universe of play can be completely impossible according to the rules of existence in the indicative universe.

A Truth Which Exists Within Us

Stanislavsky made the distinction between “imagination” (*voobrazhenie*) and “fantasy” (*fantaziia*). “Imagination creates that, which exists: what we know; fantasy, on the other hand, [creates] that, which we do not know in reality, what has never existed” (Venetsianova 473; quoting Stanislavskii II 70-71). In his autobiography, Stanislavsky made a clear connection between “fantasy” of the actor and “fantasy” of traditional culture. “What fun,” he wrote, “it is to invent what never occurs in reality, but is a truth which exists within us, within traditional culture, within its popular beliefs and its imagination” (Venetsianova 473; quoting Stanislavskii I 212-213).

Truth is the coin of the realm in Stanislavsky's approach to acting. It is not an external truth, however, not one which relies on verification from without. It is instead the truth of the actor's whole-hearted acceptance of a set of given conditions.

Stanislavsky's dialectical opponent exclaims, "Enough! What sort of truth can there be when everything on the stage is a lie, a fake: the scenery, cardboard, paint, make-up, costumes, props [...] How can this be truth?" (Stanislavskii I 304). Stanislavsky responds,

But I am speaking [...] of the truth of my feelings and sensations, of a truth of internal creative motivation, which is striving to express itself. I do not need truth outside of me, I need the truth within me—the truth of my relationship to this or that phenomenon on stage, to objects, to scenery, to my stage partners [...] to my thoughts and feelings [...]" (Venetsianova 299; quoting Stanislavskii I 304).

Stanislavsky continues, describing how he realized that creativity begins at the moment when "what if" appears in the soul and the imagination of the actor. As long as the truth of indicative reality, in which a person cannot not believe, exists, he says, creativity has not yet begun. Only when "what if," that illusory truth, in which the actor is able to believe just as sincerely, but with even more enthusiasm than in genuine reality, appears, does creativity begin (I 304).

Logic and Sequence: An Actor's "Truth Meter"

So what is the nature of this "truth" of feelings, this "truth" which does not depend on external, but on internal reality? Perhaps surprisingly, the exercise of the imaginative faculty, especially in its purest form—that of fantasy—is the actor's principal means for developing this "internal truth" muscle of his acting prowess.

Stanislavsky writes,

Science, literature, painting, and tales only give us hints, nudges, points of departure for these mental excursions into the realm of the impossible. Therefore in such mental excursions the main thrust of creative work falls to our fantasy. Therefore we are in even greater need of those means, by which the fairy-tale-ish (*skazochnoe*) approaches reality. Logic and sequence are one of the most important elements of this process. They help bring together the impossible and the likely. Therefore, when creating the fairy-tale-ish and the fantastic, be logical and sequential. (Venetsianova 474; quoting Stanislavskii II, 81)

Stanislavsky tells his students that he has referred to logic and sequence at every step of their study. These key elements, he affirms, are necessary to the actor not just for action and feeling, but also for all other moments of creativity. Only by means of uninterrupted lines of logic and sequence during every moment of creativity is truth created in the soul of the actor. And this truth summons sincere belief in the authenticity of what one feels on stage (Venetsianova 202-203; quoting Stanislavskii III, 193-194).

Logic and sequence govern every aspect of the actor's "internal sensation." These aspects include "thoughts, feelings, action (internal and external) desire, scenic tasks, striving, flights of imagination, and so on" (Stanislavskii III 417).

While they govern these varied elements within the System actor's process, logic and sequence only become potent through their relationship with one of these elements: scenic action. "How do we instill a demand for logic and sequence on stage in students?" asks Stanislavsky (Venetsianova 201; quoting Stanislavskii III 417). Through scenic action, he answers. "Logical and sequential actions provoke belief in the authenticity and truth of what you are doing on stage. Truth and belief bring all the other elements into play" (Venetsianova 205; quoting Stanislavskii III 418).

For Stanislavsky this is not generic action, not even “psychological action,” but specifically physical action:

Because physical action [...] is the kind most conveniently “locked-in”, it is material and visible; therefore physical action has a connection to all the other elements. Indeed, there is no physical action without desire, striving and scenic tasks, without inner justification of these components by means of feeling; there is no work of the imagination without some sort of mental action; there cannot exist in acting physical actions without belief in their authenticity and, it follows, without a sense of truth in them. (Venetsianova 202; quoting Stanislavskii III 417-418).

This “method of physical actions” is the crown of the System, its final refinement, which occupied Stanislavsky in his last years.

The Method of Physical Actions

Physical actions allow the performer to secure “the interrelationship between the body and the soul [mind], between action and feeling, thanks to which the internal provokes the external” (Venetsianova 91; quoting Stanislavskii II 179). Stanislavsky asks,

What is Lady Macbeth doing at the culmination of the tragedy? Simple physical action: washing the bloody spot from her hands. [...] ...washing the bloody spot helps Lady Macbeth achieve her ambitious plans, and her ambitious plans force her to wash out the bloody spot. (Venetsianova 91; quoting Stanislavskii II 179-180)

Physical actions, as in the present case, are tasks involving the body. Their execution contributes directly to the achievement of the character’s goals, which are usually defined as something much more than the completion of a simple physical process. The method of physical actions is the logical culmination of Stanislavsky’s efforts to break down the actor’s work into discrete, goal oriented units, the achievement of which leads directly into the next challenge, and the next. The sequence and character of an actor’s

physical actions for a role are determined by the given conditions and the character's overall goal (super-objective).

Logic and sequence both govern the ordering of an actor's list of physical actions (based on a logic of behavior appropriate to the given character) and emerge from the execution of this sequence. Stanislavsky writes, "The correct execution of a physical task will help you create the right psychological state" (Venetsianova 90; quoting Stanislavskii II 160-161). In other words, what has been determined in the mind as in keeping with the character's circumstances and desires is verified and made an incontrollable physical fact (to both performer and audience) through the performer's body when it performs a physical action.

Physical actions are no less important for establishing the right "state of mind" in traditional performance. The first, most basic element of this "state of mind," the alternative reality shared by a great many manifestations of performance in traditional culture, is the holiday complex. The physical actions in this case are largely behavioral, that is, traditional customs that serve to mark the difference between holiday time and everyday reality. Indeed, the entire holiday complex is governed by rules about what must and what must not be done at this time. Without its "physical actions" to establish it and maintain it, there would be no holiday.

Perhaps the most visceral way that the given conditions of holiday were established for members of traditional communities was through consumption. We have already seen how the relaxation or intensification of dietary restrictions often marked the beginning or ending of a holiday period. Attitudes towards drink also helped clarify the distinction between the everyday and holiday.

Actions other than eating and drinking also reflected the different realities of holiday and non-holiday time. Popular knowledge of restrictions and obligations regarding certain behaviors was often expressed via ideas about supernatural creatures and their relationship to holidays. Swimming, spinning flax, picking fruits, and a great many other activities, were permitted at certain times of year, but culturally unacceptable at others: demonic forces were thought to punish transgression. As T.A. Agapkina maintains,

The calendar system actively “attracts” demons in order to mythopoetically justify various prohibitions, including those involving taboos during the spring-summer period of touching immature plant foods, such as prohibitions such as ‘don’t go into the peas (don’t eat peas) until the Savior ([holiday of the] Transfiguration) [August 19th], an iron woman sits there, and will hurt you with her tits; “Don’t pick cukes until the [holiday of the Holy] Maccabeus [August 14th], a *rusalka* will drag you away”; a devil sits in the apple tree until the Savior, you must not pick apples [until they have been blessed on that day]. (214)

Agapkina and others see the creation and transmission of popular traditions in terms of motifs, structures, and signs, in the terminology of adherents of this approach; “mytho-poetics.” The very term betrays its origins in literary theory, or, more precisely, Russian “philology.”

For the bearers of these traditions, however, knowledge abides in actions—some requiring commission, some requiring omission, as well as re-actions. In the case of prohibitions, avoiding one action constitutes another action. Both actions and the avoidance thereof show “active thinking” (*deistvennoe myshlenie*), a dynamic, profoundly theatrical model for interactions with the next world based on notions of action and re-action by scenic partners—one in this world, one in the next—as modified by specific given conditions; for instance: summertime, the subject wants an

apple or cucumber, a demon is waiting for his opportunity to punish wayward acts, and so on.

Thus ideas about the world of the supernatural in traditional communities are realized through physical actions appropriate to specific times of year, in other words, culturally determined behaviors. At the same time, the specific characteristics of certain periods, i.e., holidays, provide the given conditions which made such actions appropriate and necessary, what Stanislavsky would call “logical and sequential.” Therefore, notions of the supernatural in traditional culture are maintained and renewed in culture as much or more by the actions of performers than through verbal narratives.

The Supernatural World and the Holiday Complex: Place

While time—both in terms of time of year and time of day or night—is an important factor in determining the degree of activity of supernatural beings and their tendency to interact with humans, place is equally, if not more important. L.N.

Vinogradova has written how

Everyone who has studied folk demonology has repeatedly observed that a mythological character’s locational characteristic is its most important identifying feature. It is no accident that [location] is one of the leading principles in the naming of the majority of these characters: *domovoi* [house spirit; from *dom*—house], *dvorovoi* [courtyard demon; from *dvor*—yard], *gumennik* [threshing-floor spirit; from *gumno*—threshing-floor], *ovinnik* [barn spirit; from *ovin*—barn], *bannik* [bath-house demon; from *bania*—bath-house], *vodianoï* [water demon; from *voda*—water], *bolotnik* [swamp demon; from *boloto*—swamp], *lesovik* [forest demon; from *les*—forest], *kolodeznyi dukh* [spirit of the well; from *kolodets*—well], *zhitniaia baba* [grain woman; from *zhito*—grain], *polevik* [field demon; from *pole*—field] and so on. (166)

The house spirit, or *domovoi*, while often very sensitive to perceived slights, typically exists in a state of harmony with the people in a home unless offended through certain

sins of omission or commission. With the exception of the *domovoi* and his close relatives—specialized spirits of the cellar, the stove, Mrs. Domovoi, and so on—all mythological creatures are found at some remove from the center of human life, the home. In order to encounter a supernatural being, the human subject must leave the center of his existence and engage the spirit at the center of its existence. Sometimes, these places are inherently dangerous, such as forests and swamps. Often though, the danger associated with meeting an unclean spirit is culturally determined: specific localities and their attendant *genii loci* embellish and augment each other in terms of their ambivalence or malevolence for humans.

The bath-house is just one example. In traditional culture, visiting the bath-house should occur only under certain conditions, which, when followed, greatly reduce, if not eliminate, the potential for an unfortunate encounter with the *bannik*. One should not, for example, visit the bath-house alone, at midnight, or after two shifts have already bathed—this so-called “third steam” is for unclean spirits to have their bath. Much of the folk etiquette involving the bath-house, as expressed through anxiety about the *bannik*, is eminently practical. Discouraging solitary visits to the bath-house, where the heat and steam can potentially overwhelm someone’s heart or result in other negative consequences, especially when alcohol is involved, is very prudent. Perhaps the reddish skin of the solitary bather who lost consciousness in the steam room of the bath-house gave rise to beliefs about the *bannik*’s favorite punishment for those who violate the rules of conduct in his domain: skinning alive.²⁰

Sometimes, however, the subject willingly and purposefully violates the established procedure for being in a specific place at a specific time under specific

²⁰ In a number of local traditions the bath spirit’s consort is *obderikha*, or skin-flayer.

conditions. Unmarried young women, for example, visit the bath-house alone during Yuletide in many local traditions. Rather than avoid or reduce the potential for an encounter with the *bannik*, the young woman actively seeks one. This behavior is a form of prognostication, a vital component in the Yuletide complex and certain other seasonal holidays. Here is how Sergei Maksimov described Yuletide prognostication.

Prognostication is [...] the center of girls' entertainment because any future bride, naturally, wants to look into the future and, even with the help of the devil, find out whom fate will send her for a husband and what sort of life awaits her in the future with this unknown husband, whom an idle imagination portrays now as a handsome, good young man, tender and sweet, and now as an old grumbler, a repellent skinflint with heavy fists. (290)

In this case “the devil” is represented by his proxy, the bath-house spirit.

Two or three young women sneak away from the evening's party unnoticed, on reaching the dark, deserted bath-house, the most daring thrusts her hand through an opening. “If she is seized by a hairless hand [it means] a poor groom [for her]; a shaggy hand [means] a rich groom” (Krinichnaia 2004, 81; quoting Bogatyrev 1916, 75). Or else girls would lift up their dresses one by one and press their naked posteriors in through the open door of the bath-house chanting the following couplet: “Hit me, rich man/ On the ass with hairy hand.” If she felt a shaggy hand, it meant her husband would be rich. A hairless, stiff hand promised a poor, cruel mate. A soft hand indicated a husband with a gentle disposition (Krinichnaia 2004, 80; quoting Zelenin 1991, 404).

An especially fearless girl was needed to try the next example of prognostication in the bathhouse. The prognosticating girl locked herself in bath-house alone overnight. She set a table with two place settings. There were no knives because otherwise the summoned evil-spirit might cut her. Just before midnight, before the

cock's crow, which unclean spirits fear, the girl sat down to table. With a look out the window over her left shoulder she invited her betrothed in with the words, "fated-one, come have dinner with me." Tradition held that the girl's betrothed would respond to such an invitation, or at the very least, appear in the window (Balov 77).

The experience of a manifestation of supernatural reality depended on a number of factors: the subject's expectations about either unclean forces in general or specific evil spirits vis-à-vis the popular calendar in her local tradition. For instance, when performing a prohibited activity, the degree of fear associated with a specific situation, the level of inherent danger involved, and local traditions about supernatural beings and when and why they appear were all factors which could condition an "encounter" with a mythological character.

Like time, place can be a very evocative, powerful stimulus to the performer's imagination. Actual physical locations in the indicative universe—the bath house, a churchyard at midnight, or a crossroads—are not the only source for the given conditions performers in traditional culture use to enter imaginary worlds of play. Locations existing primarily or exclusively in the imagination are important in the creation of alternative realities as well. Notions about space, we learn in the article "Describing the Organization of Space in the East-Slavic Wedding" by A.K. Baiburin and G. A. Levinton, occur in meta-ritual texts such as prognostications about weddings, "in which questions are asked not just about the groom and the date of the wedding, but also about the house, which the bride will enter [...]" (89).

Visualization: Cinematic Internal Vision

The key moment in the actor's creation and processing of spatial given conditions is visualization. Since the home of her future in-laws imagined by the young woman is something which could exist in reality, this type of mental creation corresponds to what Stanislavsky called "imagination" rather than "fantasy." But whether based on reality or purely fantastic, the performer is developing her talent at creating viable worlds of play, sets of given conditions on which to base her actions.

Indeed, visualizations of her future life and especially its pivotal moment—her wedding, an imaginary yet supremely likely set of mental pictures—supplied girls in traditional communities with one of their key sets of given conditions as performers. Through the years of her childhood and adolescence, visions of her future husband, future home, future in-laws, the direction from which her groom would come, his physical characteristics and his personality, and myriad other details were developed and reinforced in performance. Girls participated in games, skits, and other folk practices, such as prognostication, where the subject was marriage, from an early age.

Stanislavsky made this ability to picture a different reality a vital component in the System:

It is enough for me to put forward a theme for imagining and you already start seeing the corresponding visual images with your so-called inner vision. In our actors' jargon these images are called inner-sight visions. [...] imaging, fantasizing, day-dreaming all mean [...] looking, seeing with inner sight that, about which you are thinking. (Venetsianova 47-48; quoting Stanislavsky II 83)

These visions are absolutely essential to the process by which given conditions shape a performer's actions.

We need, first of all, an uninterrupted line of “given conditions,” through which the life of the etude [sketch] takes place, secondly [...] we need an uninterrupted chain of visions tied to these given conditions, in other words, we need an uninterrupted line not of simple but of illustrated given conditions. [...] The permanent observation of this cinematic internal vision (*kinolenta vnutrennykh videnii*), on the one hand, secures you in the given conditions of the play; on the other hand, it will constantly and reliably guide your creative process. (Venetsianova 48; quoting Stanislavskii II 84)

The wedding ritual was exceedingly visual. A great number of texts of songs and verbal formulas recorded by ethnographers and folklorists demonstrate the importance of this “cinematic internal vision.”

In the song “*Vysoko zaria vyskhazhivala*” (*The Morning Glow Rose High*), the bride projects a cinematic vision of the situation that awaits her in the wedding chamber.

[...] There stood a wooden bed,
On the bed was a down comforter,
In a silken cover,
Topped by down pillows,
On the pillows lay sweet Vasya.
At that wooden bedside,
Next to him sweet Liubushka stands,
She cries like a river flows,
And sobs like a wave breaks.
Cursing the land of strangers,
“Cursed land of strangers,
“[That] parts me from my mom and dad,
“From my mom and dad and relatives,
“And from my dear girlfriends,
“That land is not poured with honey,
“Not sprinkled with sugar,
“Not planted with apple trees.
“Her tears poured out,
“Yellow sand flowed out,
“She is stung with nettles.
“My tears were bitterer,
“Than the sting of nettles.” (*Russkaia svad'ba* 331)

The bride's mental picture here, as she is led to the wedding chamber, is vivid not only with visual images of the scene that awaits her, but also of her emotional state. For whatever the "actress's" feelings might be regarding her situation, the character she is playing, that of the reluctant, fearful, regretful bride, is set by tradition. Her given conditions dictate that she behave and perceive reality in this way.

While the folklorist is satisfied once he has recorded a text like the one above, to be collected, anthologized, analyzed, and compared to other texts, wedding songs like this have an important purpose in the process of pre-theatrical acting. While the primary function is to express the bride's emotional state at the moment she is being led to the bedroom, the song is also crucial in helping future brides create their own set of given conditions, their own "continuous cinematic vision." Let us not forget that the bride's girlfriends, and perhaps their little sisters, are likely in attendance, soaking up these images. We should remember also that wedding songs do not emerge out of nowhere when needed for the appropriate ritual situation. They are learned, rehearsed, observed in performance, and taught to others. The result is a chain of images, descriptions of emotional states, and accounts of ritual actions all conveyed through the highly imagistic medium of folk poetry that passes through the lives of girls not just on their wedding day, but over and over again: at the weddings of friends and relatives, in other ritual situations, and even in children's games about the wedding ceremony.²¹

Wedding songs demonstrate that members of traditional communities were quite savvy about the actor's process. Stanislavsky writes that,

²¹ See Igor' Morozov's *Zhenit'ba dobra molodtsa* (Moscow: Labirint, 1998) for an exploration of the connection of folk games and traditional entertainments to calendar and family cycle rituals, especially the wedding complex.

The visual images of our day-dreams, in spite of their illusiveness, are nonetheless more real, more palpable, and more “material” [...] than notions of feelings, which are vaguely suggested to us by our emotional memory. Let these more accessible and compliant visual images help us to resurrect and strengthen our less accessible, less solid [...] feelings. Let the “cinematic vision” constantly underpin within us the corresponding mood, appropriate to the play. (Venetsianova 48-49; quoting Stanislavskii II 86)

Stanislavsky says “play” but in our case we can substitute the term “wedding drama.”

In the song cited above, the performer does not speak of her feelings directly. Instead she projects images for herself and others of a bride crying. She pictures this state of grief, reports the speech of a young woman in a situation similar to her own, and provokes a mental picture of the emotional state by comparing it with the image of stinging nettles.

Enacting Spatial Transitions

Another important aspect of the spaces or zones into which ritual environments were subdivided in traditional performance lies in the transitions between them. Baiburin and Levinton offer a model of the wedding ritual based on crossing thresholds and transitioning from one semantically meaningful area to another (89-105). One key spatial transition in the wedding drama occurs during the matchmakers’ visit. The space of the peasant home (*izba*) is divided into inner and outer halves by the center beam of the roof (*matitsa*), which supported the ceiling. Strangers could cross over into the inner half only upon invitation of a member of the household. Until then, their place was usually on a bench next to the door in the outer half. Matchmakers, whom tradition allowed advancing to the very edge of the outer half, exploited this seam between the two halves of the dwelling to signal their intentions. (101-102). In Rybnikov’s description of the wedding ceremony, the matchmakers place their mittens on the center

beam with the fingers pointing up, which, according to folk belief, will ensure a favorable answer, and remain standing under the beam, declining an invitation to sit down (5). N. Astrov's 1905 description of the matchmaker's entrance from the Penza district is even subtler. "The householders immediately guess why the strangers have called based on their observation of how the matchmaker glances up at the center beam" (Baiburin and Levinton 102; quoting Astrov, 417). Here is a case of reading your stage partner's unspoken motivations that would have made Stanislavsky proud.

While folklorists concentrate on the structural (-ist) aspect of these transitions, finding a "semiotics of space," the theater scholar will notice something else. First of all, none of these "semantic fields" could exist or have any meaning without people to give them their significance. Performers in their interactions with other performers, all acting according to a mutually agreed to set of give conditions, create these spaces and the meanings associated with transitions between them.

Secondly, transitions between zones of meaning—leaving or entering a house or yard, entering the neutral area between villages (*chistoe pole*), moving from one part of a dwelling to another, even sitting down at a specific place at the table—are for the performer what Stanislavsky called "adaptations" (*prisposobleniia*), that is, ways to approach a scenic task, especially interactions with one's stage partner. Defined by Stanislavsky, adaptations are,

[...] both internal and external contrivances, with which people adapt themselves to one another during communication [...] In some cases adaptations are tricks; in others, adaptations are clear illustrations of inner feelings or thoughts; sometimes adaptations help you attract the attention of the person with whom you wish to communicate, to dispose toward yourself; sometimes adaptations convey to others what is unseen and only felt, which is not communicated via words, and so on, and so on. (Venetsianova 321; quoting Stanislavskii II 281)

Thus crossing ritually actualized boundaries in traditional performance communicates an actor's intentions or goals to a partner in the performance. The meaning created is important not just in an abstracted "semiotic" sense, but is also a part of the ongoing communicative process. The subtleness of this interaction, the way a performer can "say something" without verbalizing it explicitly, is yet another feature of the alternative reality where performance makes its home. Under the given conditions of the world of the wedding drama, for instance, communication exists not in its usual, indicative state, but is transformed by imagination and improvisation. It exists and has meaning only in the ephemeral moment of performance, only when apprehended in the moment by the performer's "stage" partner.

Framing Given Conditions: The Borders of Imaginary Worlds

The difference between stage acting and pre-theatrical acting in terms of given conditions is that performance as such is the largest frame in the System, while in traditional performance the life of the community is the largest frame. Performing on a stage (or its equivalents) is an invariable in the System, a product of the Western, high-culture concept of "theater," where performers are segregated from audiences. Choices about given conditions—and thus the creative process of acting—exist within that frame, within the imaginary world of tonight's performance between the footlights and the backdrop. In pre-theatrical performance, this model is present in the case of the mumming presentation that does not involve members of the audience directly: the skit performed in the middle of the room at the Yuletide party and viewed by the audience surrounding it. A second variety of mumming is this type involving the participation of audience members. M.L. Lur'e called the two categories contact games (or play) and

show games: "...the games of Yuletide mummery are divided into those featuring interaction between mummers and non-mummers, and those in which viewers remain [passive] viewers" (Lur'e 112).

Contact (interactive) games in traditional mummery blur the boundary between performer and audience. In other varieties of pre-theater it is even harder to make a reliable determination of who is a performer and who is a spectator. This means that the given conditions in such performances extend, in a sense, beyond the performance itself into the life of the community. Thus events in the life of the community such as milestones in the yearly cycle like Shrovetide (*Maslenitsa*), and in the family cycle, such as weddings, are proper given conditions in pre-theatrical performance because they determine the behavior of participants. The traditional holiday reveler does not exercise the reflexivity of the System actor who asks himself, "What would I do if I were in such-and-such a situation?" The question is implicit: "What would I do if it were such-and-such a holiday?"

In both the System and pre-theater the answer to these questions is provided in the form of scenic action: what the performer does is his response to that question. In pre-theater, just as in the System, specific given conditions lead the performer in the direction of specific actions. Before the wedding, the bride's mother laments, publicly, the loss of her daughter, whether or not those are her true feelings. In late December, unmarried young women participate in organizing and attending Yuletide parties and prognosticate their future. At the same time, unmarried young men get drunk and attend Yuletide parties. When, for various reasons, young men cannot get drunk they "pretend" to be intoxicated.

Drunken Bluster: Action Determined by the Given Conditions of “Holiday”

The “drunken bluster” (*pianyi kurazh*), as Morozov and Sleptsova describe it, of these young men merits a closer look (2004, 193). For young, unmarried men in many traditional communities, public drunkenness, or the “mask” of intoxication was an important part of their holiday behavior. Morozov and Sleptsova describe how public drunkenness adds to a lad’s prestige: he was considered richer and braver when in a drunken state and had better chances of finding a desirable bride. The more homes and villages the youngster visited in this state, the better. The next day’s story of their drunken “feats” was just as important as the events themselves (2004, 194).

A typical holiday scene from the north of Novgorodskaiia province was described as follows:

After dinner young men get together, and with accordions and with songs of the most repulsive content [...] and go from house to house bringing this chaos along with them [...]. [After] two or three cups of beer the group, not so much intoxicated as pretending to be drunk, moves on to the next house. Being drunk during a holiday is considered valorous and audacious. (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 194)

Morozov and Sleptsova conclude that, “drunken bluster and its associated demonstrative aggression were merely a behavioral mask for young unmarried men.” A lad always put on this disguise when the public demonstration of his status was necessary, in other words, “[this behavior] always presupposed the presence of an audience and partner-rivals” (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 194). As confirmation of this, the authors quote the Sokolov brothers’ collection of tales and songs from the Belozerskii district.

Every lad, if he does not become severely intoxicated, at the very least has to try to give the impression that he is completely drunk. In this

way he shows that he has the means to get drunk and knows people with whom to do it. We recall how one event astounded us. We were on our way to a holiday [celebration] in the village of Prokufinskaia [...] with a company of young lads. We walked peacefully, having a typical, relaxed conversation. The lads were sober. But not far from Prokufinskaia we caught sight of the outskirts [and] something happened to our boys. They began swaying and talking loudly, picking fights with each other. One [even] pulled a bottle from his pocket (totally empty, by the way!). And we entered the village with a seemingly totally intoxicated gang. (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 195; quoting B. M and Iu. M Sokolov, 422).

Also during holiday gatherings, young men would try to limit contact between the young women of their community and young men from outside the community while also “crashing” parties in neighboring villages to establish contact with that community’s potential brides. These are just a few of the many specific given conditions created by the traditional calendar that lead the holiday celebrants towards specific actions.

Performative “Bleed-through” to the Life of the Community

There are clearly limits to the proposition whereby behavior sanctioned by the holiday complex in traditional culture is analogous to acting “on stage” in the theater. I have described performance in east Slavic traditional communities as “pre-theater” rather than theater, after all. Excepting spectacles like mummers’ “show play” before an audience, pre-theatrical performances typically bleed imperceptibly into life beyond the performance. Reasons for this are several. Performances like weddings, funerals, certain seasonal rituals, and so on, are already set apart from non-holiday, purely indicative existence. Holiday brings an atmosphere that allows this “bleed-through” to occur, making, for example, masking, fighting, vandalism, innuendo and outright sexual references, and all manner of supernatural contact easy and even expected.

Outside of the holiday complex, items on the above list are typically seen as aberrations, behavior the community rejects as inappropriate. While set off in this way from normative existence, varieties of traditional performance which demonstrate this bleed-through nonetheless maintain an interactive relationship with the indicative world in ways that “show” play does not.

The evolutionary school of the history of Russian theater sees performances where bleed-through occurs as more primitive than shows which are aesthetically “sealed off” from its audiences. The former are too “messy.” Palpable vestiges of ritual are mixed up with elements of how theater would later evolve. Performances where contact between performer and audience is regulated by a “theatrical” model, with actors performing and spectators watching, seem like an evolutionary leap forward because they are much closer to the species of theater that Russia inherited from Europe, with its proscenium, whether actual or implied.

However, in terms of the actor’s process, the “closed off” type of performance in pre-theater is not necessarily more advanced than the type where the life of the community and the holiday complex supply the final frame. The mummings’ self contained skit represents a step backwards in terms of an approach to acting seen in the System articulated by Stanislavsky and developed by others in 20th century Russian theater.²² The bleed-through to the life of the community observed in the wedding ritual or certain types of Yuletide holiday performance allows for a much greater degree of

²² The discrete, non-interactive “show” in traditional performance probably contributed to the emergence of the folk drama tradition, which is related to the acting of the neo-classical period in Russia by virtue of its distinct “staginess” in the same way that interactive pre-theater shares processal similarity with the System.

organic existence during performance. This is a quality of reacting naturally, without the “staginess” that performing on “stage” brings often brings.

Playing Truthfully, Acting Naturally

In his first acting textbook, the tome known in English as *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavsky poses the question, “What does it mean to ‘truthfully’ (faithfully) play a role?”

This means to correctly, logically, sequentially and humanly think, want, strive, and act while on stage in the conditions of the role and in full accordance with it. Only upon achieving this does the actor get near the role and begin feeling in line with it. (Venetsianova 274; quoting Stanislavskii II, 25)

This is really just another way of saying that the actor must accept his given conditions and behave within them with the same degree of sincerity with which he approaches life *outside* of performance. This may seem paradoxical—acting is about pretending. What sincerity can there be? This proposition is also an elusive concept. One hardly thinks about sincerity in one’s real, indicative life. Yet weeks and even months at the start of acting class must be devoted to teaching the student to react naturally, with his “back to the event.” But there is a step that comes even before this.

At one of our first classes in directing, Pokrovsky posed the following question to the group: “What is the very first thing a director needs to obtain from his actor?” The answer was that before the director can require anything else the actor must be himself on stage: comfortable, natural, uninhibited, and free. We aspiring directors learned this ourselves during those initial weeks and months of our five-year program. Dance class began by walking in a circle while the pianist played a piece with an even rhythm and our instructor, Svetlana Gavrilovna, corrected our gait, posture, and

carriage. We were not to play or portray anything but to relax all our muscles, tensing only what was necessary to stand, take a step, turn, make a gesture, and so on, without any superfluous muscle tension.

Acting class was about the same thing: walk across the room from one corner to another while engaging only the muscles essential for that task, acknowledge a fellow student walking in the opposite direction. Actor training according to the System begins here, with muscle relaxation. This is the start of the long process whereby the actor eventually learns to pursue his character's goals and react to the stimuli of the given, imaginary world as a being different from his own indicative persona but via his own innate responses to what exists for him both inside (emotions, memories) and outside (sensual perceptions). Once the actor has learned to be comfortable on stage, can exist "as himself," he must learn to take action, again "as himself." Greeting a classmate while walking from corner to corner in the acting classroom now had to be backed up with an action: "Why am I saying hello, what do I want?"

So, while skit acting in traditional communities is formally closer to acting on a stage than are ritual and social performances like weddings and seasonal rites, this correspondence does not tell the whole story. The skit resembles the stage-play superficially, as seen from outside the actor's process. One of the principal features of the pedagogic value of the System is how it trains the performer to be himself on stage, to attend to the character's business without self-consciousness getting in the way. Pre-theatrical actors lacked this training. Certainly actors in ritual and seasonal performances were "on display," witnessed by an audience. But in such cases actors

were not nearly as exposed while engaged in interactive performance as when they were acting out a skit, and thus had less need to feel self-conscious.

Two factors made this possible. The first is the functional lack of the “proscenium” made possible by the bleed-through between the performance as such and the ongoing life of the community in both conditional and indicative modes. Recall the bride’s lament following her betrothal. Her “performance” of this selection of oral culture is made separate from what came before it and what happens after by the heightened, artistic reality brought in by music and poetry. Her lament, the equivalent of the Prima Donna’s aria ending the first act in an opera, is a highlight of the altered, special existence shared by everyone involved in this section of the traditional wedding ritual. Here again is an actor accepting given conditions and using “what if.” In this case, “what if I were not my indicative, “real self” but an idealized bride-to-be in a set of idealized family relationships which require me to follow an idealized sequence whereby in this situation I am motivated to strive to preserve my maidenly freedom?” She pursues this goal through scenic action. In the citations from Rybnikov’s collection offered previously, her goal and action are quite clear. She wishes to delay or permanently disrupt her marriage. She appeals to those who can make this happen—members of her family: father, mother, and brother. She picks a specific strategy (adaptation) to approach each and every stage partner, as presented above in the example of the post-betrothal lament.

Playing One’s Self in Given Conditions

The other factor that frees the traditional performer from the debilitating self-consciousness of “acting on stage” with its attendant loss of unrestrained naturalness is

the same technique that beginning actors in the System use to learn scenic action, interaction with stage-partners, “what-if,” and how to exploit given conditions without sacrificing ease on stage: play yourself in given conditions. Participants in the wedding drama do not play characters different from themselves; they play themselves, not their everyday selves but their holiday selves, alternative hypostases of themselves where everyone is smarter, merrier, and more attractive. The imaginary world of the wedding drama is one of idealized members of families and communities as dictated by traditional cultural norms. In this world of cultural “roles,” all brides lament, regretting the loss of their maidenhood. Unmarried companions of the bride commiserate. Brides’ mothers mourn the loss of their daughters. Everyone behaves according to cultural prescription, whether or not the “role” corresponds with the performer’s true feelings.

Let us take a closer look at an example of “playing one’s self in given conditions.” To do so we will return to Yuletide mummery. During the holiday party described by N.S. Preobrazhenskii in 1864, in the middle of the festivities,

...a fearful yell rang out, ‘Hold the doors... Lock them!..’ This shout shocked everyone at the gathering like unexpected thunder. Girls raced headlong to the back corner. Children from neighboring villages tried to hide on the stove, in the back corner, into the cellar and under benches behind girls’ legs [...]. The kids trembled and squealed. (189)

What was happening? The very essence of Yuletide fun was starting, he says: They were bringing in the Yuletide demons, i.e., mummers dressed as demons.

The turmoil continued. *Kikimoras* ran into the room with shouts, lashing and thrashing with brooms in every direction, trying to treat the kids from neighboring villages to especially generous helpings of their [sooty-snow-soaked] brooms. These *kikimoras* were local lads, dressed as old women in all manner of scraps and rags. (190)

Even young women the same age as the mummers were often observed to panic at the sight of these “scary mummers.” At a crowded Yuletide party, in the murky half-light of candles and birch splinters (*luchina*), a young woman, seeing some sort of being from another world, resolutely non-human, with a piece of cloth over its face or headless (an oversize coat buttoned up over the performer’s head, perhaps), moving with non-human movements to the din of an otherworldly “orchestra” (the clang of various household items played by other mummers), mutely and inexorably advancing straight towards her (not towards a neighbor, not passing along side her), must be forgiven for momentarily “displacing” the knowledge—purposefully or otherwise—that this creature was nothing more than a masked lad dressed up in old rags, so completely lost was she in the given conditions of a visit by these other-worldly creatures.

We should perhaps look for the origins of Russian acting as much in the behavior of this young woman “spectator” as in the behavior of the “scary mummer” that provoked such a spontaneous response in her. Taken together, these two performers represent the approach to acting as described in the System. Both performers reproduce elements of the process, but neither achieves entirely the pinnacle of the actor’s art according to Stanislavsky: *perevoploshchenie* or “trans-embodiment.”

Trans-embodiment: Proceed from the Self as Someone Else

Aside from the professional literature of theater practitioners, the term *perevoploshchenie* is found in scholarly discussions of Russian traditional performance, such as Larisa Ivleva’s *The Pre-theatrical Play Language of Russian Folklore*. She defines the two necessary elements of (pre-theatrical) play as trans-embodiment and

action (1998, 38). Ivleva's definition of trans-embodiment differs, however, from Stanislavsky's. For Ivleva, any masked reveler has trans-embodied, becoming, in a play universe, someone or something else. For Stanislavsky, though, a different character is not something merely slipped into like a costume. "The actor's first and main task is the capacity of inner [*dukhovny*: literally, spiritual] and outer trans-embodiment" (Venetsianova 274; quoting Stanislavskii V 185).

Trans-embodiment is not about getting away from your self, but about immersing yourself in the given conditions of the actions of the role and "living" into it to such an extent that you no longer know 'where am I and where is the role?' This is the real deal; this is trans-embodiment. (Venetsianova 274; quoting Stanislavskii 1953, 681)

Who knows if mummers' trans-embodied according to Stanislavsky's definition? If they did, then the System actor had a functional prototype in traditional performance culture. We cannot be sure, however, of a situation where the actor "gave himself [up] to the role," blending into the image and "creatively trans-embodied" (Venetsianova 274; quoting Stanislavskii II, 251-252). Therefore, to be safe, we must treat this kind of mumming essentially as masquerade.

Can acting exist without trans-embodiment? Yes. Trans-embodiment is not an initial step in the actor's process, according to Stanislavsky, but something that comes after the actor begins to understand what his character is doing in the scene.

Stanislavsky described the opposite of this approach, a path he rejected, in *My Life in Art*,

We advanced directly towards external results of creative work, leaving out its most important initial stage—the generation of feeling. In other words, we began with embodiment without having yet experienced the spiritual content that needed to be given form. (Venetsianova 447; quoting Stanislavskii I, 210)

Before the actor can inhabit another being via his own body, he must experience the world that character inhabits—the given conditions of the scene—naturally, with sincere reactions that issue from his own (the actor’s) individual psychophysical make-up. Stanislavsky called this *itti ot sebia*, or “proceed from the self.” Students develop this initial process of understanding their characters “from within” while playing themselves in given conditions.

Where is the most likely place to find something like complete trans-embodiment—a performer playing a completely different character from herself yet acting and reacting to stimuli based on her own psycho-physical initiative—in a pre-theatrical performance setting? It is certainly not to be found in the wedding “drama.” Here, trans-embodiment occurs in a modified aspect: performers play themselves in given conditions—not their indicative selves but their idealized selves, performing actions expected of them as dictated by tradition.

The mumming “show” before an audience where the functional divide between performer and viewer is at its most pronounced features trans-embodiment according to Ivleva’s definition, but not Stanislavsky’s. Here we can only be sure of superficial characterization, masquerade.

The situation we need to find is one where playing a different character intersects with a performer’s ability to “proceed from the self,” to locate his character’s reactions in his own, personal psycho-physical complexion. System actors learn to do this on a professional level, applying it everywhere as the essence of their approach to performing. Pre-theatrical actors, though, are not professionals. Something like complete trans-embodiment could only exist during a favorable coincidence of

circumstances. While “proscenium-type” mumming is weighted heavily towards masquerade, mumming where the boundary between performer and audience is porous provides satisfactory pre-conditions because the performer cannot fall back onto the “skit” for security, cannot hide behind the “mask” of his character, animating only its surface, cannot “mechanically” execute the performance.

The performer needs constantly to be confronted with a dynamic set of given conditions that cannot be pre-guessed but instead require that the performer adapt to them in character as they happen. The crucial ingredient here is improvisation within a detailed set of given conditions. The most likely situation for these pre-conditions to coincide is during mummery open to the audience, Lur’e’s “contact play.” Let us consider mummies dressed up as “gypsies.” These performers maintain their characters during performance-visits to neighbors: dancing, singing, and collecting food and money for their “baby” (a block of wood wrapped in a swaddle) or horse, not as members of the community but as “others,” “strangers.” Exchanges with householders cannot be entirely foretold in advance, are likely to go “off script.” Performers in this case must react spontaneously to new stimuli while maintaining their characters in the chosen set of given conditions, “what if I were a gypsy visiting a household of Russian peasants in the village of X?”

Trans-embodiment in Pre-Theater

Perhaps one of the closest scenarios where pre-theatrical performance approached System acting was during exchanges between mummer-gypsy and non-mummer based on “fortune-telling.” Larisa Ivleva’s published field notes (2004) show that “gypsy fortune-telling” was common. In the words of her informants, “Gypsy

women came all together, ‘Let me tell your fortune’” (Riazanskaia province, 94); “When there was a wedding, people mumed on the second day: [...]. The person dressed up as a gypsy woman greets everyone, ‘I see you don’t get along with your husband, let me tell your fortune...’” (Riazanskaia province, 108); “We dressed up as gypsies: a long skirt, a shawl [that] dangles and is tied in the back, and an apron, ‘Let me tell your fortune’” (Riazanskaia province, 123); “We dressed up as gypsies. Come in. Say hello. You ask the owner of the house being visited if you could tell fortunes, ‘let me tell your fortune’” (Vitebskaia province, 129); “People dressed up as gypsies during *shrovetide* and on the last Thursday before Lent. I was a gypsy: I cast horoscopes” (Vitebskaia province 178). Unfortunately, further details, aside from the provocative “I see you don’t get along with your husband,” were typically not recorded. Similarly unfortunate is the widespread tendency among scholars of traditional performance to be satisfied with such an incomplete account of gypsy-mummers.

Imagination and an understanding of the acting process can help to fill in the gaps. However, we need to understand why the information available on gypsy-mummers is incomplete. First, specific details of actual exchanges, the very salt of acting, are the most ephemeral aspect of performance. Many years after the fact, which is when the majority of informants’ accounts of these activities were recorded by folklorists, a person would be likely to remember the general situation—gypsy mummers came, danced, read palms, and so on—but not the living soul of a particular performance exchange, i.e., what made each specific instance of fortune telling so entertaining and interesting for both parties. This was the content unique to the two participants.

What did the two participants share? That depended on the degree of intimate knowledge they had of each other. The “gypsy” reading your palm could be your next door neighbor. In that case, the performer had highly detailed knowledge of your affairs. A mummer from the other side of the village might also know a great deal about you and be able to use this in her performance. Even a mummer from another village might know much about her “client” if not personally, then by word of mouth. A gypsy-mummer might seek confirmation of a rumor about the client by way of an indirect question, a comment, or a joke. The client might guess her partner’s game, playing along or providing misleading information.

Another aspect of this dynamic would have been the mummer’s anonymity. “Removing the mask,” or guessing a masked performer’s identity, was a big part of the fun of mumming. At what point did this happen? What happened when a “client” guessed the identity of her partner but decided, for the time being, not to out her? How did this change the dynamic of their relationship? If X guessed that Y was poking into her business using the “anonymity” of a mask, her reaction would be different than if the questioner were her good friend Z. We have no information about the specifics of such exchanges, which were hardly more durable than the sweets that lads brought to the Yuletide party, the wisps of smoke from the candles, or the quickly melting snow on the mummies’ boots, but they must have existed, especially in the context of village life, where everyone knows everyone else’s business.

Even in cases where such “pulp” of performance survives in the memories of participants, informants may not be inclined to share with collectors much more than the “shell” of the overall scheme—gypsies danced, asked for food, offered to tell

fortunes, and so on. There might be details that the informant chooses not to divulge, even after half a century or more. A lack of information must not hinder logical reconstruction of the process of pre-theatrical acting. In fact, widespread reticence on the part of informants regarding anything beyond schematic descriptions of performance suggests that such content, presently inaccessible, did indeed exist and played a crucial part in these activities.

Unique exchanges pregnant with specific meaning for both mummer and “client” did occur. Otherwise why else would “gypsy fortunetelling” and all the other varieties of mumming with the direct participation of the audience have persisted year after year? The scenario would certainly not have been recreated again and again if the game had stopped once the client held out her hand upon hearing “Let me read your palm.” While this is often the impression one gets from many accounts of traditional oral culture made by conscientious folklorists, the place where descriptions of mummied fortune-telling leave off is not the end of performance but the beginning. Participants have agreed upon given conditions; they know their roles and their relationship to one another based on those given conditions. Now they can start to act. Now they can start to have fun. At this point, communication between two members of a traditional community begins to develop in a way impossible outside of the conditional realities of pre-theatrical acting. Performance goes where indicative existence cannot go, bringing participants in pre-theatrical activities along with it. In this new reality, members of traditional communities could explore themselves and their relationships to others in ways not otherwise possible.

Conclusion

Pre-theatrical acting has many points in common with acting according to Stanislavsky's System. These two varieties of Russian performance are similar in the way actors entertain notions of imaginary universes of play and then "stay true to them" or "believe in them" in performance by acting and reacting to what happens within those realms "as if" it were real. In both cases, performers expose themselves in ways not typical for life in the indicative universe. At the same time, though, acting within conditional universes under assumed identities provides cover. This allows for a degree of emotional sincerity to emerge. For Stanislavsky, this sincerity was a goal of the System; its presence was a sign that the actor's process was at or near completion. In pre-theater, such openness allowed members of traditional communities to communicate and interact fluently via imaginary worlds of play.

Chapter Three. Acting and the Collective in Traditional Culture

Imagination, Aesthetics, Collective

In this and the following chapter I discuss ensemble in performance: how it is created and sustained, what role it plays, why it is important, and its dual existence in both the indicative and the conditional dimensions. The present chapter deals with ensemble and collectivity in traditional culture, describing in detail a number of examples of how pre-theatrical performance (1) facilitated, in the words of Morozov and Sleptsova, “the inclusion of all social and age-based strata into the ritual and holiday reality” thus strengthening community cohesion and solidarity, (2) made “artistic” choices to advance ethical and ideological agendas, and, (3) did so often beyond, besides, or in contrast to the verbal content of the folkloric texts “proclaimed” through non-verbal means such as kinetic content.²³

In the following chapter, the discussion of collectives will shift to modern Russian acting practice, specifically the System. I will argue that ensemble performance in pre-theater and the System is conditioned by many of the same laws and forces common to both. The two varieties of performance are united by similarities governing

²³ Such privileging of the “proclamation” of texts by Morozov and Sleptsova is curious, since their book, *Krug igry (The Circle of Play, 2004)*, persuasively demonstrates on the basis of ethnographic data from Vologda Province how solidarity and integration of the collective was achieved through many other means besides text proclamation and reception. The latter, *otsenki* (also: evaluation, judging), again excludes what happens to the performers by focusing on detached contemplation rather than bodily participation (see Introduction).

the dynamics of collective action performed in conditional worlds of play. The difference between the two categories stems from the relative importance of aesthetics in each. Therefore, a few words about aesthetics as a category in performance are necessary.

In the theatrical culture of early-20th-century Russia, where the System developed, the aesthetic aspect of performance was an independent category. While the aesthetic purpose was and is primary in System acting, aspects of the non-aesthetic functions of collectivity appeared in the System from the very beginning. Not only were these functions present, they became essential to it. Ensemble work on stage by mature actors is only one aspect of the importance of collectivity in the System. Collectivity—training together and learning to rely on one’s partner both on and off stage—is a crucial ingredient in the learning process of students of the System. Thus the System, and especially in its use as a way to train acting students, demonstrates many of the non-aesthetic qualities of collectives seen in traditional communities. Processes are similar; the difference is one of priorities or ultimate goals. Both types of performance, however, employ creativity and artistic decisions on the part of the performer and artistic judgments from performer and audience.

Existence in the conditional domain—the ability to function and interact with others under given conditions—requires the exercise of a creative, artistic competence: assuming different characters, admitting alternatives to social relationships and normative dimensions of time and space, and allowing for manifestations of the mythological “next” world in this one. All these capacities are imaginative in character.

Imagination is more important in the workings of the mind than is often acknowledged. Writing in 2002, Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner maintain that “elements of mental life that look like primitives for formal analysis turn out to be higher-order products of imaginative work” describing “apparently simple mental events” as “the outcome of great imaginative work at the cognitive level” (8).

[T]he imaginative processes we detect in [the] seemingly exceptional cases [of imaginative simulations without external stimulus, such as fictional stories, what-if scenarios, dreams, and erotic fantasies] are in fact always at work in even the simplest construction of meaning. (6)

Under this formula, imagination is not engaged selectively; it is instead an inexorable component in all human mental functioning. Certain applications of imagination typically avoid detection and remain unconscious, such the creation and running of conceptual blends upon which all thinking depends, while in others—creating fictional stories and acting them out, for instance—the use of imagination is obvious. While in no way absent from the everyday and the indicative, imaginative work is in the foreground of, and a precondition for, conditional modes of existence of the kind that acting requires.

Does the central position of imaginative creation in subjunctive worlds of play argue for the existence of an aesthetic quality in traditional performance? Aesthetics, I think, are based on perspective. To the outsider, pre-theater clearly is an aesthetic phenomenon. Otherwise it would not have received mention over and over in histories of Russian theater. To insiders, however, aesthetics are not a particularly relevant category. For members of traditional communities, performance did not have an independent aesthetic existence. Excursions into the conditional realm were ultimately utilitarian in function but not prosaic in character. Holiday brought members of

traditional communities together by cementing, renewing, and renegotiating family and community ties through participation in conditional modes, which included performance.

Aesthetics, then, may or may not be acknowledged as a valid category by those complicit in performance—both actors and spectators. Aesthetics are clearly important to the Russian high-culture stage. In pre-theater, aesthetics do not play such a crucial role for performers and their audiences. Scholars' evaluation of traditional performance includes aesthetic concerns, but aesthetics are present in pre-theater only to the degree that they facilitate non-aesthetic functions. Both pre-theater and the System share this non-aesthetic aspect of performance concerned with social consolidation and integration.

Collectives in Traditional Culture

In traditional culture, communities were consolidated through expressions of collectivity. This consolidation was reflected both within communities themselves and through their engagement with the world beyond. Collectivity was manifested through action: what members of communities did together as groups, whether it was working, playing, worshipping, grieving, or celebrating. Exercises in the solidarity of the entire community and of sub-groups within it occurred in both the indicative dimension of everyday life and the conditional reality of holiday existence.

What are the social and cultural processes facilitated by collective exercise with an explicitly imaginative aspect? These are the negotiation of life-cycle and social changes such as those identified by Victor Turner in his discussion of “social

dramas.”²⁴ Often the “crisis” in traditional communities is conditional rather actual.²⁵ Successful resolution is in most cases a forgone conclusion as long as the *process* of negotiating a solution collectively takes place. This goes for both life-cycle changes such as weddings, as well as yearly-cycle landmarks on the traditional calendar, such as transitions of agricultural significance: holidays marking solstices and equinoxes, and when and what to sow or reap, for instance. In every case, communities came together and existed as one in the given conditions of conditional, holiday reality.

For example, in the case of Yuletide social gatherings a key goal was to facilitate pre-marriage contacts between young people of the community and to provide a controlled outlet for adolescent energies. Morozov and Sleptsova describe the Yuletide *igrishche* as a special kind of *posidelka*, a party “held on Sundays and holidays for the youth of several surrounding villages”; the name *igrishche*, they explain, derives from the main content of these gatherings:

[T]hey were filled with *igry* [games, play], choral dances, and [pair] dances; their primary aim being the choice of a marriage partner [via activities] including play weddings. Moreover, the *igrishche* was a part of the entire system of youth play-communication and was an important element of the traditional holiday, therefore logically developing its principal aims. As a vividly presented spectacle with the participation not only of local youth [...], but also the parents of potential brides and grooms, the *igrishche* was a show for the demonstration and evaluation of all the qualities of its players—from the ability to dance to knowing how to dress properly. (2004, 112)

The *igrishche* were the most festive expression of the *posidelka*, evening indoor gatherings which could be as simple and low key as a few girls gathered on a

²⁴ Victor Turner’s notions of “breach” and “redress” seem too extreme for many expressions of collectivity through performance (1987, 72-98).

²⁵ Sometimes, though, there is an actual crisis to address. Such events belong in Shangina’s (see Introduction) third category of rituals: occasional rites, “performed in cases critical to the life and well-being of the community, for example: droughts and plagues visited on livestock. They were supposed to avert or stop misfortunes” (14).

weeknight to spin flax. All such gatherings had both practical or social function and an aesthetic component. Continuing their discussion of the *igrishche*, Morozov and

Sleptsova write that it

was a kind of stage on which many types of performance activity were practiced [...], including folk dramas and mummers' skits. These "pre-theatrical"²⁶ play scenarios facilitated the inclusion of all social and age-based strata into the ritual and holiday reality, providing the "ideological" basis for their solidarity based on the texts proclaimed during performance and the reception of the material acted out during the skits. (112)

While the authors clearly have in mind specifically verbal texts (*provozglashaemykh* [...] *tekstov*), a broader definition of "text" as any culturally meaningful content, and not just "signifiers" to be "read," makes the above passage better reflect both the power and the varied means employed by performance.

The "ideological basis" for the social consolidation seen at such gatherings hinged upon the shared acceptance of imaginary worlds of play by both actors and spectators (actors accepting given conditions and spectators suspending disbelief). This dramatic aspect of the *igrishche* and other forms of traditional pre-theater was the aesthetic component in a multi-faceted holiday "complex," which also included food, ritual participation, and shared beliefs. Altogether these elements fulfilled the social purposes of these special, festive times of year by providing outlets, increasing social cohesion, marking and facilitating transitions (rites of passage), and so on.

On the one hand, these aesthetic qualities of pre-theatrical performance are coherent only in the entire context of the ritual complex. That is, there is no independent, purely artistic side of pre-theater because it is bound up with

²⁶ *Predteatral'nye*. Ivleva's term is *doteatral'nye*. Both prefixes mean preceding, coming before something else chronologically. I reject the inclusion of "folk drama" in the category of "pre-theatrical" (see Introduction), although folk dramas were often performed at Yuletide parties.

manifestations of holiday existence, such as alternations in normative regimes of work and food, for example, which have nothing directly to do with watching or participating in a performance involving embodied characterization. On the other hand, whatever the social purpose, in terms of consolidating communities or sub-groups therein, providing controlled outlets, socializing the young, and so on, served by traditional performance, it manifests itself in imaginative work and through artistic forms. In traditional communities, the aesthetic qualities of performance and holiday expressivity are ultimately utilitarian: acculturating children into their communities, facilitating life transitions, and renewing community bonds.²⁷

Collectivity in Traditional Culture

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* deals with communities on the "macro"-level, as nation-states made cohesive through means available for the most part only in the modern era: print media, national symbols and narratives, the concentrated focus and effectiveness of a centralized bureaucracy, and so on. In such communities, members feel like they belong in the same group even though they can be personally acquainted with only a small fraction of the total number of their fellow members. Collectivity in traditional communities was based on smaller, less imaginary groups. Members could and did know all other members. Connections between members were not virtual but actual. Members came together in the same space and time: at church, in the fields, at play, at a Yuletide party, and so on. Communal living defined many aspects of existence in traditional communities. Economic production

²⁷ See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, on life crisis rites and calendrical rites (168-170 and elsewhere).

was often collective. Non-economically productive activities, of course, such as celebrating holidays, were also collective exercises.

Stable and Ad-hoc Collectives

Collectives in traditional communities were of two varieties: (relatively) stable and ad-hoc groups. Stable groups included the community in a general sense as a collection of households assembled in the same geographic area. In this first, most general category of social organization, cooperative efforts in the sphere of economic production, church-going, and holiday celebration were some of the many activities which bonded communities. The family or household was the next level of stable group. Its membership, like that of the overall community, was not static. Births, deaths, and marriages constantly transformed the composition of these groups. A third variety of stable collective was the peer group. The peer group was especially important in traditional culture as a venue for cultural indoctrination.

As in many other cultures, traditional east-Slavic communities indoctrinated their young in groups, initiating them into subsequent stages of maturity. This sequence of shaping the next generation—whether it was teaching children and young people about a person’s place and function in the community and the cosmos, or training them for their roles as economic producers, spouses, parents, and members of the community—included games, initiations, tests, ordeals, and performances.²⁸

²⁸ This aspect of traditional culture has been explored by I.A. Morozov (*Zhenit’ba dobra molodtsa*, 1998, and *Krug igry*, 2004, with I.S. Sleptsova), T.A. Bernshtam (*Molodezh v obriadovoi zhizni russkoi obshchiny XIX-nachala XX v : polovozrastnoi aspekt traditsionnoi kul’tury*, 1988; *Molodost’ v simbolizme perekhodnykh obriadov vostochnykh slavian: Uchenie i opyt tserkvi v narodnom khristianstve*, 2000), M.M. Gromyko, (*Traditsionnye normy povedeniia i formy obshcheniia russkikh krest’ian XIX veka*, 1986; *Trudovye traditsii russkikh krestian Sibiri*, 1975), and others.

Changes occurred in stable collectives notably due to the passage of time and the gradual maturing of the group's members. Children, teenagers, newlyweds, adults, and the elderly all belonged to specific subgroups, which were subdivided further based on gender. Stable groups included all of the potential members of a category, whether or not a specific person participated in a given collective activity at any given time.

While stable groups are based on eligibility—every potential member of a given group belonged to it regardless of whether or not he or she participated in a given activity—ad-hoc groups consisted of the eligible members participating in a discrete collective exercise. Weddings, funerals, and other family-based transitions, as well as specific play or work functions, brought together subgroups in traditional communities for discrete periods. Certain situations brought together collectives without regard to age, gender, and social position. In these cases, membership in a collective was typically based on family and neighborly ties. Weddings, christenings, funerals, and many calendar-based celebrations are examples.²⁹ There were also ad-hoc collectives based on more specific categories. Holiday fight groups, as discussed in chapter one, included all or most of the boys and men in the community within certain age parameters. A group of girls planning and executing a Yuletide party was another example of an ad-hoc collective.

Stable collectives realized their solidarity by coming together periodically, producing ad-hoc groups. Sometimes these gatherings existed strictly or predominately in the indicative mode, as was frequently the case with economic production.

Collectives could also exist in the conditional mode, under the terms of the holiday

²⁹ Although even here certain ritual functions could be discharged only by representatives of certain groups based on age, gender, and other categories.

complex. Often, the event which brought together an ad-hoc collective contained both indicative and conditional elements. Examples of collective action which existed predominantly but not entirely in the indicative mode were the so-called “helps” (*pomochi*), the equivalents of barn raisings in America. Gathering to help a neighbor build a structure or perform an agricultural task fulfilled an economic need and renewed community bonds through shared labor. The beneficiary was expected to entertain his neighbors with food and drink afterwards. These feasts, as examples of east Slavic “table (*zastol’naia*) culture,” belong to the holiday complex, and thus contained a conditional element: they were clearly festive and celebratory: eating and drinking accompanied songs and toasts, both highly conducive to solidarity. Thus all present were brought together in the reality of the feast, a mode of existence to some degree distinct from the everyday reality of eating at home.

Play is another case of the indeterminate boundary between indicative and conditional modes as expressed through collective action. Play can be thought of as the conditional activity par excellence: it always involves some deliberate separation from “real” life. In the case of adults, this separation is generally quite easy to detect, especially with regard to collective actions. With children the distinction is harder to determine. Play is a child’s “work,” so children and their collectives exist predominantly, if not exclusively, in conditional mode. Collectives of young people, from small children to newlyweds, often discharged their indoctrinatory and acculturative functions in the conditional mode: during holidays, but also during non-holiday play. Children also transitioned between indicative and conditional reality

freely. With maturity, these transitions became less frequent and more qualified. Total immersion into an imaginary world became a skill that gradually atrophied.

By adulthood, existence in alternative, conditional realities occurred primarily in association with the holiday complex. Conditional became more expressly distinct from indicative as play became more divergent from “real” work. Furthermore, adults often needed children or teenagers to initiate conditional realities. Holiday parties, with mummies’ performances, and other play activities, were predominately the work of youngsters or else performed for the young.

Collectivity is a defining factor both in communal existence overall and specifically in terms of holiday based play-performance culture. Cohesion of stable groups—the community as a whole and subgroups within it—is achieved through the repeated assembly of ad-hoc collectives: a local holiday, such as a patron saint’s day, celebrated by members of a given community and their neighbors, or a Shrovetide bonfire, or an autumn spinning bee of a weekday evening.

Along with basic cohesion, collectives also formed or were exploited to address a specific problem, crisis, or challenge faced by a community or subgroup therein: coming together to cut hay, providing opportunities for the community’s young people to find mates, and keeping children away from dangerous places and situations.³⁰

Special Collectives for Special Tasks

Why did ad-hoc collectives come together, for what purpose, and under what circumstances? The indicative dimension of gatherings in traditional communities is

³⁰ Tales of supernatural beings and the enactment of such creatures probably helped to scare smaller children into proper behavior. Whether or not older children and adults believed whole-heartedly in such “bogeymen,” the personification of dangers and restrictions brought norms for regulating conduct and behavior out of the realm of the abstract to the level of direct, “personal” exchanges.

easy to identify: some task of direct, obvious consequence to one or more members of the community required completion: for example, cutting hay, spinning flax, or mediating a disagreement between neighbors. In each case, an ad-hoc collective appropriate to the task at hand formed to include all able-bodied adults, or women and girls, or heads of households.

Specifics of behavior in both indicative and conditional modes varied according to participants' membership in this or that stable collective. Adults performed different indicative tasks based on age and gender. Children got more and more real-world responsibility as they matured. A person's experience of holiday reality also varied with regard to stable collectives. For example, once a person moved from the category of unmarried to married, "on-stage," active participation in Yuletide parties ended in most local traditions.³¹

Ad-hoc collectives often existed in both indicative and conditional modes. The collective that assembled to execute the indicative task of hay cutting shifted after the work was done into conditional mode around the beneficiary's generous table. Various degrees of conditional reality crept into the spinning bees of the fall. At non-holiday, "everyday" gatherings, participants would gossip, join together in song or listening to a storyteller, working all the while. In certain cases, village lads would come with tools and equipment to mend, but more often to provide distraction. The traditional calendar provided instances on a weekly and a seasonal basis where these distractions became the purpose of the gathering. The indicative task of spinning was alternatively co-equal

³¹ Shrovetide, on the other hand, had a significant component where newlyweds—typically the same couples who had been betrothed after Yuletide and married soon after, were "center stage." See Sokolova, 1979, for Shrovetide holiday activities.

with young people's flirting and game playing, merely a pretense, or eliminated altogether during Yuletide when work was prohibited.

This flirting and game playing is an example of a "task" performed in a collective setting in the "subjunctive" mode of existence. The goal in this case was to facilitate pre-marriage contacts between youths. The games, entertainments, secular rituals, and ordeals they performed in the context of the holiday complex were many and varied, but all were goal-oriented and followed a through-line of action with the ultimate aim of concluding a successful match. The conditional setting, by allowing for the relaxation of social stratification, gender separation, and behavioral restrictions, created a social dynamic more appropriate to the task than would be possible under indicative conditions.

Young people of marriageable age were not the only stable group to participate in and benefit from the entailments of holiday reality. Younger brothers and sisters, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, friends, neighbors, and grandparents all had a vested interest in how youngsters would pair off and a role to play in the process; and the performances were very entertaining. The holiday complex facilitated the bringing together of these stable groups as well, where relatives, friends, neighbors and other members of the community could watch, comment on, and influence the process of mate selection as well as enjoy the opportunity to work through their own issues of maturing, acculturation, negotiating relationships, and renewing social bonds. The sort of "work" accomplished at holiday parties, ritual gatherings, and other festive collective events could only happen under "subjunctive" conditions.

For instance, at Yuletide in a number of local traditions, young women dressed up, put on masks and went from house to house as mummers. They specifically targeted the homes of boyfriends and potential mates. Thus disguised and enjoying the freedom afforded to holiday celebrants, they were able to reconnoiter the homes of their prospective in-laws, gathering much first-hand information, especially clues to their prospective in-laws' economic situation (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 387). Such reconnaissance missions were conducted, of course, by girls in groups.

Gathering dances at the start of holiday parties are another example of how indicative concerns were addressed in the subjunctive mode in traditional communities. Initiated either by a choral dance "leader" or rank-and-file participants themselves, dancers chose partners, usually of the opposite sex, from their peers not yet engaged in the performance with each pair performing some basic choreography, usually with a verbal component. In this way, all the evening's eligible participants found their way to the "dance floor" and the party began in earnest (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 142-189). Gathering dances, as the first of a series of performance activities that made up a holiday party, facilitated the shift from indicative to a conditional mode of being, which made possible socially acceptable and ritually regulated interactions between the sexes. Holiday dances and games occurring throughout the year provided young people the chance to explore heterosexual relationships, demonstrate their maturity, their bodies, their clothes, and their performance abilities.

Although the folk saying advises, "Pick your wife in the kitchen-garden, not at the choral-dance" (*nevestu vybirai v ogorode, a ne na khorovode*), these shows were important not just for the young but their elders as well. A recurring motif of holiday

dances was the simple act of walking or dancing around in pairs. Perhaps Timofei's parents never considered a match with Anfisa, but seeing the two together made them think twice: she is a robust girl; she moves gracefully; and her dress is one of the finest at the party. In a few weeks they will send matchmakers. Thus marriage was the ultimate goal behind many holiday activities involving young people.

These holiday "balls" featuring youngsters of marriageable age were not the only parties to occur during Yuletide. Just down the road there may have been another gathering of girls ages nine to thirteen. At these parties, children rehearsed for the day when they would be able to graduate to the village's "large gathering." The collective authors of *Bath-house and Stove in the Russian Ethnic Tradition* write that "the large gathering" of potential brides and grooms was the main attraction, important to the community for both entertainment and more practical issues of judging potential mates for one's self or one's relatives in a public venue. Younger children "rehearsed" in their own age-based groups for years before graduating to the "large gathering." Not always able to obtain space in a home, younger girls sometimes held their parties or practiced their dance steps in a bath-house. (*Bania i pech'*, 238, 237)

Thus, ad-hoc groups functioned in conditional mode sometimes in front of the entire community, as in the case with the holiday parties of the "large gathering." Sometimes at the gatherings of other age groups there were only token representatives of other age groups present, such as the adult left to supervise an event bringing together the village's "small" or "medium gathering."

Even when an ad-hoc group's "work" was public, as in the case with the "large gathering," there was still an unseen, hidden side to the functioning of any

collective, an aspect obscured to all but members of the group themselves: discussions, deliberations, rehearsals, and sharing of impressions. Girls planned their parties and made preparations: getting together to pay for a rented space with chores before or after, deciding what to wear and what to bring to eat. Boys arranged their collective actions: pooling money to buy vodka, deciding what mumming skits to perform, agreeing on casting and costuming. Ad-hoc groups of carolers and other ambulatory ritual celebrants had their planning and preparation before going from house to house and a similar closed session afterwards to divvy up what had been gathered. These stages of performance occurring in addition to the actual performance *per se* correspond to some if not all the categories in Schechner's "whole performance sequence": training, workshops, rehearsals, warm-ups, performance, cool-down, and aftermath (Schechner 16). The important thing to remember is that group solidarity occurred in these hidden cases as much or more than it did when group members were "on stage" as a discrete group in the community at large.

Encouraging Collective During Actor Training

I see a similarity to my own experience with my "group" at GITIS. At breaks during acting class, which typically lasted around a half an hour, we retired to our *kamorka* or small room, which was a windowless space on the second floor, not much bigger than a closet. Here we could have tea and a snack, share impressions of how the lesson was going, and try to recruit each other for future demonstrations (as directors, a scene always had an "owner" who conceived, cast, and rehearsed it before showing it in class). At these moments, which combined a number of Schechner's categories from

both before and after the “performance,” we existed in between indicative and conditional modes or in both simultaneously.

There are hidden aspects of collectivity in both traditional performance and Russian theater pedagogy. The approach to teaching acting and directing at GITIS and other theater schools, where a student stays with a group guided by an artistic director all through a five-year course, fosters collective ties that go beyond the strictly conditional world of performance. Thus ensemble acting—the ability to see and hear your stage partner, to be tuned-in to what is happening “here, today, right now” in the imaginary world of the scene, achieved by means of the exercises of first- and second-year acting class—is augmented by collective bonds forged “off stage,” in indicative existence.

Stage ensemble collectivity survives past graduation from theater school into professional life. Indeed, this ability to “play your partner” is the hallmark of the System-trained actor. Collectivity in its indicative dimension for the System actor may never be as strong as during training, but in many cases it is present nonetheless. Witness the ubiquity of the stable company in Russia. Its existence, I think, is no accident. The stable company of “staff” actors and directors both contributes to and benefits from the phenomenon of indicative bonds between performers. Bonds between actors in this kind of company are forged on and off stage, in rehearsals, dressing rooms, and during performance, in the theater’s cafeteria, and on tour during the summer.

Before collectives can result in ensemble playing “on stage,” however, they must be forged and acknowledged by their members. In the next section I will explore

various ways that bonds between performers are created in both indicative and conditional realities. The first step in forging an ensemble requires that members of a collective be aware of their own apartness from the community at large.

Establishing and Consolidating Collectives

Performance itself can contribute to the sense of one's belonging to and solidarity with a group. The performer's sense of conditional self, her sense of "not-me, but not not-me," to quote Schechner (109-113), develops along with a sense of "us," of "our conditional existence in this imaginary realm of play." The performer's sense of an altered self is contingent upon a sense of others similarly transformed and immediately present; a performer's partners are with him in the imaginary world of play but are also close at hand in the "real" world. As mummers, as carolers, as newlyweds being treated to sleigh rides at Shrovetide, as prognosticators, and as members of groups performing "ritual hooliganism," costume, make-up, character, and especially behavior-action set off members of ad-hoc groups engaged in these holiday activities and increased their internal cohesion.

Ad-hoc groups of girls planning a holiday party sometimes switched clothes in order to make it more difficult to identify individuals. Often they set off to reconnoiter the homes of prospective in-laws, as described above. Outfitted in this way, or with full disguises including masks, the internal solidarity of these ambulatory, age- (and often gender) specific groups was heightened (they knew who each other were underneath their disguises). Their temporary separation from other members of their community increased this solidarity as well. Aside from the basic level of separation that automatically exists between performer and audience during performance, in pre-

theater there exist specific methods for establishing and augmenting the isolation of the performers: unanimity and anonymity, which help to further the process by which the performer acquires a different, conditional sense of self and sensation of inhabiting a play universe. Thus aspects of performance, in this case costume-disguises and the transformation of self they elicit, contribute to building a sense of collective by creating an even further degree of separation from the community at large.

Unanimity is achieved through various means including being costumed in similar or identical fashion, performing similar or identical somatic components such as dance steps or gestures, and participating in the same action together, either scenic or ritual.³² Anonymity achieved the same function of external separation and internal cohesion but with slightly different means. Rather than being costumed in similar fashion, mummers resembled each other only in terms of their strange, motley, other-worldliness.

Both unanimity and anonymity emerge from and help contribute to the marginal or liminal quality of holiday time by enhancing solidarity and helping the performer to leave the indicative and enter conditional reality. Being disguised affords the bearer freedom from the strictures of indicative conditions and relationships. On the other side of the disguise, unmasked holiday participants enjoy guessing who it could be behind the mask. And both share in the delight and surprise when the secret is revealed. For instance, one of Larisa Ivleva's field informants informed her that as a girl,

³² The difference between the two is often more theoretical than real, but nonetheless analytically helpful. Most if not all "actions" in traditional performance culture are both scenic and ritualistic. The best way to generalize the ethnographic data is to consider individual cases in terms of degree: Yuletide prognostication is *predominantly* ritualistic, although it was certainly observed as a kind of spectacle, at least by participants. Yuletide mumming skits performed at holiday parties could, on the other hand, be seen as more show than ritual. Many actions, such as spring-summer period processions with effigies, occupy an ambiguous middle-ground between the two categories.

We went as scarecrows, so as not to be recognized. We rub our faces with soot; and grab an old bucket [for a drum]. One [of us girls] would beat [it], the rest would dance. (Ivleva 2004, 169; Riazan' oblast', Kadomskii region, Kochemirovo, 1990)

Another informant recalled,

[People] went mumming in the past: you dress up in some strange fashion and go house to house. They speak in mummer-talk (*po-okrutnitski i govoriat*): not with the normal voice, but in shrieks (*vizzhat*). (Ivleva 2004, 34; Leningrad oblast', Kirishskii region, Khotitsy, 1971)

With their bizarre outfits, make-up, veils, or masks, and the steps they took to change their voices and movements, celebrants obscured their identities. Anonymous maskers, therefore, were not uniform in appearance but rather uniform in their apartness, uniformly “other.”

Somatic Uniformity

Uniformity was also achieved through dress and behavior. Girls planning a Yuletide party, for instance, were known to agree on the color scheme and other details of their outfits. In addition, many of the ritually based actions of holiday performativity, such as choral dances and songs, were based on the repetition of the same movement, melody, or sequence of actions by all participants.

E. Knatts's description of the “Ninth Friday” (after Easter) holiday in the Pinega region of the Arkhangelsk province is an example of this coordination:

Upon gathering [...], girls form a neat queue on the meadow, on the side of the road near the little barns, and sing songs. The girls greet every person walking or riding to join in the festivities with a bow from the waist, bending over not simultaneously, but one after the other beginning on the side from which the visitor is approaching, in an unusually congruous fashion, like a wave through a field of grain. (Knatts 190)

While uniformity of movement in traditional culture has a secure place and perhaps even originates in the indicative world stemming from labor processes,³³ its occurrence in the alternative world of holiday existence elevates it to an element of the pre-theatrical actor's process, if not automatically to the level of artistic expression. Here unanimity of movement augments the basic conditions of the girls' unity: being gathered together at the same place at the same time, dressed the same (in their holiday finest) and for the same purpose (to show themselves off to prospective husbands and in-laws). Being assembled in the same place and being similarly or identically dressed require little or no special effort on the part of the performers to maintain this fundamental, or automatic, category of uniformity during performance. These elements contribute to separateness and solidarity but are not especially performative.³⁴

However, uniformity expressed through common actions (choreographical and musical) extends the fundamental solidarity into a dynamic, living process: the performer must coordinate her body and voice with her partner(s) by concentrating her attention on her partner(s). To achieve this kind of uniformity, or unanimity, performers must take an active stance during performance, must be aware and engaged rather than merely present and costumed. This active engagement with the collective is a focused and dynamic process resulting in a true ensemble of performers.

³³ This is the position taken by V.N. Vsevolodskii-Gerngross, who argued that the origins of theater and dance lay in economic activities, such as sowing and reaping (*Istoriia Russkogo dramaticheskogo teatra, T. I*, Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1977, 17-18).

³⁴ Ivleva was on the right track by reacting against the tendency to see traditional performance as "theatrical" by identifying "theatrical" attributes in pre-theater: props, costumes, characters, verbal formulas, and so on (1998, 23-28). This approach is misguided because it grasps at everything possible but the essence of theater: the actor's process, scenic action, and the dynamic between performers and characters (ensemble). See Introduction, pp. 4-7.

Anonymity: Nihilomorphic Mummers

One of the strangest and perhaps the most extreme case of anonymity in East Slavic, pre-theatrical performance is what Larisa Ivleva refers to as the tradition of representationally (*izobrazitel'no*) neutral or “nihilomorphic” (*nulemorfnoe*) masking (1994, 190). These are masked characters that “represent” *nothing* in the sense of the “nothing” of the anti-world as opposed to the “something” of this world.³⁵ Ivleva asserts that this practice is “profoundly ritualistic” (190), and she may be right. With regard to the actor’s process, nihilomorphic masking is also very interesting because it demonstrates both fundamental differences between pre-theatrical and modern acting in terms of aesthetics as well as important functional similarities.

The nihilomorphic mummer can exist and elude definition due to a particular quality of masking widespread in East-Slavic culture. Among the Eastern Slavs, the mask is not seen as the abode of a supernatural being, either temporary or permanent. Instead, traditional culture followed the teachings of the Orthodox Church, which regards masking as sinful. Thus ritual ablutions at Epiphany, which came at the end of Yuletide, were used to redeem the holiday reveler by removing (absolving) the sin—the action—of masking. Masking was defined as the covering of the performer’s face, with the act being much more important than the object. Often disguise was achieved by obscuring the face with soot, flour, beet juice, or a piece of material. The face covered by a rag or scrap seems the most widespread “mask” used in nihilomorphic masking.

³⁵ Notions of the profoundly ritualistic aspect of this performance tradition have to do with ideas about the world of the dead in East-Slavic traditional culture as an anti-world. Vladimir Propp, for example, in his study of Russian folk tales, observed that the rules of existence in the anti-world involve doing the opposite of what is expected in this world (*The Morphology of the Folk Tale*, 1968). One walks backwards to enter this realm, behaves oppositely when there, and so on. The connection between notions of this world versus the next world and the everyday-holiday dialectic is obvious, and has helped to shape my thinking about the realm of the supernatural in traditional thinking as the first level or frame of given conditions in performance.

This type of masked celebrant, therefore, presents an image “bereft of any morphological personality,” without “an individually inscribed appearance, as if erased” (Ivleva 1994, 191). The nihilomorphic mask, therefore, eludes definition, the masker “appears silently at the party, does not make a sound for the whole time, only wandering like a mysterious shadow around the dwelling, stopping occasionally before the more timid, looking into their faces. Some young girls become scared” (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 544; quoting Shablykin 188).

The nihilomorphic mask is unique because rather than represent another character, being, or personality—gypsy, bear, living corpse, etc., no matter how clichéd or caricatured—the performer creates a character image with no individual identity. The nihilomorphic mask takes the notion of opposites, which defines the relationship between the real and the anti-real, to its ultimate extreme. Thus instead of merely reversing individual signs of normal existence—down is up, death is life, profane is sacred, old is new, dirty is clean—nihilomorphic masking achieves a wholesale negation of indicative reality on the most basic level, that of its susceptibility to definition, identification, and classification. Nihilomorphic mummies, then, are creatures impenetrable to the human intellect. They are sooner perceived with the emotions than with the mind.

A strange blend of fear and laughter is the most typical response from audiences. Nihilomorphic maskers exploit a feature common to many examples of East Slavic mummery: an indeterminate mixture of the comic and the terrifying. Ivleva asserts that, “the chief characteristic of these masks is that they produced an impression

of terror at the margin of the laughable. ‘At first they were scared, and then it became funny’” (1994, 191; quoting an informant).

Not only is the effect, the emotional impact of these characters ambiguous, they cannot be defined nominally: traditional does not name them; it only performs them. As Ivleva has written, “There exist entire traditions in which these kinds of nominally undefined types of mummers predominate (they are simultaneously faceless and nameless)” (Ivleva 1994, 191).

While there is often no name for this phenomenon, the performed image is a specific one, quite precise in its amorphousness. “Superficially,” Ivleva continues, “it may seem that in their participation in a performance [nihilomorphic maskers] do not create any specific image. In fact, though, they expressed the demonic [i.e., other-worldly] nature of the ritual hero, distilling the ambivalence characteristic of such performances” (Ivleva 1994, 191). Thus absent from narrative traditions, they nonetheless are quite real in performance traditions. In this case, scenic action flourishes in a place where narrative cannot exist. Thus pre-theater presents the unusual case of painstakingly constructed anonymity in performance: anonymity as a performed (anti-) identity.

In the System, character image is also carefully created, but the result is anything but an anonymous “nameless, faceless” character. Individuality is in fact so important in the System that well before the student attempts characterization, as defined by the embodiment of an “other,” he is expected to become proficient at existing in sets of given conditions from his own, personal point of view, i.e., playing himself in given conditions. The student must learn how to exist “naturally,” how to see

and hear his partner and react spontaneously. Neglecting this sequence can result in “naked characterization,” assuming a character-identity insufficiently adapted to the individual performer, whereby the actor merely demonstrates characteristics of the portrayed other, rather than “becoming” that other in the play reality. Thus the uniqueness of a characterization is grounded in the actor’s own extremely personalized approach to existing on stage, rather than merely being assumed or affected. At the root of this process is the maxim “what would *I* do if *I* were so-an-so in such-an-such conditions?”

Inimitable blends of actor and character mark the pinnacle of System acting, the “super-objective” of the System as a methodology. Consider only a few such cases from the formative years of the System: Stanislavsky’s Doctor Stockman in the MAT production of *An Enemy of the People*, Mikhail Chekhov’s Caleb and Vakhtangov’s Tackelton in the First Studio’s *Cricket on the Hearth*. While it is fair to assume that these actors used the System to create these roles, these roles also helped shape the System: what it became and what it came to value.

Pre-theater, subject to a different set of aesthetic criteria, is under no similar obligation to create individualized character images. These different aesthetic criteria make nihilomorphic masking possible. On the one hand, they make it easier for pre-theatrical actors to exist in given conditions than for actors of the modern theater. The nihilomorphic masker is spared the trouble of enacting an individualized character: the nihilomorphic mask, by definition, has no individuality. The performer can exist in the specific given conditions of an anti-world of imaginative play where individuality does not apply, without having to create and maintain an individualized, unique character.

Thus the nihilomorphic masker, by neither playing himself in given conditions nor playing a different being—enacting a character with definable attributes—charts a third course into embodied performance, one categorically impossible in System acting yet definable in terms of the System's description of the actor's process.

Enhanced Individuality

While the tendency towards obscured, collectivized (un-individualized), and sometimes even negated identity was widespread in traditional performance, a countervailing trend of accentuated individuality also occurred. The two qualities were not always at odds with each other; they could even exist simultaneously. The act of obscuring identity attracts rather than deflects attention, especially in the context of mumming. In traditional communities, the revealed masker could be a neighbor or a co-villager. If the masker had arrived from another community, he or she could be a potential mate or a rival: a wild card thrown into the interpersonal dynamics of two or more young lives. Whatever the case, the mask focused the attention of audiences on the unknown interloper, the revelation of whom could have consequences reaching far beyond the surprise and shock of initial recognition into issues impacting indicative existence. In other words, the identity of the masker could be important not just in terms of holiday revelry and entertainment, especially when masking was used as tool to further a performer's interests in the indicative dimension, such as when young men put on disguises to gain entrance to a party where one or more girls of interest to them were in attendance.

In what has just been described, anonymity was replaced with enhanced attention to a performer's individuality. In other cases, obscuring did not occur. Instead,

the performer brought special characteristics from the indicative world into the conditional world of performance. These characteristics include signs of rank, position, and wealth attached to their owners in indicative reality.

“Beautiful Mummers” and “Petticoat Inspection”

An example of a performer’s real-world individuality and distinction being carried into the subjunctive dimension of performance is the case of “beautiful mummers” (*krasivye kudesi, baskie nariazhonki*, etc.) described by Morozov and Sleptsova (2004, 508-511). This was a variety of mumming in groups practiced by potential brides. The name comes from the fact that participants would wear their best (most beautiful) clothes and go from house to house in their own and surrounding villages before ending up at a Yuletide party. The play element in this custom was pronounced: girls would sometimes get one or more lads with accordions to accompany them; other sources report that some girls would dress as “lads” or “soldiers,” in order to create a more convincing spectacle as dance pairs. Dancing was in fact so important that groups of six or eight girls were assembled for the purpose of performing special holiday group dances (508-509). Anonymity and uniformity were secured through the custom of masking,

“They covered the face with tulle” (508) [...] “The head was covered with a printed cotton kerchief so that one part draped over the back, and the other was tied around the neck and with the sides folded to cover the face.” (510)

Furthermore, the ubiquitous custom of sharing clothes and wearing a large number of items of clothing and a great deal of jewelry certainly would not have made it easy to identify individuals (510-511).

But this demonstration of the choicest items in one's own and one's girlfriends' wardrobes was, along with the above-mentioned strategy of reconnoitering the households of potential in-laws, in fact, the whole point of dressing up as "beautiful mummies." Morozov and Sleptsova cite a good example of the purpose behind "beautiful mummying" in the custom from the village of Shozhma in Vologda province, which, "allowed girls to show their [dressmaking] skill and affluence." They write,

Each [girl] was required to "take her girlfriends mummying" (*svodit' nariadikhami*), by dressing them up in her outfits. Obviously, the more friends a girl was able to dress up, the more prestige she acquired. In the words of an eye-witness, "beautiful mummies represented, in this way, a live, itinerant exhibition of outfits." (2004, 509)

This use of finery represents a departure from most other cases of mummying. Rather than turn to the threadbare, the outmoded, and the other-worldly, "beautiful mummies" in traditional village communities decked themselves out in their best, with an eye towards what was fashionable, including elements of what people were wearing in cities and towns (511).

Real-world materiality penetrated even further into the alternative reality of holiday performance through another practice. "Petticoat inspection" (*smotr podol'nits*) was practiced both at the ceremonial holiday gatherings where the display of marriageable young females or "markets of brides" was a crucial element of the festivities, and as a game played by youth during fall-winter work-bees and Yuletide parties. In the later case, this activity was likely a "re-creation" of the behavior performed at these "markets." In its "original" manifestation, the practice involved the close, tactile inspection of a girl's petticoat³⁶ by old women. "On Christmas [potential]

³⁶ The *podol'nitsa* was an embroidered undergarment.

grooms and brides go into the church,” Morozov and Sleptsova cite the words of an eyewitness:

“Grooms and old women pick brides, good girls. [The lads] are told, ‘There’s lots of girls, so go, pick one! Get married; take a wife, enough partying already. You need to marry, [get] a worker for the summer. Get married!’” (507)

The girls ready for marriage that year stepped onto the parvis in front of everyone:

“The old women step forward—the girls are standing on the parvis (five or six are standing): [if they] make the sign of the cross, then it’s in unison, and they bow as one. [The old women] approach the girls and turn up the petticoats of their dresses [...]. These hems are [made of] material, wide, thick, comely, and there are even striped ribbons sewn three fingers wide—these are good petticoats, the only kind worn to church. These [decorations] mean a rich bride. The old women inspect, and then ask quietly, ‘Whose is that nice girl [i.e., who are her parents]? Must be from a wealthy place, from a good one, and with good parents?’ And they are told whose [she is]. And after Christmas the grooms sure enough ride out to that village to the holiday party to check out the girls their mothers had asked about.” (507)

This particular ritual took place in the village of Siamzha in Vologda province, but “petticoat inspection” in other local traditions has been attested during Epiphany, during spring-summer outdoor festivals, and other times of year.

The above citation provides stunning details about what a collective process of choosing a bride in traditional culture could be. In the context of the holiday complex—Christmas, the community assembled together in the church, girls dressed in their finest, and with Yuletide on the horizon—older women had a ritualized opportunity to get a close look at potential members of their families. Certainly the inspection itself was important: the richness and quality of the decorations was irrefutable proof of the economic position of the girl’s family. Her skill with a needle

and thread was also of great concern. And who better to evaluate this than an old woman?

But much more than sewing was a stake here. It was an opportunity for the female of the highest rank in the household to evaluate a potential newcomer, someone who would occupy the bottom rung of the hierarchy of adults in her new place in her husband's family home. After a few words were exchanged, the inspector could get an idea of a girl. Was she modest; demure; respectful? Would she be a good fit in her new household? If grandma liked the lass, she would discuss her with her grandson's mother. Mother, in turn, would ask her son about the girl. Had he noticed her? Would he be going to her village over Yuletide?

Morozov and Sleptsova report that at work-bees and parties, the boys themselves inspected petticoats:

In Mol'skii parish [of Vologda province] lads organized a "petticoat inspection" thusly. With a bundle of lit wood splinters [*luchiny*] they made the rounds of all the girls, beginning with those sitting in the corner under the icons, asking to be shown petticoats (under-age girls did not have them). After extended rejections and coquetry the girls showed their petticoats, and lads discussed the embroidery and lace on them, comparing the skill and taste of their owners. (2004, 508)

Accounts from the Siamzhenskii region of Vologda province, show that petticoat inspection, like many other play situations, allowed communication to proceed on a number of levels:

The lad holding the *luchina* approached a girl, asking her, "How have [you] dressed? Is there a petticoat? Rather than answer, she tuned up the edge of her dress, bringing it closer to the light. If it was pretty, [the boys] cried, "Ah, its good! A good petticoat!" If it was not, then [they exclaimed] Ah, lads, threadbare! Not appropriate for marriage [She's not suitable for marriage]." This sort of girl was laughed at. (508)

Since petticoat (*podol'nitsa*), like the pronoun she/her, is grammatically feminine in Russian, there were opportunities to hint beyond the quality and workmanship of the petticoat itself and at its wearer through double entendre, for instance.

These two customs are instances where material objects from the indicative world “play themselves” in the conditional situation of performance. The physical attributes of these objects, indeed, the cultural meaning attached to them, in the indicative universe, is unchanged in the conditional reality of play. This is a departure from the sequence seen in other varieties of mummery whereby objects are transformed in the conditional universe: they are “played”; that is, performers “create” a new reality for them during performance differing from their reality in the indicative universe. These two approaches to physical objects are analogous, however, in the way they foster ensemble: contact between performers. Participants interact—renewing, renegotiating, and challenging social relationships—*through* the objects in question.

Blending-in vs. Standing-out

Centrifugal tendencies of individuality and distinctiveness were balanced by the centripetal collective spirit of being part of a unified collective. Thus “standing out” was juxtaposed to “blending in.” Participation for the young at Yuletide parties was universal. Repressive means—jokes, scolding, ridicule, humiliation, and physical abuse—in traditional play culture were brought to bear against those individuals who *did not* participate, who were late to the party, or otherwise failed to merge with the collective (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004).³⁷

³⁷ “Failure to participate in a dance was detrimental to a girl’s reputation. For shy and average-looking (“*nevidnykh*”) girls (and sometimes boys) there were many unflattering nickname [and expressions], the origins of which are connected to long-forgotten belief and rites.” These include expressions roughly translated as “dragging home a fallen tree (roots and all),” “digging moss in the

In choral dances and even the pair dances that gradually replaced the former towards the end of the 19th century,³⁸ ensemble and uniformity were the rule.

Individuals and pairs could excel, but only by performing culturally established patterns better than their peers. “Dance,” Morozov and Sleptsova declare, “was a good way to demonstrate a lad’s dash and a girl’s grace” (2004, 175). While performance aptitude helped these individuals to stand out, it also reinforced the centrality of collective: success was only possible in the context of performing a shared activity.

The relationship between blending in and standing out and its importance in Russian performance, both traditional and modern, becomes evident upon consideration of something as simple as carriage. Young women were expected to follow exactly a strict, culturally determined style of movement and posture when performing i.e., “on display,” more so than young men, although they, too, were held to a certain standard. Morozov and Sleptsova quote a description from the 19th century made by a peasant from the village of Iagrysh, Vologda province: “I was always impressed by how a girl carried herself when walking; it was as if she floated: her dress did not rustle; she held her head straight, never looking to the side and knowing that she was the target of hundreds of curious eyes [...] Lads also carry themselves [lit. ‘play’] with dignity. Only occasionally will one permit himself to tap his foot in time with the song” (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 172-173).

One’s carriage while inhabiting the conditional reality of holiday existence had a connection to indicative reality, as did everything else in holiday performance culture. In the village of Burga, Vologda province, youths were told while being taught how to

corner,” “took the bull home,” “the straw doll went home,” and so on (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 176).

³⁸ See Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 168-177.

thresh, “If you don’t learn how to thresh, you won’t learn how to dance. If you learn how to thresh, then you will learn how to dance” (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 172).³⁹

The eyes of others in the community, especially those of older women, focused on girls in performance greatly influenced how the girls behaved. While young people performed and old women critiqued, the reputation of the former was established to a certain extent (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 172). The spectator’s “gaze” has been much discussed by scholars of performance. The holiday situation gave the old women a special venue and a large audience, institutionalizing, as it were, their tendency to critique the younger generation. While this “gaze” was crucial to the social equation by further enhancing mechanisms already present in the collective execution of the games and dances, there was also another “gaze,” one that had a direct bearing on the actor’s process: the performer’s internal gaze.

The requirement to meet the performative standard, in this case to execute dance moves with the proper bearing, made things simultaneously easier and more difficult for the performer. Being “the target of hundreds of curious eyes” can be distracting, of course. But the performer could nonetheless take refuge in the ideal. She had something other to worry about besides merely being observed. She is competing against herself and others to embody the culture’s ideal of how a young woman should walk. The ideal, of course, was the same for everyone on the dance floor: in striving to emulate the ideal, the result was that the girls approached uniformity in their movements and in the way they carried themselves.

³⁹ Here is a case of the connection between performance and labor processes, which scholars in the Soviet era so often made. See note 33.

The Actor's Internal Gaze

Yet this uniformity was surely motivated in each individual case by a unique impetus. Stanislavsky sought “simple, expressive, sincere, internally replete movements.” An actor’s movements should be propelled, he wrote, by an energy originating deep within the actor’s most secret recesses (*iz glubokikh tainikov*) and coursing through her body, “filled with emotion, desire, and scenic tasks”

This energy, warmed by feeling and imbued with will, guided by intellect, proceeds confidently and proudly, like an ambassador on an important mission. This energy emerges in a deliberate, deeply-felt, pithy, and productive action. (Venetsianova 281; Stanislavskii III, 41-42)

The actual movement, as these young ladies “floated,” was identical for all participants, but each imbued her motion with unique “content.” One girl wanted to impress a boyfriend. Another enjoyed having two young men be equally smitten with her. A third wanted everyone to notice her. A fourth enjoyed the camaraderie and coordinated movement of the collective. And so on.

Energy, Stanislavsky explains further,

does not only move through the arms, the backbone, and the neck but also through the legs. It incites to action the muscles of the legs and gives rise to the gait, which is of extraordinary importance on stage. (Venetsianova 281; Stanislavskii III, 49)

There can hardly be a more basic expression of the body than moving on one’s two feet through space. Yet it lies at the root of the actor’s process in both pre-theater and the System.

During my first semester at GITIS, in dance class, our lessons began with walking around the room while the accompanist played a piece with a steady rhythm. My fellows and I were told to walk “naturally” with backs straight, chins up, and eyes

straight ahead. Stanislavsky explains what muscle freedom meant for the actor, describing the ideal as “natural movement” (*estestvennaia plastika*). He writes:

Natural movement is not what is found in [those theaters] or the ballet, in particular, where all actors are inculcated with one and the same methods according to a once-and-for-all established model, which makes everyone—ballerinas, tenors, or what have you, all the same. In order not to disrupt the individuality of nature, the entire body must be developed equally, all muscles, the entire multitude of movements beginning with the hands and the fingers, the plasticity, expressiveness, and mobility of which are so important, and concluding with the gait and movement of the entire body. (Venetsianova 283; Stanislavskii IV, 498)

The point, Stanislavsky goes on to say, is not a question of the muscles’ volume or strength, but their mobility and vitality (Venetsianova 283; Stanislavskii IV, 498).

Much attention is paid during the initial months of performance training in Russia to a certain “ideal” not just in posture, but also in voice. Since the Moscow dialect is considered “correct” pronunciation of modern Russian for the stage, my pedagogues expressed concern about eliminating the regional dialect of one of my colleagues from the provinces. This desire to have students emulate a certain, culturally specific “ideal” of bodily (or vocal) perfection is problematic from certain points of view and may even appear politically incorrect. The results of all this certainly include the “incorporation” of stereotypes, perhaps even the “embodiment” of hegemonic ideologies.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, there is more going on in these cases than the manifestation of power at the expense of individuality, à la Foucault, if one cares to look. While undeniably marked or constructed, the body of the performer, in striving towards a

⁴⁰ Interestingly, Western and Soviet thinkers of structuralist and post-modern persuasions have tended to diverge in their responses to the enforcement of a culture’s standards of behavior. In the West, “structure” is often equated with repression and the subduement of the individual (Foucault). In the Soviet Union, where repression and subdual was a much more immediate reality, structure in culture was given a much more nuanced reading, even seen as a benign force (Lotman).

cultural ideal in the context of collectivity, becomes a kind of blank slate, not in “absolute” terms, of course, which is an absurdity, but relatively, in terms of the culture in question.

The sequence of System training demonstrates how and why the “neutral” or “natural” body is taught. Training begins with “body awareness.” The walking with emphasis on posture and bearing and exercises to reduce muscle tension are done to direct the student’s attention to her own body as an instrument over which she must develop virtuoso control and total understanding. N. Filatova, in her book about Vakhtangov as a teacher of acting (*Evgenii Vakhtangov: Opyty teatral’noi pedagogiki*, 1990), cites Vakhtangov’s explanation of the System to the students of his own “Mansurovskaiia” studio.⁴¹

The first lecture was devoted to the actor’s muscular freedom. In it Vakhtangov said that the actor requires absolute muscular freedom for creativity. The slightest unnecessary tension causes psychological tension and leads to acting clichés. (21)

In order to avoid clichés, that is, in order to ensure true scenic individuality, the student must eliminate muscle tension. The best environment for achieving this is, somewhat paradoxically, a situation where the student strives to embody a bodily ideal in a collective setting.

This heightened awareness of the body’s expressive potential nurtured during the initial steps of actor training results in a new, unusual sense of one’s body. In contrast to the performer’s body-sense, or lack thereof, during indicative existence—a

⁴¹ Filatova explains that these student notes of Vakhtangov’s lectures, published in *Vakhtangov. Zapiski. Pis’ma. Stat’i: Sbornik*. Moscow: VTO, 1939, afford a perspective on Stanislavsky’s teachings as of approximately 1911-1914 (Filatova 21).

world of ordinary, everyday, utilitarian movement—the actor enters a world of special, refined, and aestheticized movement.

Modeling one's body to be uniform with the collective is how the performer senses his own body as a clean slate. Muscle awareness exercises in the System are done in groups: with each student focused on her body but simultaneously aware of others engaged in the same process. In this collective setting, attention is focused both outwardly onto the collective and inwardly onto the self. This helps to develop a sense of self in the performance environment, an awareness of body not existing in a vacuum, but in the context of one or more scenic partners inhabiting the same play universe.

Thus, on the surface, the emphasis on uniformity would seem to indicate that a lack of individuality in bodily expression was the aesthetic goal. The result, however, is a steady platform from which the actor can reach for a new reality of the body. In the System, where individual creativity was valued, this new reality of the body made possible characterizations unique both in terms of their novelty for audiences and in terms of their deep, specific connections to their individual performers. But pre-theater held a different set of aesthetic values from System acting. Unique characterizations were not prized by traditional culture. The comparison of one's own body to the collective and to cultural standards stemming from an awareness of being observed also results in a new reality of the body. "I am not my indicative self," thinks the performer, "I stand up taller, I am funnier, merrier, more attractive, and more daring, all the things my culture values in holiday celebrants."

The process of comparing one's self to others engaged in the same performance activities, of striving to meet external standards results in an internal awareness of one's

performative apparatus, namely, the body and voice. Only once this awareness is achieved and the actor has mastered her “instrument” can she begin to realize physically her creative impulses, thus making “the difficult habitual, the habitual easy, and the easy beautiful,” as Stanislavsky was fond of quoting Volkonsky.⁴² While this aspect of the System is well-known, we too often focus on the actor’s *individual* process, forgetting that what happens in the learning *collective* is also important.

The Purpose of Ensemble

Scenic ensemble was in a certain sense even more important in pre-theater than in System acting, for in the latter ensemble skills, while important, ultimately serve a higher purpose, that of aesthetics and the theme or message the director and actors wish to convey. As Stanislavsky writes in his autobiography,

I realized [in the productions of the Mamontov circle] and witnessed with my own eyes the results of a lack of finish, proper rehearsal, and general ensemble in our collective creativity. I became convinced that art cannot exist in a chaotic environment, [that] all participants in and creators of a production must subordinate themselves to one overall creative goal. (Venetsianova 27; quoting Stanislavskii I, 85-86)

Thus Stanislavsky conceived of ensemble as a tool for achieving artistic goals, never an end in itself.

In pre-theater, the actor’s process engaged in creating ensemble is its own goal. Here attention is concentrated on one’s “stage partner” in a number of ways: through a focus on “real-world” attributes, the character-role and the process of its creation—mask, costume, movement, and even through the “playing” of inanimate objects “brought to life” in the performance. In every case, scenic ensemble fosters

⁴² Prince Sergei Volkonsky (1860-1937), Russian teacher, director, critic, enthusiast of Jacques Dalcroze, and Director of Imperial Theaters 1899-1901.

interdependence between members of communities who are coexisting in a realm of being over and above indicative reality—by co-acceptance of the generic dimension of holiday or by coming together in a specific play-world. This interdependence of members of communities is acted out, performed, realized, experienced, and witnessed in bodies, not just talked about or passively contemplated. Collectivity, in turn, contributes to the depth and vividness of imaginary worlds of play. In performance, imaginary realms are actively shared and co-created. This is not the case when a storyteller or narrator shares an imaginary world with an audience. In collective performance, all participants are co-equal in creation and all are co-equal in sustaining the universe of play or ritual.⁴³

In traditional culture as well as the System, each participant in an imaginary world of play is interested in maintaining that world, in not being the reason for its failure. In the System, this is a matter of professionalism, a skill inculcated from the very beginning of the training process. No matter what happens, maintaining the “illusion” by being able to “justify” (*opravdat*) any contingency that comes up “in” or “out” of the world of play is incumbent upon the actor. As N. Filatova states,

“Justify,” in the language of actors, means finding a reason for why everything invented by the playwright and the actor could occur. The actor must justify any situation, any hitch, i.e., one’s own or one’s partner’s mistake, according to the circumstances of the play. “If your partner is late with an entrance,” Vakhtangov gave the example, “it does not mean that your colleague missed [an entrance], it means, perhaps, that the person you are waiting for and who must immediately appear is not appearing for some reason. This forces you to take some

⁴³ Huizinga has remarked on how play lasts only as long as participants maintain ludic reality. “The player who trespasses against the rules [of play] or ignores them is a “spoil-sport. [...] [T]he spoil-sport shatters the play world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. [...] [H]e must be cast out, because he threatens the existence of the play community (11).

sort of action; it causes a new sensation; but it does not lead you out of character, does not cause confusion.” (23)

Here professional ethics—not letting down one’s stage partner and the rest of the company, who are doing their best to create and sustain the “illusion” for each other and the audience—mesh with technique and training. The actor must improvise to “justify” *anything* that might come up. This means acceptance of imaginary circumstances must not flag: maintaining nimbleness and adaptability of imagination is paramount in the actor’s technique. In its turn, being always on guard to catch, justify and react not only to potential showstoppers but also to immediate nuances in a partner’s performance keeps the actor’s imagination and improvisatory apparatus in good condition.

Pre-theatrical performers experience a similar, if not identical, compulsion to maintain the conditional reality of the play situation for and by means of the collective. Cultural forces and peer pressure enforce generic participation in the holiday complex. A girl would much rather undergo an uncomfortable test or initiation than *not* to take part in the collective ordeal with her friends. Boys will do whatever they can to ensure that their holiday swagger and bravado is duly noted by the community even if it means “faking” inebriation. These influences are also at work in cases of specific play situations along with even more coercive means: mummers locking the doors and rounding up all children who try to hide or escape, and threats of physical or verbal abuse against those who try to avoid taking part in a scene, skit, or game. Just as generic holiday participation is universal, all members of a given stable collective present as an ad-hoc group must perform their solidarity together in specific

performance exercises: a choral dance, a game, a prognosticating expedition, or an ordeal with mummers.

Therefore, ensemble is a key element in both the System and pre-theatrical performance. The solidarity and cohesion of members of a performance collective, while a means in the first case and an end in itself in the second, is created and sustained in similar ways, by reconstituting existing or potential unified groups in an imaginary, conditional reality where the “rules of the game” force members to pay attention to each other and become co-dependant.

Chapter Four. Collectivity, Ensemble, and the System: Stanislavsky, Sulerzhitsky, and the First Studio

There is no better place to explore the relationship between notions of collective in traditional performance and the importance of collective in the genesis and the functioning of the System than in the experience of the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theater. Many aspects of the System have parallels in how performance was organized, conducted, and “taught” in traditional communities. By exploring the ways that the First Studio, the first troupe to effectively employ the System, resembled in its approaches to actor training and troupe cohesion traditional notions of ensemble performance, I will show the debt that contemporary Russian actors owe to their artless, homespun predecessors—participants in seasonal community gatherings, weddings, funerals, and other and traditional ceremonies with elements of performance.

The First Studio was established in 1912 as a testing ground for the System and a demonstration platform for its suitability as an approach to actor training and was the first viable example of a new kind of theatrical organization based on Stanislavsky’s innovations in pedagogy and stage technique. The First Studio changed the way acting was taught and theaters organized in Russia. While its model was seldom followed exactly, it inspired the studio movement. In her monograph about the studio movement in Russia, Katarzyna Osińska describes the term “studio” as

A theatrical collective, which combines in its activities pedagogical and experimental tasks, [where] intensified work on perfecting professional skills is accompanied by the search for new paths in the theater. (7)⁴⁴

For a studio, she goes on to explain, product never matters more than process (7). Studio also differs from repertory theater in the observance of a code of ethics,

The slogan formulated by Stanislavsky of “no aesthetics without ethics” was picked up and developed by Leopold Sulerzhitsky and subsequently Evgenii Vakhtangov; they worked out a set of maxims called “studiality” (*studiinost*). Studio ethics demanded the ruthless observation of discipline, loyalty, discretion, collegiality, and total commitment to work in the studio, which in practice usually meant a refusal to work outside the studio. (7)

This notion of a code of ethics could be formalized and written down or transmitted by means of maxims, attitudes, and through relationships across generations from teacher to student as “lore.” Frequently, studios employ both of these approaches.⁴⁵

Before the System and the studio movement, certain performers used both the written word and lore to convey to subsequent generations how they understood the craft of acting.⁴⁶ The System, though, was the first attempt to standardize, explain, and organize the actor’s process. The First Studio made development and functioning of the

⁴⁴ *Klasztory i laboratoria. Rosyjskie studia teatralne: Stanisławski, Meyerhold, Sulerżycki, Wachtangow*, Gdańsk, 2003.

⁴⁵ The First Studio used both. In her book *Studio w rosyjskiej kulturze teatralnej XX wieku. Wybrane zagadnienia*, Warszawa: Semper, 1997, Katarzyna Osińska published, in Polish and apparently for the first time in any language, the “Project for the Internal Organization of the MAT Studio.” From manuscript K.S. nr 13613 /1-2 in the MAT museum (a copy of the original held at the State Archive for Literature and the Arts (RGALI, f. 1990, op. 2, No. 4). Point number three of the “Project” states that “The life of the Studio is divided into three parts: administrative, *ethical*, and artistic” (Osińska 1997, 23; my italics). Ethical concerns are addressed in points 33 and 34 (28-29).

⁴⁶ Their success in this area is hard to gauge. Volkonsky was pessimistic about the ability of Russian actors to pass on anything of value to adepts. “In the person of [St. Petersburg’s Alexandrinsky Theater actor V.N. Davydov] the last real, genuine [bit of theatrical culture] is vanishing. Yes, vanishing because our actors cannot pass on [their knowledge] to others. Davydov taught at the Theatrical School, but was unable to impart that, which he had in such abundance for the simple reason that he, like all our actors, relied on internal inspiration unenlightened by consciousness [of what he was doing]. One can only teach what one knows, and not what one is able to do. We Russians have no knowledge because we have no school, no transmission. [...] The talented actor believes in vain that his lack of study is obscured by his talent” (Volkonskii 36).

System possible by organizing and regulating a collective of actors. Without a set of rules for conduct and general agreement on principles concerning craft and profession outside of imaginary worlds of play, the effectiveness and persuasiveness of performers within their given conditions is limited. A code of ethics ensures the cohesiveness of performance collectives by providing a framework for productive relationships between performers, which makes relationships between characters more rich and integrated.

In the System, a functioning collective is crucial. It is present wherever theater actors use the System as their approach to their art. And it is an indispensable element whenever acting students are trained according to the System. The ultimate goal, the super-objective, in this case, is not collectivity for its own sake, but collectivity as a means to increase the artistic potential of individual actors by giving them more profound and productive ways to connect with their stage partners and to discover and reveal their individual gifts as performers.

Ever since Sulerzhitsky and Stanislavsky molded the young MAT actors into the First Studio, director-pedagogues have striven to fuse collectives of actors together by subjecting their charges to the shared ordeal of a “course” of study. The model of the First Studio became a part of how the System is taught in Russia. In institutions like GITIS, the School-Studio of The Moscow Art Theater, and other leading acting schools, a group or “course” is selected by an established theatrical artist and trained together, developing artistically and maturing as human beings. The students will one day be integrated into a larger community of actors as a member of a theater, but during training they are largely isolated from contact with “adult” artists, the exception being

their mentor, the course's "artistic director" and that person's hand-picked coterie of assistants—other professional actors and directors.

According to the model for theater education in Russia I observed and have read about since the First Studio, future professionals are exposed to necessary material and master it within relatively isolated collectives. My colleagues and I knew other groups at GITIS, both older and younger. Our contact with these students took place largely outside of the classroom. Occasionally, my group of directors was consolidated with our contemporaries from the class of musical theater actors, which also formed in 1992, but only for "peripheral" subjects like art history and Russian history. Core course, like acting and directing, were to be covered only within our group and with our own pedagogues.

In my directing group, a number of us wanted to the opportunity to engage real actors—as opposed to each other—in our scenes and exercises for directing class. This was not allowed; only in unofficial settings could we work with students from other groups. Some individuals were sometimes discouraged by their course leaders from participating in "extra-curricular" projects, or too busy. Luckily, classes of singers were usually large; and there were often students who did not get as much "stage time" as they desired. Our trick as directors was to identify these individuals and entice them with attractive collaborations.⁴⁷

Therefore, in the context of a large, bustling theater academy with two campuses, and with various departments where we had contact with and exposure to many different students and teachers in both professional and casual situations, our

⁴⁷ Engaging an accompanist was also a problem, one not typically an issue for our colleagues in the spoken drama.

collective of directing students under the artistic direction of Boris Pokrovsky nonetheless maintained a perceptible degree of autonomy. Our contact with each other happened not just during classes, but before and after. We met outside the confines of the Academy, such as when a colleague and I met at the bus stop before walking together to our German language teacher's apartment for a lesson, or when the group gathered at Pokrovsky's theater for a directing class. The autonomy and isolation of the individual course was not limited to my own group. Our colleague-actors from the group lead by Alexander Titel' often had class at their leader's theater, the Stanislavsky-Nemirovich Danchenko Musical Theater, and many of them joined the company after graduation.

For our group's acting and directing exams we rehearsed and anticipated exam day together, participating in the scenes and exercises directed by our colleagues. We were subject to the admonishments and, rarely, praise of our instructors as a group no less often than criticism was directed at an individual. And we lived with the danger that our two chief pedagogues would give up on us. Anna Alekseevna, our acting teacher, threatened to quit us many times (but never did); Pokrovsky actually did walk away during our third year, never to return. The risk of becoming "orphans" is an element in the wider trope of "the leader's wrath" that seems fairly common in Soviet and Russian theatrical pedagogy, showing up repeatedly in reminiscences and descriptions of the educational process. Going through ordeals together often strengthens collectives.

Ensemble does not mean that members of the collective need be friendly with each other off stage. But their ability to function together professionally is more than a

conscious choice to be cordial at work. It means their training together has prepared them to tune into each other carefully and creatively. An actor's instinct to outshine his partners is not overcome. Indeed it cannot be overcome. But the ensemble actor knows he cannot outshine his fellows by ignoring them. His whole performative existence depends upon cooperation: "you play me;" "I play you;" not "I play *with* you" but "I *play* you" like playing a scene or a character. Of course I still play my own characters, in the literal sense. In another sense, however, I am no longer portraying my own character but my partner's character through my relationship to him. I do not portray haughtiness, or compassion, or any other quality: these traits appear via the way other characters interact with me. The two main advantages to this approach are (1) freed from the burden of projecting my own character, I can concentrate on stage action: pursuing my scenic goals according to my through-line, and (2) by playing other characters I am focused not on myself but on my stage partners; the result is more interaction between performers and thus a more integrated stage ensemble.

The studio movement's contribution to the idea and practice of theatrical ensemble was to add a degree of commitment by the members of a collective to each other extending beyond the rehearsal room into indicative existence and from there back into the play environment. In the previous chapter, I explored how the subjunctive holiday play reality was intertwined with the indicative dimension of everyday existence in the lives of members of traditional communities. The closed, intimate community of a studio was achieved by separating the members from the larger community and having them undergo what amounts to an ordeal or certain indoctrination together, much like Van Gennep's rites of passage. Victor Turner and

others, in exploring such processes in various cultures, have remarked on the importance of performance in the conduct of such rituals. What is not so often noted is that rites of passage can be crucial in preparing professional performers.

A large part of the formation of a collective of performers, especially in the case of the first successful experiment in using the System to train a group of actors at the First Studio, has to do with their isolation from the larger community. To some extent, isolation is not deliberate. Young people in traditional communities keep to their age appropriate groupings, which are the venues for a great many of their activities, including their contributions to the community's performative expressions during holidays. Indeed, young people learn much about their place in society and how to function in it within the relatively isolated group of their peers.

Ensemble: Director's Theater and Actors' Theater

The emergence of the stage director at the end of the 19th century as the shaper of the artistically unified production necessitated an ensemble, in the sense of a responsive, malleable group of performers able to execute the vision of a single artist. During this period of great change in Western theater at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th centuries, directors and managers sought to promote ensemble by changing the way troupes were organized in order to create the sort of company that would make "director's theater" possible.

Ensemble was an important element in the Saxe-Meiningen company. J. L. Styan describes how, "the company worked together as an ensemble in which the leading actor from one play might be expected to play a member of the crowd in another, so that the work of everyone in the company was regarded as important to the

whole artistic effort” (11-12).⁴⁸ It is perhaps no accident that the Saxe-Meiningen company, which, as Simon Williams points out, many historians have seen as the start of the modern theater, emerged from the serious if fitful tradition of concern for ensemble in German stage culture (Williams 421). One needs only remember Tieck and Goethe.⁴⁹ Beginning with Saxe-Meiningen, however, ensemble stopped being merely a desirable quality; it became essential. Saxe-Meiningen’s famous crowd scenes were possible only thanks to a disciplined, well-rehearsed company. Other innovative theaters of the time—Antoine’s Theatre Libre, Brahm’s Freie Buhne, and the Moscow Art Theater—all demonstrated the transformation of “theater company” from a group of performers under the same management to a group of performers able and expected to work together to further a director’s artistic vision.

In addition to the concern for developing the “human resources” necessary for “director’s theater,” the model of ensemble developed in the history of Western theater in response to the so-called Star system. Ensemble theater brings a certain leveling in acting talent, or at least recognizes that an acting company is only as strong as its weakest member. Prince Sergei Volkonsky, in *Laurels*, his book of memoirs focusing on the performing arts, (Berlin, 1923), writes that,

A theater must be judged not on its talented members, but on its non-talented members. A theater bears as little responsibility for [its] talent as the ground bears responsibility for the airplane that crashes into it; only in the non-talented actor do you see if training and education is at work in him or if he is left to himself. (Volkonskii 65)⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Styan, J. L. *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*, Cambridge: University Press, 1981.

⁴⁹ Simon Williams writes, “In contrast [to the actors Ifland, Fleck, and Devrient], Goethe at Weimar trained his actors [...] to respect ensemble [...]”; “[...] Tieck labored without too much success to introduce simplified stagings and natural ensemble”. (Banham 420, 421).

⁵⁰ This quote comes during the author’s discussion of the Saxe-Meiningen theater. Concluding the paragraph, Volkonsky writes, “In general, I will say that in terms of the clarity of the tasks they set for themselves, in terms of the sincerity of [their] relationship to [those tasks], and in terms of the

Antoine's "model for an ensemble company" was "a group of thirty actors of moderate talent, all equally gifted" (Cole and Chinoy 216). Thus Antoine purposefully set out to prevent the situation where one performer could overshadow her fellows.

Changes in approaches to acting along with changes in audience expectations meant that the power and effectiveness of the star's solo performance was no longer enough. Now interactions between characters could no longer be an afterthought. Indeed, interactions became a focus in acting practice. The stress that Zola and other Naturalists had put on a character's place in and relationship to his environment certainly influenced this trend in the execution of new plays where this theme was important. But the effects on production were not limited to a specific type of dramatic literature. Detailed, carefully worked out relationships between characters became the centerpiece of the detailed, carefully worked out worlds that directors sought to create in productions. Initially, directors largely monopolized this process. In the innovative theaters of Western Europe and in the early years of the Moscow Art Theater, directors conceived complex scores—detailed plans of actions and movements or "stage business" for their actors to reproduce.

The System: Actor as Co-Creator

The problem that soon emerged from this approach to rehearsal and performance was that the actor enjoyed only a secondary role in the creative process, allowed only to reproduce not just the author's text but the director's stage business with little opportunity to participate in its creation. Moreover, the director's "score," no matter how intricate, sooner or later ossified. Actors, with few exceptions, did not know

conscientiousness of their fulfillment [of them] the Meiningen troupe is one of the most honored in the history of theater" (65).

how to renew their roles by experiencing them afresh with each performance. At best the actor could be a more or less talented reproducer of another's vision. Stanislavsky knew from personal experience that an actor gets bored with even the most scrupulously designed stage life, if his own creativity is not involved in the process of its composition, and, more importantly, continuous re-creation. The result is a characterization with no possibility for growth. A different sort of actor was needed to find a way out of this dead-end. Training this new actor and providing the environment for him to function effectively necessitated the second type theatrical ensemble, the actors' company. This variety of ensemble exists where actors do more than execute a director's vision but instead take ownership of the production, living in it and growing with it.

Stanislavsky began his work on the System to address the issue of getting the actor more engaged in (re)creative process. At the very beginning, while reflecting, conceptualizing, and ordering his priorities, and even during his initial attempts to put his ideas into practice while rehearsing with his colleagues at the Art Theater, Stanislavsky thought that the actor's individual creative process seems to have been more important in Stanislavsky's thinking than creating and nurturing ensemble. However, his first measurable success with the System happened in large part thanks to circumstances in which ensemble emerged as a crucial factor in the way actors were trained and plays rehearsed. The initial productions of the First Studio provided the first validation of the System. As Rebecca Gauss has written,

The First Studio was the birthplace, not only of the "system" which has so thoroughly dominated Western theatrical training in this century, but also the incubator for the greatest teachers and

practitioners of the “system” who then shared their knowledge with others around the world.” (49)

The breakthrough acknowledged by audiences, critics, and Stanislavsky’s colleagues at the Art Theater was not the work of established, experienced actors, but of young, relatively green members of the troupe. The young members of the First Studio could not match their elders at MAT in terms of experience. And this suggests that something else must have been at work to allow for such amazing success.

The First Studio had two qualities, both exceedingly rare in the theatrical practice of the time. First, the Studio was a collective unified not only by Stanislavsky’s artistic vision, but also by the ethical stance supplied by Sulerzhitsky that nurturing human beings rather than just performers was important. The second factor was that the notion of actors’ ensemble was instilled in the collective from the very beginning. Creation of a cohesive group of performers was a greater priority for the Studio’s members and leaders than was the creation of “commodities” in the form of finished productions.

The impressive results demonstrated by the First Studio encouraged Stanislavsky to continue developing the System. While Stanislavsky was the deciding factor in the creation of the System, the environment, the laboratory where he did his research was an important component in his success. To be convinced of this one needs only remember two things. First, Stanislavsky got nowhere with the System until a group of young actors mastered it while they were becoming a collective. Second, the model of the First Studio has been repeated in Russian actor training ever since. Learning the System in a peer group in relative isolation beginning with the most basic exercises and continuing within that collective under the guidance of mentors through

the end of the training period, and often staying together through artistic maturity, is the standard in Russia even today.⁵¹ In order to understand why the First Studio was a significant step not just for the Art Theater but for the future of actor training in Russia, we must consider what preceded it.

Prelude: The Studio on Povarskaia

Before the First Studio came another studio experiment, the Studio on Povarskaia Street. This entity was in many ways the “dress rehearsal” for the First Studio, to borrow Lenin’s description of the 1905 revolt in relation to the Revolution of 1917. Pavel Markov described the mission of the 1905 Studio as follows:

That which could not be offered to a general audience, whose sympathy could not be counted on, was verified, searched for, and affirmed. In [the studio] new forms of acting and directing were sought; scenic forms from symbolist drama were sought. Studios refined and perfected scenic skills. (Markov 349)

The official reason for organizing the Studio on Povarskaia Street was to train a new generation in new techniques for a new theater.

But there were also more practical, immediate concerns involved in its creation, or at least the speed of its organization. As Katarzyna Osińska explains, Stanislavsky was encouraged to realize his ideas for a theatrical studio sooner, rather than later, because of MAT’s failure on tour to St. Petersburg in April 1905:

The press reported unanimously that the legend of MAT was not supported by reality. The attacks were ruthless; critics wrote of a run-of-the-mill troupe with no talent for creating artistic images, about actors unable to play living people, about the elementary level of productions, about boredom, about young actors with no understanding of the stage, and so on (Osińska 2003, 24)

⁵¹ Stanislavsky continued to develop the System in the laboratory setting of successor MAT Studios. Vakhtangov started working with his own group of students in 1913—an ensemble that evolved into the Vakhtangov Theater. Finally, actor training at GITIS and other theater institutes follows the pattern established by Stanislavsky, Sulerzhitsky, and the actors of the First Studio.

There were other reasons behind Stanislavsky's interest in creating a studio on Povarskaia Street. According to Olga Radishcheva, author of the three-volume *Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko: A History of Theatrical Relations*, Stanislavsky had an ambitious plan for a number of theatrical troupes to tour the provinces, of which the Povarskaia Studio was only to be the first. These companies were to pursue new directions in stagecraft and also perform repertoire already in production at MAT. Stanislavsky envisioned MAT "franchises," which would bring up new generations of actors and audiences for both Russian capitals and the provinces. Further evidence of Stanislavsky's expectations for the Povarskaia Studio is provided by his plans for improving the 663-seat theater acquired for it by adding a deeper stage, relocating the dressing rooms and the artistic foyer (art gallery), expanding the buffet, building a shed for scenery, and converting the basement to make props. These expansions required removing the residents of five apartments in the building. Finally, a year's rent was the significant sum of 9,000 rubles. (O Stanislavskom, 338-339). Osińska observes that, "It is hard to believe that Stanislavsky would have built such an expensive theater for laboratory work" (Osińska 2003, 247).

While the remodeling was happening in Moscow, the new troupe was sent to the village of Pushkino outside of Moscow for the summer. As Meyerhold rehearsed with the young actors, several scenic designers were brought on board as collaborators⁵² along with symbolist poet and playwright Valery Briusov as literary manager, and Il'ia Sats as music director. Clearly, the number and stature of these non-performing theater artists and consultants indicates that *productions* were expected. The

⁵² Nikolai Sapunov, Sergei Sudekin, Vasilii Denisov, and Nikolai Ulianov

founders of the Povarskaia Studio saw the way forward for theater by bringing all the stage arts together to realize the new Symbolist dramaturgy.

As stage director, Meyerhold led the way. He strove towards new forms in directing. However, realization of these ideas was much less successful. While ready to move forward into uncharted territory, Meyerhold's actors were not able to embody his ideas. Acting was the Achilles' heel of the experiment on Povarskaia Street. At the first general rehearsal on October 7th, 1905, Meyerhold showed Maeterlinck's *Death of Tintagiles*, Hauptmann's *Schluck und Jau* and a number of one-acts. Stanislavsky was disappointed with the results. In his chapter about the Povarskaia Studio in *My Life in Art* he writes,

The young, inexperienced actors were able, with the help of a talented director, to show their new abilities to the public only in small excerpts. When required to realize a play's vast internal content, subtle structure, and in symbolic form, the youngsters demonstrated their infantile helplessness. The talented director tried to cover up [with his own talent] actors who in his hands were like clay for modeling beautiful groups and *mise-en-scenes*, with which he realized his interesting ideas. But without technically proficient actors he could only demonstrate his ideas, principles, and strivings; there was nothing and no one with which to bring them to life [...] Once again I learned that [...] theater is first of all for the actor, and without him cannot exist, that new art needs new actors with entirely new techniques. (Stanislavskii I, 285)

In *My Life in Art* Stanislavsky ultimately attributes his decision to end the experiment of the Povarskaia Studio to a lack of money and the chill which followed the 1905 Revolution. The above passage, however, shows that Stanislavsky was motivated by artistic as well as economic and political considerations.

Meyerhold's concerns were artistic. But his approach did not include collaboration with his actors. As Katarzyna Osińska has written,

Meyerhold's goal was—although he did not state it openly—the achievement of total self-realization in the act of creation, for which he did not require a group of people bound by any special ties. The artist therefore is alone and must remain so. The idea of the theatrical collective was foreign to Meyerhold... (Osińska 2003, 36-37)

Much like Gordon Craig, who famously compared his ideal for an actor to a marionette, Meyerhold, at least at this phase of his creative development, believed his actors had nothing to contribute to *his* creative vision.

Meyerhold was not alone in neglecting the creation of a unified collective of actors a priority. Soviet artist Nikolai Pavlovich Ul'ianov's recollections of the Povarskaia experiment provides interesting clues about conditions that summer. Stanislavsky, for example, was quite busy with the half dozen scenic artists engaged for the project not only with regard to the stage sets, but also with the look of the theater: the foyer was to be an art gallery, there were individual decorators for the gallery, the buffet, and the "oval foyer" (Ul'ianov 199). Stanislavsky, it seems, was swept away with enthusiasm for the work of the scenic artists, remodeling for the new theater building, and his plans for the franchising of the MAT brand.

By the end of that summer, if not earlier, there were serious problems with morale in the acting troupe. I. Vinogradskaia, in her *The Life and Art of K.S.*

Stanislavsky: A Chronicle, cites an archival document from some of the actors of Povarskaia Studio dated September 1905:

Actors of the [Povarskaia] Studio Theater write Stanislavsky of their dissatisfaction with what is happening in the Studio, of their profound concern for its future and ask him to give them "the chance to immerse themselves in amicable, unanimous work," to lift up their energy and faith in what they are doing. "Lately, especially during our work back in Moscow, each of us individually has come to understand that our creative endeavors in the theater have gotten stuck in a dead spot, are

not moving forward, that too little of what we have prepared justifies opening a theater.” (Vinogradskaia 532)

The young actors reported that they were not satisfied with what they had accomplished. In their letter they acknowledged that the quality of the work they have done was not acceptable; they expressed their misgivings in a mature and honest fashion. Perhaps even more surprising was their clear-sighted sense of what was missing: an ensemble. They wanted to dive into “amicable, unanimous work,” they needed a leader who inspired them, someone who cultivated both their individual qualities and collective solidarity. As young artists, they needed this much more than they needed a visionary director, like Meyerhold, who would be able to forge ahead into the uncharted waters of Symbolist theatrical production with or without them on board.

Another bit of evidence about the actors of the Povarskaia Studio shows them in a less favorable light. Ul’ianov recalls that,

Within the theater dissent has begun, something like a schism in the troupe, and intrigue. The theater has not yet been created, but there is a corrosive atmosphere, against which Stanislavsky has always struggled, in the wings. (Vinogradskaia 532; quoting Ul’ianov, 199)

Factions and intrigues are always ready to emerge in groups of actors. There is no reason to think that the original members of Sulerzhitsky’s First Studio were any less prone to this than the young actors in 1905. But Sulerzhitsky was always ready and available to his charges, in ways that Stanislavsky and Meyerhold had not been, to “lift up their energy and faith” and provide opportunities for them to “immerse themselves in amicable, unanimous work,” in the words of the Povarskaia Studio actors’ letter to Stanislavsky.

The System at the Art Theater

Between the Povarskaia experiment and the chartering of the First Studio Stanislavsky's ideas about reforming acting and actor training developed into the initial version of the System. His attempts to work through and refine these positions within the Art Theater convinced Stanislavsky that the isolation of acting students from "everyday life" at MAT was the key to teaching the System. Actors at MAT were dismissive of Stanislavsky's innovations in acting technique. Radishcheva writes, "Perhaps Stanislavsky would not have gone into isolation if he not felt such distrust and ridicule of his way of working" (39). He tried to apply the still-developing System during rehearsals of the MAT production of Turgenev's *A Month in the Country* during the 1909-1910 theatrical season. Stanislavsky, seeking relative, but not yet total isolation, in the words of MAT actor and First Studio founding member Boris Sushkevich, "suddenly disappeared from the theater to the small stage for four months with a small group of performers" (O Stanislavskom, 380).

Nikolai Efros describes Stanislavsky's initial efforts to "propagandize" the System within MAT.

He passionately searched for followers, trying to infuse them with all the ardor of his faith [in the System]. [...] Principles and methods of the "system" began being used in work at the Art Theater. Backstage jargon was enriched with unaccustomed, unusual expressions. [People] started to say, "entering the circle," "being in the circle,"⁵³ began to understand "affective feelings," which are the actor's psychological material out of which he creates his role and [character] image based on [the model of] his own soul; about "desires" and "adaptations" and even about "kernels" and "currents below the surface." Roles were broken down into "bits" and unifying "cores" were sought. (Efros 12)

⁵³ "Circles" mean "circles of attention" (*krugi vnimaniia*).

At first Stanislavsky shared his ideas about a new approach to acting freely. During the initial table period of *A Month in the Country*, Radishcheva writes, the System seemed to be working for the actors.

[B]ut when they moved to the stage, everything fell apart. “They lost [everything they had achieved in the table period],” writes Stanislavsky. “<...> The enemies of my system cawed, said it was boring, [and] brought down the rehearsal.” Approximately a month till the premiere Stanislavsky ruefully acquiesced, “No one mentioned circles and adaptations. [Now it was just] slap [the production] together somehow.” (26)

Of course no one at this early stage, including Stanislavsky, knew exactly what the System was all about. According to Radishcheva:

Difficulties, obstacles and stoppages during work on *Month in the Country* occurred because the performers were at the halfway point between entrenched habits and Stanislavsky’s method. Stanislavsky constantly brought them new discoveries in the psychology of creation, and if actors had yesterday learned how to manage “affective memory,” then today that was not enough: they were faced with some sort of daunting “circle.” (26)

This absence of consistency frustrated the actors, who did not share Stanislavsky’s dissatisfaction with the way they had come to prepare and rehearse their roles, since this approach had brought them success, fame, and artistic fulfillment. They rebelled. Knipper-Chekhova, cast as Natalya Petrovna, Radishcheva continues, was the worst offender. Stanislavsky knew she did not like his “system” and only professional discipline made her submit to the new demands (27).

MAT’s old guard of leading actors was not ready to give Stanislavsky the benefit of the doubt; and he was not satisfied with the response he got from them. As Stanislavsky wrote in 1907, “In the company the attitude towards my experiments is extremely hostile and whenever they can people are sarcastic and obstructive”

(Benedetti 1991, 255). According to Efros, these same actors were, in Stanislavsky's estimation, "insufficiently flexible and sometimes stubborn. They could not carry out the required techniques of 'concentration of attention,' release of feelings, of experience" (Efros 13), and

What was needed for all this were new, inexperienced people; a new atmosphere [was also needed], where the air was not infected even in the slightest with "traditions," where no habits [...] stood in the way. K.S. Stanislavsky and L.A. Sulerzhitsky, his devoted assistant in establishing the "system" as theatrical practice, dreamed of a kind of *tabula rasa*. (Efros 13)

The only way Stanislavsky saw to escape MAT's *mal'aria* was to break from ordinary existence, to take a "holiday" from the daily grind at the theater.

As Stanislavsky writes in *My Life in Art*,

After my first experiences in bringing the "system" to life, Sulerzhitsky and I came to the same conclusion that Meyerhold and I had come to during our experiment a few years earlier, to wit: that laboratory work cannot proceed inside the theater with its daily performances, amidst concerns about the budget and the box office, amidst arduous creative work and the practical difficulties of a large-scale operation. (Stanislavskii I, 351)

Hope for developing the System did not lie with the theater's established actors. Rather, the youth of the theater, with its flexibility, faith, naïveté, and lack of entrenched habits represented the way forward for Stanislavsky.

An Experimental Theatrical Laboratory

Russian theater, MAT, and Stanislavsky faced many of the same problems in 1910-1911 as they had in 1905: Who would replace the theater's current generation of actors? Would the theater be able to meet the challenges posed by new developments in dramatic literature? Literature, music, and the visual arts all seemed to be leaving the stage behind. Theater's problem at this juncture was not a lack of adequate dramatic

literature or scenography. A new kind of actor was needed in order for theater to move forward.

Judging by how his second attempt at forming a studio took shape, Stanislavsky decided that a laboratory for exploring a new approach to acting was his sole aim. Although the First Studio's success was such that very soon it became a theater in its own right, at its inception Stanislavsky engaged no scene designers, no composers, nor any literary managers. This was a change from 1905. His thinking about acting had come a long way, too. In 1911, much more than in 1905, he had a plan for actor training ready to be tested. He had the beginnings of the System. As Pavel Markov writes,

In the meantime, in 1910, when Stanislavsky was separated due to illness from [MAT] for almost a whole season, the "system" starts to take shape. It needs a multitude of exercises; it is waiting for students more than for solid actors... (Markov 351)

In 1905 Stanislavsky had a number of objectives: create MAT "franchises" for the provinces, work with Meyerhold to find a way to stage the new impressionist dramas of Maeterlinck and others, and develop a team of designers able to work with this new dramatic literature. What was his super objective? It is difficult to trace and define with precision. And without a super-objective, as Stanislavsky would assert in the mature, written version of the System, developing a through-line of action becomes impossible. By 1911, Stanislavsky's motives seem to have grown much clearer and sharply defined. He was not concerned with set designers, franchises, dramatic literature, or anything else besides the one thing, which, if it were lacking, would make everything else had wanted to work on eventually meaningless. That one thing was a new kind of actor.

In 1910, not only was Stanislavsky more focused on his goal for the Studio, he understood better what conditions were necessary to achieve it. Chief among those conditions was isolation. The 1905 experiment had been conducted apart from MAT. But training the new actor apart from the physical environment a working repertory theater was not enough. Actor training also needed to be isolated in terms of priority. The experience of the Povarskaia Studio shows that Stanislavsky had not yet placed the actor and her process ahead of other concerns like directing, set design, literary management, and stage music. The First Studio isolated acting as the single most important issue in the renewal of theater.

It could be argued that the original impetus behind the First Studio came not from Stanislavsky but from the young actors at the Art Theater, the only “stable group” to have accepted the System in its embryonic form. By 1910 Vakhtangov was leading, along with Sulerzhitsky, the small group of young actors that would become the First Studio in exercises inspired by the System. Sofia Giatsintova recalls that,

Konstantin Sergeyevich, having found out from Sulerzhitsky that we [the soon-to-be members of the First Studio] wanted to stage excerpts, allowed it because, based on what Sulerzhitsky had told him of us, he trusted us, trusted us enough to say, “Go ahead, hold your lessons in the theater, if you are so enthusiastic about the System. I will split up the theater into groups of ten, and they can attend your lessons as well.” But no such groups of ten were formed; no one attended our lessons, because no one had any basis to believe in us and what we were doing. (O Stanislavskom 364)

This, according to Giatsintova, was the end of Stanislavsky’s attempts to teach his System at the Art Theater. “Then Stanislavsky once and for all decided to hold lessons in the System outside of the theater” (O Stanislavskom 364).

There were exercises on entering into the circle of attention, on muscle relaxation, on developing a sense of truth and of belief. We showed

these exercises to Konstantin Sergeyevich, but it sometimes happened, to our horror, that while we had been working on something he had already renounced what he had taught, having found something else. Sometimes he would ask us, “What fool taught you that?” (O Stanislavskom 364)

Perhaps only the younger actors had the patience and the desire to be part of such a vacillating work in progress. Only after the artistic and financial success of the First Studio’s early productions would a vindicated System return to MAT. In the meantime, Stanislavsky profited from the “lessons” as much as anyone else as his System took definite shape, thanks to the contributions of Sulerzhitsky, Vakhtangov, and the other members of the Studio, who all taught Stanislavsky how to teach the System.

Sulerzhitsky Stewards the Studio

Stanislavsky was too busy with his duties at MAT to make the long term commitment needed for the important experiment he was considering: to train a group of young actors systematically, consequentially, and as a cohesive group using his new approach to actor training and to see what the results of this work might be.

Luckily, though, Leopold Sulerzhitsky did what Stanislavsky was unable to do at the time and took charge of the Studio. As MAT and First Studio actor Valentin Smyshlaev writes,

Sulerzhitsky was the actual founder of the First Studio of MAT. He undertook the difficult and thankless task of [being] the first tutor of the young actor-collaborators of the Art Theater; he was the organizer of this artistic institution and all of the huge weight of the daily grind fell on his shoulders. (LAS 579)

Stanislavsky, of course, conceived the System and wrote the books about it; however, Sulerzhitsky’s contribution in the crucial aspect of how the System functioned and how

it was taught in practical terms, lesson by lesson, minute by minute, cannot be overestimated. As Yuri Zavadsky, a student of Vakhtangov, writes,

I think that Stanislavsky's System, his first written records of it, his conclusions, his ideas about the studio movement and ethics would be unthinkable without the participation of Sulerzhitsky. (LAS 612)

Sulerzhitsky turned Stanislavsky's brainchild into an active, collaborative learning process.

Stanislavsky acknowledged Sulerzhitsky's talent at conveying the System to the eager students of the First Studio.

Suler was a good teacher. He knew better than I did how to explain what my artistic experience suggested to me. Suler loved young people and was young at heart. He was able to communicate with students without scaring them with technical jargon. This made him a superb conveyor of the so-called "system"; he brought up a small group of students based on new teaching principles. (Stanislavskii V, 536)

In the words of First Studio actress Serafima Birman,

Stanislavsky gave directives, Sulerzhitsky executed them. Stanislavsky, just as a mother carefully considers whom to entrust her new-born when she cannot raise the child herself, knew with whom to trust his "system," which was striving towards life but not yet born. (Birman 47)

Stanislavsky maintained that, "the Studio and the Art Theater are heavily indebted to the moral, ethical, and artistic influence of Sulerzhitsky" (Stanislavskii V, 537).

Play and Ethics: Building Collectives On and Off Stage

Sulerzhitsky realized that his program of nurturing the development of "human beings through art" was the combination of ethics and aesthetics. As Stanislavsky himself explained, Sulerzhitsky loved the First Studio because it realized one of the aims of his life:

to draw people closer together, to create a shared project, collective goals, communal labor and joy, to fight against vulgarity, violence and injustice, to serve love, nature, beauty, and God. (Stanislavskii V, 537)

This was the ideology of Sulerzhitsky's First Studio: drawing people together, the collective, communal work and play. Prior to Sulerzhitsky, functioning assemblages of actors were capable, to a certain extent, of forming in acting classes and among actors engaged at the same theater. Ensemble acting, although it was not something typically valued in 19th-century theater, nonetheless emerged from time to time between thespian comrades-at-arms. But it was not actively cultivated. It emerged by accident. And there were and are usually much more powerful forces in theatrical collectives that work to undermine communal cohesion: ambition, jealousy, vindictiveness, and so on. These obstacles to ensemble were not absent in the First Studio.

Sulerzhitsky expressed his misgivings about the atmosphere in the Studio in a letter he wrote to Stanislavsky on 27 December 1915 but apparently never sent:

[...] During the second year all the members of the Studio fought disgracefully; when all was filled with decay in the Studio, I weakened and wanted to give up. (LAS 381)

But he persevered and, "Everyone made up, began trusting each other and in themselves; and I saw how souls blossomed, how *Cricket* glowed" (LAS 381). But as the Studio began enjoying greater renown, Sulerzhitsky, as head of the institution, had more and more responsibilities beyond those of acting teacher and mentor. Referring to the handful of students he had chosen as his administrative assistants, Sulerzhitsky wrote that,

[Administrative duties] are always the most unpleasant [activities], but, on the other hand, are always given to those who take care of them [...] I can't help but get the impression that people who [take on administrative duties] are leaders, unwillingly they start to feel like the

owners of [the institution], they inevitably become spoiled and withdraw from the main goal, the main core of the Studio, from their comrades, cohering into a sort of executive body and executing not the collective will, but their own. (LAS 381-382)

But Sulerzhitsky was the first to succeed in building collective cohesion among a group of actors on a new level never before seen. He had several things on his side. First, he had a group of young actors in relative isolation from the “poisons” of a working theater. These youngsters underwent a sort of rite of passage together that extended from basic acting exercises to critically acclaimed productions. In a way, they “grew up” together somewhat like performer-peers in traditional communities. Also, they had faith in Stanislavsky’s experiment. Most important of all was Sulerzhitsky’s own personality and approach to actor training.

First Studio actress Lidiia Deikun describes how Sulerzhitsky’s acting lessons continued beyond the classroom.

I remember one evening after class, Zhenya [Evgeny] Vakhtangov, Lena Kesarskaya and I walk out of the studio. Leopold Antonovich [Sulerzhitsky] whispered something to Zhenya and suddenly two completely intoxicated men appeared in their place. One of them, Zhenya Vakhtangov, kept trying to explain [something] and apologize [for something] to Leopold Antonovich, [who] with drunken stubbornness, kept shaking his fist at him. (LAS 602)

Then the exercise took an unexpected turn. On Tverskaya Street there was a coffee shop with an illuminated sign outside; the two hooligans, Sulerzhitsky and Vakhtangov, began trying to catch the letters. When a policeman approached, Deikun and Kesarskaya “had to convince the officer not to take them to jail, but without spoiling the joke. It took all of our inventiveness, powers of persuasion and influence” (LAS 602). Once past that obstacle, Sulerzhitsky and Vakhtangov rushed into the café to

continue their “drunken” escapades. Deikun and Kesarskaya hurried after them, got a table, order coffee, but, it turns out, could not pay!

Neither Lena nor I had a cent. [When] I asked Leopold Antonovich to pay he only shook his fist [at me]. In tears I pleaded with him to stop playing, but to no effect. [...] I had to reach into Leopold Antonovich’s pocket, pay, and pull them both out of the café by force. Then, finally, the game ended. Leopold Antonovich and Zhenya were ecstatic. Leopold Antonovich praised us, saying that we acquitted ourselves superbly, demonstrating inventiveness and imagination, but that [he and Vakhtangov] held up their end as well. The acting exercise was a success! (LAS 602)

Like the well-trained System actors they were, Sulerzhitsky and Vakhtangov dove in and remained submerged in their given conditions, bringing their partners, Deikun and Kesarskaya along with them.

Sulerzhitsky took Stanislavsky at his word about the importance of believing in given conditions and set an irresistible example for almost everyone around him. The only exceptions were the “grown-ups” during summer vacations in the south. Typically, Sulerzhitsky made fun out of the chore of looking after the children when it was his turn. MAT actor Vasiliï Kachalov’s son, Vadim Shverubovich, describes how,

It was our holiday when “Uncle Lyopa” looked after us. He had an unusual talent for this, each time inventing some new kind of play-assignment. First we were castaways on a deserted island, exploring every inch of it [...] Next we ended up in a waterless desert, searching for and ultimately finding a natural spring. We had to clear it and make a reservoir for water. [...] These games helped us to understand nature and perform good deeds such as finding, clearing and protecting with stones several springs of fresh water, which are so precious in the Crimea. (LAS 627)

Another summer, this time in the Ukraine, Sulerzhitsky took the children on overnight boating expeditions. Grown-ups, especially mothers, almost ruined the game by

Worrying about us, that we would drown, catch cold, get burned in the camp fire when we jumped over it in the wild hunting dance of the

Dakota tribe, that we would get hurt when we flew like swallows over the cliff into the sand on the bank, and so on. Secondly, they ruined [the game] even more by not believing in it... The worst thing for a child is when someone around him does not believe in his “what if.” The game is instantly spoiled, becoming boring and unpleasant. Suler believed, without pretending, without humoring us, but believing. *He believed.* (LAS 629; their italics)

Shverubovich asserts that, “[Sulerzhitsky’s] genuine penetration into the Stanislavsky System, the very essence of the Art Theater,” was contained in these games (LAS 629).

Sulerzhitsky led by example, often learning right along with his students.

Leopold Antonovich created artists from students, teaching [us] not by informing students only what he had already known well and for a long time; but together with [his] students he learned what he did not yet know, what he thought artists had to learn. This is why mastering the “system,” [and] our professional growth, proceeded with such ardor and [such] ease. (Birman 53)

Sulerzhitsky was able to do this by not drawing a line between life and art. As

Stanislavsky writes,

He could only draw material from nature and from life, that is, to do unconsciously what Shchepkin taught us [to base all characterization on observations from actual people]. (Stanislavsky V, 535)

As Deikun writes, Sulerzhitsky came up with

[...] thousands of exercises [...] so that we were always in a creative state; everything that he did was always colored with genuine merriment, joy, and humor. (LAS 603)

Once while walking peacefully down the street with Sulerzhitsky, and having a serious discussion, Deikun saw her opportunity to pay her teacher back for the incident at the café,

As we overtook a policeman, I quickly yanked my hand away from Leopold Antonovich and headed straight for the officer. Leopold Antonovich, suspecting nothing, followed right after me. Insulted, I addressed the policeman indignantly, “Save me from this insolent man, he is stalking me.” The office wanted to arrest Leopold

Antonovich, but he, without losing breaking character, was able to convince the policeman that it was just a misunderstanding. We went back on our way and I complimented Leopold Antonovich on a superbly and truthfully played acting exercise. (LAS 602-603)

Sulerzhitsky trained his students both inside and outside of the rehearsal room.

In a way, this approach could be summed up as “making work fun.” But this method was much more than a mere technique or strategy. It demonstrates Sulerzhitsky’s worldview and life experience. Serafima Birman wrote that Sulerzhitsky had experience and an outlook that went beyond the stage. Sulerzhitsky could not “show” like other teachers, but was better at explaining this or that place in a role to students (Birman, 41). As any good director knows, “demonstrations” can be quick and effective means of communicating to an actor what is wanted, but they often carry the danger of imposing an interpretation and keeping the actor from finding his own, unique way of playing the episode in question. Sulerzhitsky’s philosophy suggests that even if he had been adept at “showing,” he would not have availed himself of this method since the personal growth of a performer as an individual was more important to him than the requirements of the production. This is the essence of the difference between the Povarskaia Studio and the First Studio as personified in the approaches of their respective leaders Meyerhold and Sulerzhitsky.

Sulerzhitsky’s lessons continued out onto Tverskaya Street and during summer vacation in the south, for example. By not confining his teaching to the classroom, Sulerzhitsky forged a collective that went beyond mere acting ensemble. The rehearsal room was not the limit for students to live and believe in sets of given conditions, but just the beginning. This porous border between stage and street, of having interpersonal connections begin in rehearsal and be developed off stage, and

vice-versa, is reminiscent of traditional performance, with its collectives of performer-peers negotiating relationships in and out of performance.

Indeed, Sulerzhitsky anticipated in practice the theory of the super-super-objective. Defined as “the life goal of the person-artist,” Stanislavsky writes,

Imagine the ideal person-artist who dedicates himself to one huge life-goal: to elevate and bring joy to people through his high art, to convey to them the innermost spiritual beauties of the works of geniuses. [...] This person-artist can give his life to the elevated, cultural mission of enlightening his contemporaries. He can, by using his personal success, expose the crowd to ideas and feelings close to his mind and heart [...]. Who knows what elevated goals grand people might have! (Venetsianova 420; quoting Stanislavskii II, 340)

This is a fitting description of the moral and spiritual programs of progressive, socially committed actors of the 19th century like Mochalov and Shchepkin. Stanislavsky, for his own part, implored acting students to

Decide why you have come to the stage. This “what for” is your main engine and guidebook. Think constantly of the super-super-objective of your life. (Venetsianova 421; Stanislavskii 1953, 330)

Inspiring a collective of artists to pursue the same demanding spiritual goal is difficult. A galvanizing leader like Sulerzhitsky can facilitate this process. Even the, however, there are many inertial forces characteristic of creative personalities—their hypertrophied individualism, for one—ready to counteract the cohesive force of a single, elevated goal. Stanislavsky thought of this danger when he wrote,

Collectivity and the question of why you have come [to the theater]—these are the two principal questions on which you must constantly think, write, and speak not only in school but over the entire course of your creative lives. If you do not ask yourself these questions and do not constantly reaffirm the super-super-objective of your life, then your first success will go to your head. (Venetsianova 421; Stanislavskii 1953, 330)

Yet Sulerzhitsky ventured not only a personal attempt at reaching his goal, he tried to realize it in common with other artists through the collective experiment of the First Studio.

Just as in the System the path to achieving the super-objective lies along the through-line of action, the super-super-objective has *its* super-through-line (Venetsianova 420; Stanislavskii II, 340). For Sulerzhitsky this super-through-line was the creation of a collective of actors, which was both theater ensemble and community of artist-citizens with each aspect strengthening the other. While there were as many different reasons for the failure of the Povarskaia Studio as there were for the success of the First Studio, the degree of solidarity of the young actors was surely a leading factor in both cases.

We have seen to what lengths Sulerzhitsky was willing to go in order to bind his troupe together on and off stage, in and out of the rehearsal room. Acting and theater were his means to create a community of moral individuals. By some accounts, however, establishing and strengthening this community of actors came at a cost.

Sulerzhitsky and “The Monastery”

Critics and theater historians have observed a cell-like or sect-like quality in the First Studio.⁵⁴ Critic Nikolai Efros may have been the first to use the word monastery in his monograph on the production of *Cricket on the Hearth* (29). The notion may have originated, however, within the collective itself. Efros mentions Mikhail Chekhov’s remark to a journalist that “We are a group of believers in the religion of

⁵⁴ Pavel Markov, for example in his essay, first published in 1925, “Pervaia studiia MKhT (Sulerzhitskii—Vakhtangov—Chekhov),” Markov I, 347-417.

Stanislavsky” (Efros 13). There are certainly grounds for the idea of studio as sect. As Rebecca B. Gauss has written,

A studio could easily become almost a sect of believers, locked into a single worldview and creative style, limiting individual creativity. A question arose for the Studio: Should the evolution of a studio overcome its tendency towards exclusivity and join the general circle of life, developing a wider world view, and eventually become a true theater? (37)

Certainly the transition to becoming a theater is something many studios have faced, including the First Studio, but such a transition can open up a collective to the larger world in ways that had not previously pertained. Directors and actors from “outside” can come in, bringing new ideas and upsetting established relationships, production deadlines become important, and feedback from audience and critics who buy tickets and write reviews, starts to matter more.

But to my mind the notion of a sect seems somewhat of an overstatement; at most it is a question of degree. Repertory theaters often partake of a distinct creative outlook. Usually this is the result of a powerful creative personality in the role of artistic director and a core of actors who have been with the company for many seasons. These factors help make a theater. The distinctive “house styles” of theaters like Mark Zakharov’s “Lenkom,” and the theater of Roman Viktiuk derive from the very specific aesthetic positions of their leaders and the collective indoctrination of their actors. In some repertory theaters, almost all productions are staged by the artistic director. Outside directors are chosen and approved by the artistic director, who maintains his “house style” in myriad ways large and small. Productions at the First Studio, on the other hand, in its initial seasons, were directed by Boleslavsky, Vakhtangov, and Sushkevich, albeit all supervised by Sulerzhitsky. With these

observations in mind, it seems to me that the trope of the “single world view and creative style limiting individual creativity” inherent in the studio model is somewhat of a nonstarter.

However, certain factors external to the First Studio reinforced the idea of its “monastic” nature. Especially at the beginning of its existence when its methods were new, unusual, and poorly understood beyond its confines, the First Studio was quarantined from without as much as it cloistered itself. Its relationship with its parent organization, the Moscow Art Theater, is a case in point. Many established actors at the theater were suspicious about this new endeavor. Nemirovich-Danchenko, Stanislavsky’s partner at MAT, was also skeptical about what Stanislavsky and a number of the company’s younger members were doing away from the theater.⁵⁵ Stanislavsky encouraged his supporters to proceed cautiously. Vakhtangov wrote the following entry in his notebook for 9 August 1911.

K.S. [Stanislavsky] said to me “Work. If anybody says anything to you, I will tell them ‘good-bye.’ I need for a new theater to be created. Let us proceed quietly. Do not mention my name.”
(Evgenii Vakhtangov 97)

Vakhtangov and his colleagues worked with Sulerzhitsky and Stanislavsky outside of the structure of MAT for a year testing and developing the System before the body was officially chartered as The First Studio of the Moscow Art Theater (*Evgenii Vakhtangov* 112, 113).⁵⁶ This wariness was not misplaced. Stanislavsky understood very well the resistance to what he was planning. Separation from MAT was essential

⁵⁵ The relationship between Stanislavsky and Nemirovich was very complicated. See Ol’ga Radishcheva’s *Stanislavskii i Nemirovich-Danchenko: Istorii teatral’nykh otnoshenii* (3 volumes). Moscow: Artist. Rezhisser. Teatr, 1997, 1999.

⁵⁶ Vakhtangov records 1 September 1912 as the first meeting of the Studio and October sixth as its “opening.”

for creating and maintaining an atmosphere of experiment and freedom, but it was also a step necessary for the very survival of the enterprise.

In Soviet times the notion of the First Studio as a “monastery” was popular. While its legacy was undeniably important in terms of the actors and directors to emerge from it, as well as its role as the incubator for the System, there were other aspects that proved much more difficult for former members and critics to justify. Foremost was the idea that the First Studio ignored or retreated from reality—that it was lost in its own private domain and not engaged with life out in the world.

External historical circumstances were responsible in this case much more than anything done by or in the Studio. When *A Cricket on the Hearth* premiered in 1914, its gentle, heartwarming Christmas tale resonated with audiences facing the shock, fear, loss, and separation brought by the War. First Studio actor Alexei Diky, drafted into the tsarist army in 1914, understood the resonance *Cricket* had with audiences during the First World War:

I understood that the production talked about just what I had dreamed about while alone at the front... It talked about things that everyone understands: about how good it is to love and to be loved, the importance of a warm, domestic hearth, about how human friendship is so underestimated, about a hand reaching out to support a friend at just the right moment. It talked about happiness, which the war had taken away from so many. (LAS 642)

The production survived the First World War and even the Russian Civil War with the hardships and deprivations of War Communism. Lenin attended a performance in 1922, his last visit to the theater. Nadezhda Krupskaya described his reaction:

[Lenin] was already bored after the first act. Dickens’ middle-class sentimentality began to get on his nerves and when the dialogue commenced between the old toy-seller and his blind daughter, [Lenin] could stand it no longer, and walked out in the middle of the act. (208)

By 1922, the intimacy and introversion of the initial productions of the First Studio may have lost their appeal as society was looking outward towards the grand reordering brought by the Revolution. Thus the First Studio was condemned for being out of touch with what really mattered in people's lives and unable to speak to the urgent concerns of audiences.

Surely the principal reason for the ambiguous attitude towards the First Studio in Soviet criticism and historiography resides in the person of Leopold Sulerzhitsky. *Cricket*, of all the early works of the Studio, had the most of Sulerzhitsky in it, and his world view. Nikolai Efros describes the force of Sulerzhitsky's moral position,

“To awaken what is human in the human being is the chief purpose of art,” Sulerzhitsky said in a newspaper interview. “During stagings and rehearsals we try to locate and put forward all that unites people, all that speaks of that humanity, which testifies to the divine essence in human beings.” Does not everything in *Cricket* testify to this? Is not the entire production the development of this essence? Because of this, work on *Cricket*, on the realization of its atmosphere, its images, and *peripeteia*, was so tenderly-close to Sulerzhitsky's heart; [the work] offered a rest and comfort to his troubled heart, which did not accept the war. (27-28)

In the Studio's previous production of Berger's *The Flood*, Sulerzhitsky's “hopeful humanism” was balanced by Vakhtangov's “pointed satire” (Gauss 45). Sulerzhitsky oversaw work on the second act, when impending catastrophe softens the hearts of the play's disagreeable characters. Vakhtangov produced acts one and three, where the characters' true natures are presented. In *Cricket*, only Vakhtangov's own edgy, satirical portrayal of Tackelton diluted Sulerzhitsky's approach to the material. Sulerzhitsky, who in the words of Vakhtangov's biographer Kh. Khersonskii was “the soul of the production,” stated,

Life is hard for people. They must be brought pure joy. I don't know, perhaps *Cricket* needs a special approach, perhaps rehearsals need to be started not as is usually done, perhaps it would be better to go now to the Strastnoi Monastery and stand there silently, [then] come here, light a fire in the hearth and all sit down together around it and read the Gospels." (Khersonskii 159).

In addition to Lenin's unfavorable reaction to *Cricket*, Sulerzhitsky's relationship with Tolstoi and his reputation as a Tolstoian made Sulerzhitsky ideologically suspect and his efforts in the First Studio problematic in Soviet theater historiography for decades after his death.⁵⁷

Tat'iana L'vovna Tolstaia introduced Sulerzhitsky, her classmate at the School for Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, to her father some time in the 1890s (Sulerzhitskii 26). Sulerzhitsky charmed all the Tolstois.

[H]e turned the lives of the Tolstois upside-down. At dinner he told jokes and fancifully humorous stories; [he] narrated, imitating people, animals, birds, and even inanimate objects. He sang Ukrainian, Georgian, and Jewish song, keeping time on the back of a guitar; he sang accurate and unbelievably funny parodies of classical opera. (Sulerzhitskii 27)

Sulerzhitsky and Lev Tolstoi spent much time together. The great writer adored his young friend. Sulerzhitsky shared many of Tolstoi's values, but their philosophies were not identical. Elena Poliakova wrote that Sulerzhitsky

⁵⁷ Tolstoi's position as a great writer was unassailable, although certain of his later works like the novel *Resurrection*, although published occasionally in the Soviet era, were problematic in the view of Party ideology. Indeed, the philosophy of Tolstoi's final period, when he espoused non-resistance to evil, was hard to reconcile with the notion that "progressives" in pre-Revolutionary Russia were always somehow engaged in active struggle against tyranny. The dominant narrative about Sulerzhitsky in mid-century was that he was "broken" by the fight. He "fled" to the theater rather than continue his activities as printer and distributor of clandestine material, thus "embodying" Tolstoian non-resistance. Elena Poliakova has done much to rehabilitate Sulerzhitskii with her books *Sulerzhitskii*, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1970, a collection of Suler's fiction, letters, and his articles and observations about theater as well as the recollections of his contemporaries, and the biography *Teatr Sulerzhitskogo: Etika. Estetika. Rezhissura*, Moscow: Agraf, 2006. These are to date the only book length publications devoted exclusively to Leopold Sulerzhitskii.

circulated Tolstoi's works. Shared his views of society, the family, and labor. He was a vegetarian. Does that mean he was a Tolstoian; that he was a non-resister [who] rejected any possibility of reordering society through social channels; that he was a follower and proselytizer of the doctrine of humility: "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, offer the left one"? No, he was not. Tat'iana L'vovna Tolstaia remarked that "in contrast to many so-called 'Tolstoians' Suler, while under the influence of Tolstoi, did not lose his individuality." (Sulerzhitskii 28)

Sulerzhitsky suffered from guilt by association because of his personal relationship with the Tolstoi of the great writer's final period and their similar, though not identical, moral stances.

While "the revolutionaries of the 1860s and 1870s set as their principal task the preparation of the peasants for organized actions," in the words of V.G. Vazanov, Tolstoi recommended universal submission (302). Vazanov characterizes this position in a description of one of Tolstoi's short stories from the 1880s:⁵⁸

Both the landowners and the courtiers without exception, the tale argues, must take up the cross of submission, voluntarily give up personal property and power, and become equal to the peasants. But the peasants must not rise up, support rebellions, or achieve equality by force. (302-303)

There could hardly be anything more distasteful in the Soviet world view than advising the peasants not to rise up against the tsarist order.

Cricket seemed to substantiate the misgivings that many "professional revolutionaries and in wide circles of the revolutionarily inclined intelligentsia," in the words of Khersonskii, had about Sulerzhitsky:

For it was enough to juxtapose the highly Christian "Tolstoian" philosophy of *Cricket*, closed off in its narrow world of bourgeois melodrama, to what was happening in the world, to juxtapose the touching tenderness and comfort to the ideationally

⁵⁸ "The Tale of Ivan the Fool and His Two Brothers: Simon the Warrior and Taras the Fatso, and His Deaf-Mute Sister Malan'ia, and the Old Devil and the Three Baby Devils."

charged political collisions of the age, to compare the historical battle of classes, outlooks, and moral principles, and the nightmares of reality and appeals to struggle to the narrow-minded philosophy of *Cricket*, an ostrich philosophy [...]. (Khersonskii 163)

Seeing theater history through the partisan lens of the class struggle has largely lost its appeal. But secondary and tertiary entailments from such narratives can be very persistent. The observation that Sulerzhitsky and his Studio did not choose to engage the world in the same way as “professional revolutionaries” led to the distortion that Sulerzhitsky and his Studio choose not to engage the world at all, preferring instead “the cloister.”

Nonetheless, by their very nature studios are introverted. Their purpose is not productions but discoveries and innovations in stagecraft, primarily in the craft of acting. The trope of the First Studio, the prototype and beacon for the “studio movement” as “monastic” made it easier to separate desirable features of its legacy from its ideologically problematic aspects. By bemoaning its “monasticism,” Soviet critics and practitioners could celebrate the First Studio’s alumni and its individual success in production in a way that focused on its contributions to theater history while still condemning its alleged lack of engagement with both production-based theater and the world at large.

The context of Efros’s use of the term “monastic” in 1918 seems to indicate that he intended to convey not asceticism and willful isolation from the world beyond the collective, but the depth of members’ dedication to their craft and the degree to which belief in the notion of theatrical collective and ensemble work shaped their approach:

They worked with fervent enthusiasm, with the austerity of a monastic Holy order. “We know our partner’s roles,” Chekhov stated in the already cited newspaper

discussion, “not only the words he voices but his experience [of the role, *perezhivanie*] and the interpretation [*tolkovanie*] of the role; and we take responsibility for each other.” (Efros 29)

This cooperation and sense of shared responsibility, continues Efros, was the background in which the emotional logic of every moment and every phrase was sought (29-30). This sort of close, detailed work represents the System in action. It is facilitated only in the context of a well-regulated collective where members share the same goals and notions of artistic creativity and are able to work closely together to achieve them.

Making Connections, However Long It Takes

Stanislavsky, Sulerzhitsky and Vakhtangov worked with the young actors of the Art Theater for a whole year before the First Studio was officially chartered. The idea to do productions came from within the collective, when Boleslavsky “asked for permission to prepare a production during spare time from class” and chose Heijermans’s *Op Hoop van Zegen* [translated into Russian as *The Death of Hope*] (Efros 15). And even then, the parameters for this project were much truer to the “laboratory” function of a theatrical studio than in 1905. Unlike the fall deadline facing the Povarskaia Studio, there was no immediate expectation for when and even if Boleslavsky’s project would be ready for the public. Perhaps this circumstance contributed to the impractical and idealistic habit of Russian and Soviet directors to move back the date of the premiere of a new production they deem is not ready.

At the First Studio, the actors themselves—specifically Sushkevich, Boleslavsky, and Vakhtangov—were the directors. Sushkevich dramatized the Dickens

novella “The Cricket on the Hearth” for the stage. Even dressing sets occurred with the participation of the actors. This did not take First Studio actors away from their acting but brought them to a more profound identification with their characters. Efros writes of *Cricket* that,

The toys, which festooned the cramped room of the old toymaker, Caleb Plummer, were hand made by Sulerzhitsky together with Mikhail Chekhov. “I remember,” the latter recalls, “Sulerzhitsky and I kept busy long winter nights thinking up motley knick-knacks, preparing clowns and painted dolls. As Caleb,” he adds, “I wanted to be closer to these toys; I wanted to feel their connection to my creative process.” (Efros, 28-29)

While to some degree a matter of expediency, having actors participate in making and executing production decisions fit right into Sulerzhitsky’s philosophy. Performers could thus claim ownership of their productions through much more than just their time on stage.

Pre-theatrical performers were no strangers to making or adapting their own props and costumes. There are occasional references to store-bought masks in certain local traditions, “In Sol’vychegodsk uyezd at the end of the 19th century papier-mâché masks purchased in Ustiug were in wide use,” writes the ethnographer M.M. Gromyko, who continues, “but young people, in preparing for Yuletide parties, also constructed traditional, home-made masks” (Gromyko 1986, 246). Typically, performers developed their own special relationships with the material elements of their performances through creation and adaptation of props and costumes. Often, exploring the contents of

“granny’s trunk” was part of preparations for the Yuletide performance season, all the better if it occurred in a group. As Gromyko writes,

additions of folk carnival culture manifested themselves even during preparations for Yuletide entertainments, when youth got together to costumes and masks for mummery. (Gromyko 1986, 244)

This is in keeping with my position that the subjunctive aura of the holiday complex was wider than festive performances.

It is impossible to determine how much performer-celebrants identified with their characters, in the manner understood in System acting, while preparing costumes, props, and the performance space, and working out the details of skits in traditional culture. “A connection,” in Chekhov’s words, with the creative process was nonetheless surely present in these off-stage, out-of-character activities. Sulerzhitsky’s desire for students to bond off stage, to carry connections forged during performance into their off-stage relationships, and vice-versa, was foreshadowed in the place and process of performance as a collective endeavor in traditional culture.

This was very different from the Povarskaia Studio, where actors had no input regarding repertoire, production concept, scene design, and so on. According to traditional performance and the experience of the First Studio, acting becomes much more than rehearsing and performing one’s own part; it means participating collectively in the overall creation of the performance, including the creation of its material attributes. And if, as in the case of Mikhail Chekhov’s Caleb from *Cricket*, this contributes directly to a deeper understanding of one’s own specific character, then so much the better. Thus, Sulerzhitsky made sure that actors of the First Studio participated in two ways: in the production as individuals with work on their own

characters, and collectively with work for the production not necessarily related to one's character.

Conclusion

From the very beginning of the System as a functioning approach to acting and actor training in the work of the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theater, Leopold Sulerzhitsky put a premium on the value of collective. Moreover, he stressed the vital connection between aesthetic and non-aesthetic aspects of collectivity. Members of the First Studio were bound together by ties reaching beyond the purely aesthetic aspects of their work and education as theater actors. While pedagogy for the arts will in all cases combine aesthetic criteria with practical considerations, for Sulerzhitsky the relationship between the two was more than just coincidental; each informed the other, making the whole greater than the sum of the two parts. Sulerzhitsky worked hard to consolidate his collective both as an acting ensemble and a group bound by more than just the stage. He did this, and was supported in this by Stanislavsky, who held similar values, by emphasizing the importance of ethics.

In both the First Studio under Sulerzhitsky and pre-theater, aesthetic and non-aesthetic, everyday concerns exist in a state of complex mutuality. Where does the everyday end and the aesthetic begin, and vice versa? How do conditions in the everyday offstage lives of performers affect a performance? These questions are always pertinent when considering acting. With regard to the First Studio and Russian traditional performance they are even more important because of the close proximity of "life" and "art" achieved either due to a visionary's conscious plan, as with Sulerzhitsky and Stanislavsky or as a result of traditional life-ways as in pre-theater.

I have shown how performance, collective building, and ordeals shared within a group of young people existed in East-Slavic traditional culture in ways similar to 20th-century Russian actor training. Sulerzhitsky's peculiar melding of ethics and aesthetics along with the special emphasis he put on collective was something new as applied to the art of acting. The result was a novel way of creating and maintaining an acting ensemble. This model is coeval with the System and exists symbiotically with it.

Chapter Five. Image of Action

Image and Performance: Definitions

In this chapter I will discuss the concept I call “image of action” and how it relates to the actor’s process. Before proceeding, a discussion of terminology is in order. “Action” here means, as it does elsewhere in this study, scenic action—a palpable, conscious step or steps taken towards the achievement of a goal by a person willfully existing in (accepting the conditions of) a play universe in a trans-embodied state, i.e., as either another being or in an alternative hypostasis of himself. For “image” it is necessary to explore the meaning of the term in Russian as well as English, because my concept of “image of action” derives from my work as an actor with Russian director Vitalii Miller, and is informed by a specifically Russian discourse about *obrazy* (images).

Comparing definitions of “image” in *The Oxford English Dictionary* and the Russian Academy of Sciences’ *Dictionary of the Russian Language in Four Volumes* shows that at the basic level, the concepts are analogous: a picture, a representation, an imitation. An image is also something seen in the imagination. The cited Russian dictionary refers to “a generalized, artistic reflection of reality embodied in the form of a specific individual phenomenon,” and also “a type, a character created by a writer, an artist [or] an actor” (“Obraz”).

Judging by the definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this last shade of meaning, especially with regard to the formation of images by creative individuals, is not as well developed in English (“Image”). A passage by 19th century Russian intellectual Vissarion Belinsky, quoted in the cited Russian dictionary, is of seminal importance in the development of the concept of “image” in Russian: “The poet is intolerant of abstract ideas: [while] creating, he thinks in images (*myslit obrazami*)” (“Obraz”). Thus the artist—and not just the artist using words—has recourse to the stuff of sense perception, the phenomenological, the experiential, indeed, the tangible, with the product of his endeavors being something readily apparent to human perception, even if it also has an abstract component.

Belinsky’s “image” can be understood as an abstract concept or idea which is reified into something that is immediately accessible to an integrated mind-body: a character, an object, or an action. These reifications of abstractions work on both biological (cognitive) and cultural levels.⁵⁹ The creation of such reifications is just that—a creative act, the result of a degree of craft or skill governed by an aesthetic sensibility and therefore artistic.

Finally both the English and Russian definitions privilege the role of language in the making (and reception) of images. The OED refers to “a representation of something to the mind by speech or writing; a vivid or graphic description” and “a simile, metaphor, or figure of speech.” The Russian dictionary refers to “poetic image.”

The two languages differ with the Russian concept of image as a way of doing something, as in the figure of speech “*kakim obrazom?*” (in what way or fashion?), i.e., “how?” *Obraz* is also defined as the “character, composition, direction of something:

⁵⁹ See Slingerland 212-214.

obraz zhizni (way of life)” (“Obraz”). In this sense, then, image of action means “way or approach to doing.”

So why do I prefer the strange sounding “image of action” to the equally legitimate translation of *obraz deistviia* rendered as “way of doing (something)?” Both translations are useful in understanding the concept. The notion of *obraz deistviia* reflects the duality of acting as both the concrete actions of an actual person in space and as the projection of embodied creative acts. “Image of action,” however, with its stress on the Russian sense of image as a concretized, perceptually appealing artistic creation juxtaposed to non-embodied, abstract thinking situates the definition firmly in the realm of purposeful creativity.

Image and the Actor: Shaping Performance

This is the origin and root of *obraz deistviia* in the System: a style or approach to executing one’s tasks as an actor. Style or approach answers the question of “how.” The “what,” the detailed plan or blueprint for the role, is known as the “score” of the role. The score is painstakingly elaborated during rehearsal, from the actor’s first contact with the dramatic material—the initial reading or the director’s presentation of the play and personal concept for production, to the performer’s experience growing the character all the way through to the final rehearsal or most recent performance. An “image of action” is part of the director’s concept for the production. “Image of action” colors, shades, and sets the tone, as it were, for the actor’s animation of his character within the production.

Conceived and articulated by the director for each specific production, an “image of action” fits into the theatrical process as a part of what Alexei Popov called

The Artistic Integrity of the Production, (Khudozhestvennaia tselostnost' spektaklia; [1957] 1979). The idea of artistic unity derives from Stanislavsky's ideas about the production's super-objective. This refers to the notion of the director as the final arbiter of the artistic character of the production.

Without doubt, this process of the ripening of artistic integrity begins with the director's lucid conception. And the conception is harmonious, specific, and correct when it arises and abides in a profound and correct understanding of the super-objective of the playwright, on accessing the author's personality, the nature of his temperament, the character of his vision and, finally, the artistic manner of his dramatic expression. (Popov 311)

By attending carefully to the "voice" of the playwright, by basing all interpretive conclusions and creative decisions on the play-text, the director develops the super-objective of the production (*sverkh-zadacha spektaklia*), a combination of an idea or moral position presented as a meta-image to be embodied in the production through all available theatrical means, but primarily via actor-characters.

Before I continue with my discussion of image of action by giving specific examples, I want to discuss briefly the implications of this concept for theater studies. The notion of the poetic image as the object of detached study is ubiquitous in the humanities, especially in the study of the arts, from both the objectivist and the postmodern relativist perspectives (Slingerland 1-28). It is at least as old as Plato's metaphysics (Republic, Book X) and may in fact reside in human physiology itself.⁶⁰ It is not by accident that the two dictionary definitions cited above stress the literary, linguistic aspects of images in the sense of artistic creation and the study thereof. Scholars use words and are usually biased towards language-based understanding and

⁶⁰ These are "folk theories" of the mind, which stem from the illusion that our senses provide a seamless, "accurate" picture of external reality. In fact, our senses have developed through evolution to work in a highly selective fashion (Slingerland 34).

expression. This is especially true in the humanities, theater and performance studies being no exception. Thus framed in terms of verbal signifiers, images typically remain abstracted, at a distance from the human body, and non-visceral. This is fine if one proceeds in the pursuit of knowledge from the position of a strict, Cartesian mind-body duality—the source of both objectivism and critical theory according to Edward Slingerland (31-142). However, the rejection of mind-body dualism and the acceptance of cognitive models for human behavior—including the production and reception of works of art—means that the workings of the “mind” are not detached and independent of the body but dependent and “embodied.”

This is nowhere more true than in performance, which consists of perceptible, phenomenal images—the “artistic reflection of reality,” including realities of the ‘mind,’ “embodied in the form of a specific individual phenomenon.”⁶¹ Therefore, image cannot be successfully engaged in the field of performance by excluding the embodied approach to the creation of culture.⁶² The concept of “image of action” is important, therefore, because it represents an example of an “image” (generalized artistic reflection of reality) as something embodied, enacted, and experienced viscerally, rather than merely contemplated.

In acting, images exist via actors. It is not enough to follow Eli Rozik in describing acting as the projection of iconic images onto the actor’s body (Rozik xv). Audiences are the recipients of this projection. In addition, however, actors experience

⁶¹ In acting and directing class at GITIS, my colleagues and I were constantly admonished to avoid *voobshche*, “in general,” which kept creeping into our discourse. The weed of *voobshche* grew easily in our discourse—our explanations and discussions of what we meant to do or thought we were doing in our etudes and exercises. It could not take root, however, in actual performance—as specific, embodied action rather than discourse. The stage knows only specificity; indeed, it cannot function without it.

⁶² See Tooby and Cosmides.

images as an element of their process. Actors shape images, but the reverse is also true: images shape, if not actors *per se*, characters and productions. In other words, images are not just “read” by an audience, they are experienced by performers. The System, especially in Stanislavsky’s final years with the “method of physical actions,” explicitly acknowledges the interconnectedness of body—in the form of the performer pursuing actions appropriate to the role and the character’s objectives, and the mind—in the form of the performer’s belief in the given imaginary world of performance. The location of this connection is in the performer’s subconscious (or unconscious), where, on the psycho-physical level, the character’s behavior becomes subject to the same physiological responses that govern human functioning and reactions in the “real” world.

But acting is not just about “fooling” the performer’s mind-body into behaving “as if” it were in a “real” situation when it is in fact immersed in an imaginary world. It is about “artistic reflections of reality,” in the words of the Russian Academy of Sciences Dictionary. Images animate the actor’s performance. Stanislavsky insisted on creating, maintaining, and developing *obrazy*.

The actor gives himself up to the role only at those moments when [the role] seizes him. Then he fuses with the image and creatively transforms. [...] Since every actor must create an image on the stage and not merely display himself to the audience, then transformation and characterization become essential for us all. In other words, all actors without exception are creators of images and must transform and be characteristic [...] Transformation does not consist in abandoning the self, but in surrounding yourself with the given conditions of the role within the role’s actions and [in doing so] become so accustomed to them that you no longer know “where am I and where is the role?” (Venetsianova 273-274; Stanislavskii II 251-252; III 224; *Stat’i*... 681)

These excerpts from the writings of Stanislavsky come from a study guide to his acting terminology under the heading “Transformation” (*perevoploshchenie*, literally: trans-embodiment), a difficult but crucial concept in the System. The term “characteristic” (*kharakternyi*) must be understood in the sense of “characterization (*kharakternost*’), that is, expressing a unique, distinct character image, rather than the meaning of “characteristic” as “typical of.” The point I wish to make here is that the creation and projection of an image is a crucial ingredient in the actor’s process, according to Stanislavsky. Therefore “images” are not just what the audience sees and reacts to, but they also are what is needed to make embodied characterization a creative activity.

For the individual actor, this means executing each action in a role according to an image in some way common for all participants in the scene or production but at the same time “customized” by each performer to her individual circumstances. Thus, instead of merely playing an action effectively, the actor colors the performed action in terms of the overall image of action of the production. In theatrical acting, the director can, in order to inform the production with an added level of internal coherence and structural integrity, provide a general creative task for all actors. Each actor will respond to this challenge in her own way, based on her individuality as an artist and the unique circumstances of her character.

Images change a person’s behavior. On the most basic level, image, in the form of a characterization to be put on like—and often along with—a disguise, facilitates certain actions and interactions. Mummers dressed up as “gypsies” can talk with, challenge, interrogate, and poke fun at their neighbors in a specific manner and on a

variety of subjects—love, fate, money, and so on, typically not otherwise available to them in indicative existence.

Usually, accounts of performance in Slavic traditional culture provide only the basic situation, such as where mummers dressed as “gypsies” and “told the fortunes” of their fellow villagers. An imagination informed by an understanding of acting as practice must extrapolate what this could have meant in terms of real human interaction. Without further information with regard to specific exchanges in specific contexts we have only the theoretical possibilities of the riches of interaction made possible by assuming an image.

Occasionally one finds sources that allow slightly greater detail about the possibilities of interaction through mumming to emerge. A female informant from Gorokhovetskii Region in Vladimir Province reported, “One day I dressed up as a soldier; I went to the Chairman of [our] collective farm, pointed a goad at him: ‘Hands up!’” (*Traditsionnaia kul'tura Gorokhovetskogo kraia* 38). While we do not know how this line was delivered or how the informant’s “scenic partner” responded, that partner’s status in the community as chairman of the *kolkhoz* means that in some way a challenge to his authority figured into the essence of this exchange.⁶³

There are myriad ways that the informant could have turned the tables on the Chairman—from coming in as a bear and sniffing him, to impersonating a more senior bureaucrat. She chose to be a soldier, however. Her scenic instincts may well have played a role in her selection. The sniffing may have been potentially too uncomfortable for the informant as well as her “partner.” Realizing the scenic potential

⁶³ There are interesting issues here of power relationships momentarily upended and challenges to the structure of authority (which perhaps ultimately reinforce authority). This is the playground of the critical theorist. For our purposes, however, the performer’s process is the focus.

of choosing a senior bureaucrat would have required participation by the Chairman for it to have “worked,” i.e., he would have had to “play” her. Instead she chose the “image” of the soldier, a part well-known in the USSR following WWII due to the personal experience of many citizens and the frequency with which the trope of the heroic struggle against Hitlerism was promoted in the culture. Therefore she chose a to portray soldier, fusing with the image and creatively transforming herself by surrounding herself with the given conditions of the role. This “image” suggested not only her action—pointing the pusher (as if it were a rifle) and commanding “hands up!,” but also performance details left out of her brief account such as her bearing, her carriage, her tone of voice, the way she looked around the room and engaged with her “partner.”

Image of Action in Traditional Culture

A very simple and concise example of image in performance was given in chapter three in the description of the holiday behavior of eligible young women at a “brides’ market” held during a spring-summer festival. The girls, in E. Knatts’s description, bowed from the waist “not simultaneously, but one after the other beginning on the side from which the visitor is approaching [...] like a wave through a field of grain” (Knatts 190). This is “image” at perhaps its most basic form: not individuated and with a certain mechanical reproduction of an inanimate phenomenon, a metaphor where an unambiguous human perception of the natural world is rendered through the bodies of performers.

But of course, images can be more sophisticated, involving the reproduction not of natural phenomena but human culture activity, something close to Schechner’s

“restoration of behavior” (35-116.). A good example of this comes from the eastern part of Vologda Province (Northern European Russia) where both spring-summer and Yuletide choral dances often began with a “gathering exercise” known as “Street” (*ulots’ka, ulitsia, ulochka*, etc.; Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 147). The main function of such a “gathering choral dance” (*nabornykhorovod*) was to “assemble a circle of girls and boys [of marriageable age—JH] participating in the party (*vechervanie*; Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 142). While “Street” was performed both outside in fair weather and inside on winter nights, its practice in the latter situation provides a clear example of a “manner of action” used as an organizing principle for performance.⁶⁴

While the entire sequence of “Street” included a number of choral-dance songs,⁶⁵ the activity began with a variant of the song called “Street, how wide you are” (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004; 147, 148, 149).⁶⁶ The imagery of these songs clearly derives from pastoral impressions of the outdoors during spring and summer weather. Lines from these songs speak of “silky grass,” “the guelder rose and raspberry,” “black currant,” “a small bird,” and so on (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 148). A. Buslaev described a performance in Berezhnoslobodskaiia volost’ (district) of Totemskii uезд (county, Vologda Province):

The first game was “Street.” A boy goes to the center of the [room] and summons a girl. The girl goes around him and takes another boy by the hand. This boy invites another girl, and so on, until all are standing. A circle is formed. This circle dances, moving now in one,

⁶⁴ Stated simply, fall-winter performances of “Street” are secondary re-creations of a primary model, the spring-summer choral dance party performed outside in good weather. The word *ulitsa* in Russian has a wider meaning than the English “street” or “road” with connotations extending into “the outside” in general. It is the public arena, rather than the private space of the home, the place to encounter neighbors and strangers. “Street,” rather than “home,” is where one would find a mate.

⁶⁵ “Whoever hasn’t been to Orenburg,” “I’m going down to Novgorod,” “The hops entwined along the river,” and so on.

⁶⁶ (*Uzh ty ulitsa, ulitsa shirokaia; E-oi, dak uzh ty ulitsa, ulitsa shirokaia; Uzh ty ulitsa shirokaia; Uzh ty, ulka, ty ulka moia, Shirokaia ulka, raspakhanaia*; etc.)

now in the other direction. [Then] it stops and all start kissing. The boy kisses the girl he invited and the girl who invited him. Next a girl dance leader (*devitsa-pliasun'ia*) goes to the center and invites a girlfriend to dance with her. When they are done, the dance-leader invites a third, a fourth, and so on, until she has danced with all the girls, one by one. (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 147; quoting Buslaev)

A contemporary informant and native of Moscow informs me that this pattern is still followed today “in discotheques.”⁶⁷

In the villages of Kokino and Verkhniaia Gorka (Vologda Province), the game was played differently. In this case, the dance leader was a boy who went past the girls sitting on benches against the wall took one by the hand and led her to the center. Then the “best girls” or *slavnitsy*—the village’s most visible and desirable young, unmarried women—sang,

“Look at this young fellow here!
(Name and patronymic) here!
He’s handsome and cute.
He walks and bows,
Walks up to a maiden,
Stand up, maiden, and give your hand,
Give your hand to the lad,
Etc. (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 150)

At the end of the song, pairs stopped and kissed. This was described as “having walked along the whole street (*vsiu ulitsu proshli*)” (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 150).

As a final example, P. Shadrin quoted a conversation between two lads at a village gathering in Vologda Province at the end of the 19th century.

Why can’t your woman walk pretty? Just look how [D]mitri’s Oleksandrushka [Alexandra] sashays. What a [choral] dancer! Proud! At the party she was first among the women; check her out, what grace! [literally: She walked the whole street on one foot!] What a dancer! She floats, she floats, and then “bam!” she waves her kerchief.

⁶⁷ Leta Nikulshina, 2007.

Whew, what a wildcat! Well, [when] I get married, I'll take dancer like that [for a wife]." (Morozov and Sleptsova 2004, 174)

These mentions of "street" refer to the eponymous song-game itself, but also develop the imagery of outdoor choral dancing. Because of the way traditional culture was recorded and due to the ephemeral nature of the particulars of performance, such verbal and, ultimately, secondary descriptions and characterizations of this "imagistic" method of shaping and coloring performative activity have proven the most durable. I have no doubt, however, that the verbal metaphors I have quoted here are merely one layer of a multi-layered metaphorical system in which the indoor dance party used images modeled after social gatherings under the open sky. Before describing a case of "image of action" in my own experience as an actor, consider how an active image can shape an entire holiday sequence in traditional culture.

The *Maslenitsa* Holiday—Image of Action: Entertaining a Special Guest

Maslenitsa, the Russian version of Shrovetide, the period before Lent, can be understood in terms of an extended "image of action" metaphor motivating the behavior of participants. The trope of "entertaining a special guest" extends throughout the celebration; it permeates many aspects of holiday existence and provides an ideational focus for the activities of participants.

Maslenitsa, like other traditional holidays and expressions of folk culture, has often been explored from a diachronic perspective. As N.N. Sosnina writes in the article "*Maslenitsa*" in an encyclopedia of Russian holidays, "It absorbed characteristics of archaic agrarian and livestock raising celebrations of seeing off winter and welcoming spring at the time of the spring equinox" (Russkii prazdnik 326). For as long as members of communities depended directly upon the land for their livelihood

the passing from winter to spring was an important yearly milestone. Residents of towns and cities observed the holiday as well. Elements of pagan Slavic early spring celebrations, then, are believed to have informed the make up of *Maslenitsa* in later times. This idea can be debated. It is logical to assume that the past somehow survives in the present. However, actual facts concerning specifics of ancient beliefs and practices are scant, frequently contradictory, incomplete, and often used tendentiously. The important thing here, though, is to point out that “the presence of pagan remnants” is a way of conceiving of *Maslenitsa* as a complex of beliefs and practices, and thus represents an attempt at an overall characterization of the holiday.

Such perspectives have been very productive in the study of traditional East Slavic life. They help organize scholars’ observations and conclusions and direct further inquiry. If there is a drawback to such conceptualizations based on outside observation, based on a detached perspective—and even members of traditional communities, when they offer narratives of holiday activities, are in no small way guilty of this objectifying position by virtue of their retelling—it is that they do not tell the full story. What is missing is the view from within. What is it like for the participants? Members of communities are actors in the popular performances of *Maslenitsa*. Can a perspective from 20th century Russian theater practice shed any light on this traditional East Slavic celebration?

Another way to think of *Maslenitsa*, a way much better supported by the facts, is as an event in the church calendar, and by extension, a community’s popular calendar. Here speculation is not necessary: *Maslenitsa*, along with Easter, brackets Lent. This is obvious in the word itself, which derives from *maslo*, butter. During

Maslenitsa, meat is proscribed but eggs, cheese, milk, and butter form the basis of the rich holiday food enjoyed before the dietary austerity of Lent begins. Food is just one aspect, albeit an especially visceral one, of this important threshold in the lives of members of traditional communities. The feasting, the merrymaking with singing, dancing, and mumming, the parading and demonstration of holiday finery, the mingling, the sledding and sleighing, and visiting relatives practiced during *Maslenitsa* contrasts sharply with the somberness, restraint, and reserve of Lent. Thus *Maslenitsa* can be seen as a celebration informed by a combination of official and popular Orthodoxy poised immediately before the most intensely spiritual period of the year.

I want to organize the events of *Maslenitsa* not according to relatively abstract schemes like “remnants of paganism” or even “the impersonal dictates of the popular calendar,” but in terms of real peoples’ lives and experiences. I believe the people involved in celebrating *Maslenitsa*, as well as other holidays, personalized spiritual, supernatural, magical, and cosmic ideas and concerns, adapting these categories to the scale and perspective of their own lives. This is not just true of *Maslenitsa*. The custom common in many Slavic communities of putting straw under the tablecloth at Christmas Eve is a variation of a custom whereby families eat that meal on the floor, often on straw, sometimes even having carried the dinner table outside (Strakhov 135-136, 177-180). In this instance, people want to be closer to the events of the Nativity, need to experience it not just passively, via the intellect, but as participants. The same is true of the experience of Lent, where spiritual renewal has both a mental and a physical component. This personalization and embodiment of abstractions is, I believe, a very theatrical instinct. Bourdieu writes that, “The body believes in what it plays at [...]. It

does not represent what it performs, [...] it *enacts* [...]. What is ‘learned by the body’ is not something that one has, [...] but something one is (Bourdieu 73, his italics).”

Personalizing these categories allows celebrants to experience the holiday through making those categories relevant to their lives by putting themselves into an event taking place that they can relate to through participation.

Therefore I suggest an “image of action” for the celebration of *Maslenitsa*. I do not insist that it is especially novel, primarily because it is clearly and unambiguously indicated in many cases by the actions of participants. It has been “hiding in plain sight.” Applying it consistently to the entire, week-long holiday sequence allows for a perspective on celebrating *Maslenitsa* from the point of view of the performer—the pre-theatrical, East Slavic actor. *Maslenitsa*, then—the character (as opposed to the holiday, which I will signify in italics as *Maslenitsa*-holiday) comes for a visit at the end of winter. In certain traditions, the epithet “Guest-*Maslenitsa*” has been attested to by Sokolova (27). She is received, and welcomed with all the enthusiasm members of traditional communities can muster. She is feted with all the merriment and hospitality possible. At the end of the week she must go—abandoned, drowned, burned, torn apart or otherwise disposed of and her passing is observed with no less passion and seriousness of purpose. The image then, is one of entertaining a dear guest: welcoming her, showing the visitor a good time during her stay, and then saying farewell, often with the feeling that she has nonetheless overstayed her welcome.

As I mentioned before, certain practices directly reinforce this view. In a number of local traditions *Maslenitsa* was an actual figure, albeit inanimate, in the form

of a doll of straw or rags, with which people interact. Sometimes a Maslenitsa doll was brought in on a sleigh at the head of a holiday procession made up of local people. Boys would pull this conveyance into the village with the straw figure of Maslenitsa accompanied by the most beautiful girl in the village (Russkii prazdnik 329). When she is not physically present in the form of a doll, celebrants create her by basing their actions on their relationship to her, in acting this is known as “playing one’s partner.” One example is the songs sung to Maslenitsa.⁶⁸

But even practices that are not directly associated with interacting with a stage-partner, either directly or by “playing” her existence, can be organized around this “image of action.” These include the extensive preparations for the arrival of such an important guest, which begin

in the middle of the previous week. At that time, housemistresses tidied up every corner of the home—from the attic to the basement: the stove was whitewashed, tables, benches and floors were scoured, holiday tableware was readied, [and] trash was swept from the courtyards and around the gate. A large amount of provisions were bought for the holiday: bags of various kinds of flour for *bliny* [thin pancakes], *priazhentsy* [fried, stuffed potato pies], and *pierogi* [...], barrels of salted fish, gingerbread, candies and nuts for children; milk, sweet and sour cream, and butter were collected. (Russkii prazdnik 328)

It sounds like a very important guest was expected. People likewise began making preparations to entertain Maslenitsa (and themselves) when she arrived.

Tall icy and snowy sledding hills for sledding were built; snow forts and cities were constructed; swings were erected, show booths were put up at fairs. (Russkii prazdnik 329)

While welcoming Maslenitsa was important, so was seeing her off.

In southern and central provinces [this] consisted of a complex action with the participation of a special Shrovetide train made up of boats,

⁶⁸ See “Our Dear Maslenitsa,” p. 215-216.

sleighs, and so on. The main character was a Maslenitsa doll made of straw or wood dressed in traditional peasant costume or a person portraying her. The performance of shows accompanied the train's progress through the village. Participants in the procession were its actors while everyone else observed. (*Russkii prazdnik* 331-332)

Thus holiday existence at Maslenitsa was subsumed under or “played in the key of” welcoming a distinguished mythological visitor.

“Image of action” informed not just people’s behavior and attitudes about this holiday. It also made its presence felt in language.

In specific localities, people observed a “*tuzhilka* [funeral feast] for the honorable lady Maslenitsa” on the Monday after *Maslenitsa*, [the first Monday of Lent], where they ate fast-fare *bliny* [cooked on] hemp-seed or sunflower-seed oil [as opposed to the now prohibited butter]. (*Russkii prazdnik* 332)

Consuming large quantities of *bliny* is, of course, a behavior very typical of *Maslenitsa*, but it is also a characteristic feature of *pominki* or the Russian wake. The word *tuzhilka* obviously derives from the verb *tuzhit'*, to grieve. The 19th century lexicographer Vladimir Dal' defined *tuzhilka* as “the first Saturday of Lent.” Under the same heading he lists a number of foods made from flour—*tuzhiki*, *tuzhilki*, *tuzhil'niki*—prepared and consumed around the same time (Dal' IV 440).

Grieving and remembering the dead—not just the departed Maslenitsa from the imaginary universe of holiday play, but actual ancestors from the “real” world—is also an important component of *Maslenitsa* (Sokolova 29; *Russkii prazdnik* 327).

Proshchenoe voskresen'e or “Forgiveness Sunday” marked the transition from Shrovetide to Lent in Russia. On this day, members of communities visited the graves of their departed relatives, as well as the homes of relatives, friends and acquaintances, asking all for forgiveness. Finally, members of families asked each other for

forgiveness (*Russkii prazdnik* 332). Contrition, remembrance of the dead, and the observance of funeral customs involving folk food-ways thus intertwine in the beliefs and customs of many East Slavic local traditions. It is impossible to say exactly, even if such a determination were helpful, which cultural motif influenced the other.

Nonetheless, the pre-theatrical actor's dramatic instinct for personalizing his relationship with abstractions associated with calendar transitions, faith, and generational continuity shows up in a number of local traditions from this period. While Maslenitsa's wake is celebrated in certain localities, in others her funeral procession is enacted, as Sokolova has demonstrated.

N.P. Kolpakova in the book *Terskii bereg* (Terskii Coast) [on the White Sea] (Vologda 1937) cited an interesting description of a funeral for Maslenitsa in the town of Varguza on February 20th 1896 from the diary of her grandfather, S.P. Kolpakov. "A procession was going down the street. A lad with an accordion, dancing, bouncing and twisting before the crowd, was out in front. Behind him, girls on a poor sledge full of holes bore a scarecrow of straw dressed as a married woman with a headscarf... The crowd sang songs, danced and expressed their joy with merry gestures and shouts... 'Maslenitsa's funeral,' [a man said], 'we do it every year according to tradition...' The procession had arrived at the river, and with the same songs and dances was making its way up the high [opposite] bank of the Varzuga [river]... People removed the scarecrow from the sledge and threw it over the cliff. Afterwards women took turns going up to the edge to shout something down to Maslenitsa. As near as I could tell they called out the following, 'We saw off Maslenitsa, we did not grieve for her [*ob nei ne potuzhili*]⁶⁹...'; 'Get out winter, go to the bottom, send spring...'; 'We're seeing off Maslenitsa, waiting for the sun's light...' (Sokolova 25)

Elsewhere, sending off Maslenitsa was even more clearly modeled after funeral rituality. P.V. Shein reported from the village of Pesochna in Kaluga province that after lunch on Sunday girls and women made a scarecrow of Maslenitsa, and dressed it in women's clothes. The participant playing the priest put on bast matting (for vestments)

⁶⁹ Notice the perfective aspect of the verb *tuzhit'*.

and carried a bast shoe attached to rope (as a censer). The others took the straw figure in their arms through the village. On the way back they carried Maslenitsa on a stretcher covered with swaddling cloth. During the procession the “priest” swung the censer, shouting “Halleluiaah,” while the others shouted and laughed. At the edge of the village, they undressed Maslenitsa and tore her up (Sokolova 28; quoting Shein, 1898; 333). E.M. Sheremeteva reported that elsewhere in Kaluga province such funerals for Maslenitsa survived into the 1930s with an actual person sometimes playing Maslenitsa (Sokolova 28; quoting Sheremeteva 118).

Just what was the nature of Maslenitsa’s visit to a community and, even more importantly, what relationship did people have to this phenomenon? The second question is always of primary importance for actors. In every case it can be said that members of traditional communities were glad to welcome Maslenitsa and even gladder to see her go. Welcoming her symbolized enthusiasm for the ensuing holiday, a time of unrivaled gaiety, “the merriest, noisiest Russian traditional holiday” (Sokolova 11). This was a last chance for people to cut loose and have fun before the six weeks of Lent, which was also a component of the holiday complex, but one where very different behavior was expected. *Maslenitsa* was a time to really enjoy winter. There is usually still plenty of snow on the ground practically everywhere in Russia, but daylight lasts much longer than it does earlier in the winter. Hence the sleighing, sledding, tobogganing, the snowball fights, “storming the snow citadel,” and other outdoor activities that mark the holiday. No wonder people greeted Maslenitsa with such enthusiasm; it was as if she brought the holiday as a gift for her hosts.

She was brought along on visits: in some cases physically, in the form of a life-sized doll. People took the meaning of *Maslenitsa* with them wherever they went. Russians take their merrymaking seriously and there is no better occasion for merriment than *Maslenitsa*. “There was a conviction that not having fun on wide *Maslenitsa* meant ‘living in bitter want and ending one’s life poorly’” (Sokolova 12; quoting Stepanov 38).

The participation of everyone without consideration of gender, age, or family position was a characteristic trait of Shrovetide merriment. ‘Villagers from Zykovo, big and small, rich and poor, as they say, make merry and feast on *Maslenitsa*.’ [...] The author emphasizes the hospitality and, as it were, street-wide and public character of *Maslenitsa*. (Sokolova 12; quoting N-lov 122)

N. Sosnina writes that,

Going on visits and devouring all manner of rich Shrovetide fare, the presence of *bliny* as a necessary component of the Shrovetide table, and the giving of presents to relatives were indispensable conditions to correctly and properly observe [*vstrecha*, lit. meet, welcome] the holiday. In order for people to be well-fed in the coming [agricultural] year *Maslenitsa* had to be shown a good time, which meant greeting her richly and sending her off properly. [...] Whoever did not give the holiday its due was subject to universal reproach; moreover, it was thought that during the rest of the year that person would live in bitter want and poverty. (*Russkii prazdnik* 331)

Such obligations were not limited to just *Maslenitsa*. I have discussed elsewhere the injunction to celebrate during holidays incumbent on all able-bodied members of traditional communities.

But the relationship to *Maslenitsa* was not unequivocal. Surely she was anticipated and given a hearty welcome, but her hosts’ attitudes to her were more complicated than that of unconditional adoration, as a song from Novgorod Province demonstrates.

Our dear *Maslenitsa*,

Dear soul Maslenitsa,
You didn't stay long,
Not long, not long,
We thought you'd stay for seven weeks,
Seven weeks, dear, seven weeks,
But you stayed just seven days,
Seven days, dear, seven days,
You quickly enticed us,
Enticed us, dear, enticed us,
And put us on a long fast
You put us there, you did. (*Fol'klor novgorodskoi oblasti* 318)

While *Maslenitsa* meant indulgence and freedom from many of the restrictions and limitations of ordinary existence, she also brought with her Lent, which signified austerity in diet and behavior.

Maslenitsa as the transition from feast to fast can be understood in terms of semiotic and structural manifestations and explanations in an attempt to trace beliefs and practices back to “Slavic antiquities” and Ur-rituals. Ordinary people, however, members of traditional communities, responded viscerally, eating buttery pancakes one day and bitter radishes the next. They acted out their relationship to this event dramatically through direct, personal interaction with embodied representations of the figure *Maslenitsa* and contact with her. A. Arkhangel'skii reported in 1854 that in the Poshekhonskii District of Yaroslavl' Province, *Maslenitsa* was seen off in the following manner:

Here a large cart was specially prepared with ten or so horses hitched to it one behind the other. A rider rode on each one wearing rags torn from head to toe and dirtied with soot. One rider held a large knout he had made, another held a broom. Everywhere, even around their own necks they hung cowbells and all sorts of noisemakers. An intoxicated person, also covered in soot and dressed in torn rags doused with beer was seated in a dirtied cart covered with bast matting decked with brooms. Opposite him was an open trunk with edibles—pierogi, fish, eggs, griddle cakes, [etc.]. A carafe of wine was put on the other side. The drunk had a large goblet of wine put in his hand. This entire

procession signified that Maslenitsa was heading home. When the train was stopped and asked to stay, the driver replied that Maslenitsa was obliged to travel to the fair in Rostov. (Sokolova 30; quoting Arkhangel'skii 40-41)

This is a very interesting, detailed account of a now vanished local custom. Very typical, though, are an abundance of external details about props and costumes—all undeniably helpful—with considerably less specific information about what actors did, how they performed their roles in this enactment. This makes the brief dialogic exchange that much more valuable. Maslenitsa's regret at having to keep a previous engagement in Rostov could be shared by those who remained. In this case, it was not their fault that she was riding off and taking with her merriment, noisy celebration, and indulgence in both food and drink. Being deprived of these things was regrettable, but not the villagers' fault ultimately. They had little choice but to begin fasting.

Typically, however, relationships to Maslenitsa at the time of her departure were much more openly negative and featured “undignified jokes and swearing” and “clearly expressed mockery” (Sokolova 32, 31). Effigies of Maslenitsa were destroyed by burning, drowning, or tearing the scarecrow to shreds. “Tereshchenko wrote that in a few places in Ukraine a ritual doll was carried down the street accompanied by children yelling and throwing snowballs at it” (Sokolova 35).

In cases where a person embodied Maslenitsa, her end was not nearly as violent, fortunately.

In certain villages of the Moscow Province in the middle of the [19th] century, Maslenitsa was enacted by “a peasant dressed in the strangest manner, on a horse covered in semi-processed linden bark, bast matting and shoes, and so on, hitched to a sled decorated in a similarly strange manner. Accompanied by a crowd with songs and affectations he rode out into a field or forest and there changed into ordinary clothes: this meant the end of *Maslenitsa*. (Sokolova 29)

The similarity with this practice to chasing away Maslenitsa with verbal or physical abuse, or through the violent destruction of effigies is that it provides closure.

Understanding these performances as being executed for the benefit of small children to help them to reconcile with the abrupt end of merriment and tasty food is a useful idea. Perhaps not just children were the beneficiaries. The disciplines of cognitive science and evolutionary psychology suggest that body, mind, and emotions are integrated and include a substantial component that is “pre-cultural” or “hard-wired.”⁷⁰ Perhaps certain very basic actions universal for human beings—watching someone go away, seeing them off, and subjecting an “enemy” to physical or verbal violence help facilitate the transition from *Maslenitsa* to Lent in a way more thorough and satisfying than detached narratives ever could.⁷¹

Even when effigies were entirely absent, which was the case in many local traditions, a bonfire marked the end of the holiday. Sergei Maksimov wrote that,

Well in advance [of the holiday] small children, teenage girls and boys carry old wattle, broken barrels, discarded sleds and other objects outside the village and assemble these inflammable materials into a large bonfire. (370)

At this time, “the remains of Shrovetide gluttony: bliny [pancakes], eggs, scones, and so on,” are thrown into the fire (370). In certain traditions, parents told small children at

⁷⁰ The disciplines of cognitive science and evolutionary psychology suggest that body, mind, and emotions are integrated and include a substantial component that is “pre-cultural” or “hard-wired.” For an overview see Slingerland, Chapter 4: Embodying Culture.”

⁷¹ I would not deny that overall, as entire complexes, these are culturally “inscribed” practices. On the most fundamental level, however, “physical actions” like ripping apart a straw effigy, throwing it into the river, or pelting it with snowballs, or the “perceptual symbol” of seeing someone disappear into the forest or down the road are functions of an integrated body-mind which precede cultural “inscription,” i.e., are determined by evolution and universal for human beings. For a discussion of the issues of accommodating the contributions of cognitive science and embodied perception into the humanities and escaping the dead end of “critical theory,” see Slingerland 56 for the perceptual symbol account.

the start of Lent that all the rich, non-fast food of the previous week had burned up in the fire. M.I. Smirnov recorded in the early 20th century that parents in the Pereslavl'-Zalesskii district told children that at the end of *Maslenitsa* "the milk had burned up" (21). Here the relationship towards a transitional moment is performed and experienced as Action. People threw non-fast food into the fire and watched it burn up. Here the body actively participated in renunciation; it was more than just a mental operation, an inert mental exercise. Actions associated with the aftermath of the conflagration were also physically cathartic: the ashes were buried "so that no trace of [Maslenitsa] would be left" (Maksimov 370). In other words, she is gone for good, not to be seen or heard from again until next year.

Just how abrupt was the transition from Shrovetide to Lent? S.M. Liubetskii gives a poignant account.

Certain [celebrants], giving themselves up wholesale to Shrovetide revelry, feasted and made merry on the last day to the point of syncopal dizziness. But the prophetic hour of midnight finally arrived, beginning the fast. Suddenly, as if by magic everything froze, got quiet, and grew still. A profound calm ensued, [unbroken] until the night air was cut with the drawn-out [sound of] the church bell, as if summoning Christians before the judgment of God and of their own conscience. (211)

The contrast could not be more extreme. The change could not be more sudden. Adults as well as children likely benefited from applying the abstractions of the church calendar to an enacted, embodied metaphor. The shift could then be felt, experienced bodily rather than just conceived with the mind. The feeling of having to say goodbye to a dear relative or old friend after a joyful visit, of the time of visiting and celebration having come to an end, of having to start the next day in a different emotional dimension is very widespread, perhaps universal for human beings as a social species.

Mapping this state onto a complex, polysemic cultural construction like Shrovetide creates an immediate, visceral, and powerful “image of action.”

Understanding an entire holiday sequence in terms of a complex, action-based metaphor is very different from interpretive models typical in Russian folklore and traditional cultural studies that explain phenomena in terms of remnants of ancient pagan practices. Entertaining an anthropomorphized Maslenitsa as a special guest requires no speculation about vanished, unrecoverable pre-historic rites, no stretching, no overreaching, and no filling in the gaps so common in the restoration of “Slavic antiquities.” All behavior is modeled directly after unambiguous, universal phenomena, which fall into two main categories. One is the cultural level: the generousness of east Slavic hospitality and the injunction for all to participate in celebrating the holiday. The other is the explicit level of basic human perception and evolutionary psychology: seeing Maslenitsa burn up in a conflagration or disappear into the forest, getting the visceral sense of closure from tearing apart a straw effigy.⁷² Holiday customs are therefore not located in the murky abstraction of a devolved paganism, but in ordinary practices, prime components of holiday existence like cleaning the house on the eve of a celebration, observing that celebration with friends and relatives, engaging in singing, dancing, feasting, and playing. These components are cultural fundamentals; which come together under an imaginative, action-based metaphor to become an emergent system specific to the observation of Shrovetide.

⁷² I agree with Edward Slingerland that culture is not entirely “autonomous.” It does not exist in pristine isolation from the evolved reality of the human mind and cognitive regimes. Rather it consists of fundamental, universal human realities, from which specific cultural realities arise (Slingerland 2007).

“Image” in Action

My practical training in Moscow shaped my interpretation of traditional culture. Actors and directors brought up in the Russian school of theater are encouraged to look for the big picture, to consolidate the “bits” of a role or the myriad elements of a production into an all-encompassing, over-arching conception: an “image of action,” a “super-objective of the role,” or a “super-objective of the production.” The artist then no longer plays the “bits” separately, one after another, does not approach the production from a hundred perspectives, but rather preserves diversity and richness while promoting unity and coherence.

In the mid 90s I was involved in a production of Ostrovsky’s play *Truth is Good, But Happiness is Better*⁷³ in Moscow as part of a “studio” theater project made up of recent graduates of the Moscow Institute of Culture,⁷⁴ their course leader, Vitalii Miller, their acting teacher, Tamara Degtiareva,⁷⁵ other recent graduates of theater academies, and myself.

Miller explained the *obraz deistviia* or “image of action,” he wanted for the production as “holiday mood.” He wanted characters’ actions to be tinged with expectations of the late summer holiday called “Apple Savior” (*iablochnyi spas*), August 19th, the second of three harvest-time “Savior” holidays.⁷⁶ This is the popular

⁷³ *Pravda—khorosho, a schast’e luchshe*, first performed 1876, published 1877 (A.N. Ostrovskii: *P’esy 4 (1873-1877)*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1975).

⁷⁴ MGIK (Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi institute kul’tury), currently MGUKI (Moscow State University of Culture and Arts)

⁷⁵ People’s Artist of Russia, “Sovremennik” Theater.

⁷⁶ August 14th (August 1st): The Procession of the Precious Wood of the Life-giving Cross of Jesus Christ, The First Savior—Honey Savior (*medovyi spas*). August 19th (August 6th): The Transfiguration, The Second Savior—Apple Savior (*iablochnyi spas*). August 29th (August 16th): Transfer of the Image of Edessa to Constantinople, The Third Savior—Nut Savior, Grain Savior (*orekhovyi spas, khlebnyi spas*) (Nekrylova 2007; 391-394; 418-420; 418-420; the first date is the day on the Gregorian calendar. The date on the Russian Orthodox (Julian) calendar follows in

name for the Orthodox celebration of the Transfiguration of Our Lord, when Christ appeared in His divine form to Peter, James, and John (Matthew 17: 1–6; Mark 9: 1–8, Luke 9: 28–36). In a folk tradition that has become a part of official Russian Orthodoxy, parishioners bring baskets of apples and other fruits to church for the priest’s blessing, after which they may partake of the food previously forbidden during the just-ended fast of the Dormition of the Mother of God (*Uspenskii post*). This holiday marks the end of a unique variety of fast. Anna Nekrylova points out that, “No fruits except cucumbers are eaten until the Second Savior” (401).

From early morning tables stood on church parvises with heaping mounds of apples, peas, potatoes, cucumbers, turnips, and rutabagas; there were bowls of rye and barley. After Mass the priest blessed the fruits of the new harvest and parishioners poured a little fruit into a special basket for the clergy. Then everyone broke the fast with an apple. The priest distributed apples to the needy, children, and all those without their own orchards. (401)

As I have argued elsewhere, the visceral reality of permitting and prohibiting certain foods plays an important role defining the contours of the traditional calendar by regulating behavior.

While Ostrovsky never mentions the holiday by name, there are abundant references to it in the play. One of the themes of the initial scenes of the first act concerns the apple trees in the yard.⁷⁷ The fruit has been mysteriously disappearing:

Filitsata: [the nanny]: Merkulych [Gleb, the gardener’s, patronymic], you best get that bag of apples out of sight, in the bushes there it’s still visible. If she goes by and sees it – God forbid!
Gleb: Taken care of.
Filitsata: See to it.
Gleb: How do you know I got apples? Maybe it’s a sack of pearls?
Filitsata: It ain’t pearls; I saw you. (Act I, scene 2; Ostrovskii 266)

parentheses). Notice how milestones in the official history of the church coexist with and anchor important dates in the agricultural cycle.

⁷⁷ The play’s working title was *Nalivnye iabloki* (*Ripe Apples*; Ostrovskii, 522).

A few scenes later, matriarch Mavra Tarasovna (played by Degtiareva), the “she” of whom Filitsata has referred, asks Gleb about this year’s crop of apples:

Mavra Tarasovna: Where’s all the apples, Merkulych?

Gleb: Apples? That’s right, now that you say it, it does seem like there should be more of them: there’s a depreciation.

Mavra Tarasovna: And why would there be a depreciation? (Act 1, scene 4; Ostrovskii 269)

Gleb is surreptitiously collecting fruit and moving it off the property. Mavra Tarasovna suspects this but cannot prove anything for the time being. This is a sign that things are not right in the Barabosheva household. In addition, Mavra Tarasovna’s son, Amos Panfilych, is a dissolute spendthrift concerned only with finagling cash from “Maminka” in order to continue his profligate lifestyle. Doing so requires that he “play the part” of the enterprising businessman. Mavra Tarasovna, however, is starting to see through this “show”, or perhaps tiring of it.

Finally, there is Amos Panfilych’s daughter, the young Polyxena (*Poliksena*), who embodies not only the riches of youth, beauty, and fertility (as girl of marriageable age), but also, as heir to the estate, the more mundane treasures of the family fortune. She is like the apples in the garden that are now ripe—precious and in need of close supervision. Polyxena is resisting efforts to arrange a marriage for her. Mavra Tarasovna wants to marry her into a good family. Polyxena, however, has fallen in love with the upright Platon Zybkin, an employee. Not only is Platon unsuitable for Polyxena because of his station, he and his mother owe the Baraboshevs money. Polyxena must therefore keep her love for Platon a secret. Only Filitsata, her nanny, knows the secret of Polyxena’s heart.

This is not Filitsata's only secret. She has been employed by the Baraboshev family long enough to have known Mavra Tarasovna in her youth. Before she married someone appropriate to her station in life, Mavra had a relationship with Sila Groznov,⁷⁸ who was then drafted into the army, which in imperial Russia meant an enlistment of twenty years. Filitsata has recently seen Groznov in Moscow. As she explains to Palageia Zybkina, Platon's mother, in the expository first scene,

Filitsata: I have an errand to run: I found a magician.

Zybkina: A magician, really?

Filitsata: Well, maybe not a magician, but he knows a magic word. I'll see if he can't help my Polyxena. He'd been gone from Moscow for ages; when I saw him three days ago my heart skipped. (Act 1, scene 1; Ostrovskii, 266)

Groznov will ultimately be revealed to Mavra Tarasovna and the entire Baraboshev household, effecting a transformation recalling Christ's transfiguration when He appeared in His celestial glory.

Actors were to incorporate the pre-holiday situation into their own individual circumstances, goals, and actions. As a stranger to the culture, I look back now, with the benefit of hindsight and reading, and see that my understanding of "holiday mood" was far from what this concept meant to the director and the other actors. Thus it was difficult at the time for me to use this "manner of action" to color my performance of the conniving Mukhoiarov, another employee of the Baraboshev family and Platon's nemesis.

Ostrovsky proved himself, as usual, an astute man of the theater by not mentioning the holiday by name. First of all, it would have been needlessly redundant, since his audience immediately understood the allusions and the cultural background.

⁷⁸ *Sila* means strength. Groznov derives from the adjective *grozny*—terrible, formidable, or daunting.

More importantly however, the holiday is the *background* for the drama and must remain there. Actors must not play or act out the holiday directly. Doing so would be crude illustration. Instead, as an “image of action” holiday mood means that each character takes aspects of the upcoming celebration—expectation, longing, or anxiety about the promised transformation—and applies them to his or her own situation. Thus pre-holiday mood, one aspect of which could surely have been anticipation, in whatever form appropriate, provided an image or model of action, a metaphor with which to color and shape stage action—the actual doings of the various characters in the play. Every character was thus biding his time one way or another while awaiting his own reward, release, transformation, or what have you, according to his own unique circumstances in the world of the play.

In the case of Mukhoiarov, I needed to consider how the final days of expectation influenced my behavior. What could I have been anticipating? My thought at the time (1995-1997) was that the celebration would have provided the cover I needed for a final, outrageous act of embezzlement from the Baraboshev household. This was fine up to a point, but as I understand now, not sufficient. Holiday promises a clean slate through the liminal equality it brings into people’s lives, which extends on into indicative reality. The play’s denouement indicates this: there is no punishment for wrongdoers, just the understanding that from now on things will be different in the Baraboshev house. As the following excerpt shows, I could have even “stood with my back to the event,” i.e., not seen it coming, thus experiencing my own transformation, being the grateful recipient of human forgiveness.

Mukhoiarov: That means I am reprieved of my position?⁷⁹

Mavra Tarasovna: No, of course not. You had your fun at Platon's expense; now serve under him. And here's your first project. Go draw up an invitation: "Mavra Tarasovna and Amos Panfilych Baraboshev, on the occasion of the betrothal of Polyxena Amosovna Barabosheva with the Distinguished Citizen⁸⁰ Platon Ivanovich Zybkin, request your presence at dinner and a ball." We'll fill in the date ourselves. (Act 4, scene 10; Ostrovskii 319)

Like any good comedy, this one ends with the merriest holiday of all, a wedding:

Venets vsiakomu delu konets (The end of every doing is a wedding wreath), the proverb goes.

Mukhoiarov's anticipation would have been totally different from that of say, Polyxena, waiting for the breaking of her "fast" in the form of a physical union with her beloved Platon. The dissolute Amos Panfilovich's experience of holiday would be one of purely visceral endurance of the fast before the holidays of the Feast of the Transfiguration and Polyxena's wedding reception brought him relief from his craving for drink.

To the actress who played Polyxena, Leta Nikulshina, "holiday spirit" meant, "playing everything on a positive, hopeful note."⁸¹ Over the course of the play, she faces obstacles to her goal of marrying the young Platon Zybkin. Her family plans to marry her to someone else. Her father, after seeing a colonel riding up to the house of a neighbor with an eligible daughter decides to find a general for Polyxena. Mukhoiarov intercepts Platon's love letter to Polyxena, thus exposing their relationship; and the two are caught together in the garden at night without a chaperone. This makes the Baraboshevs decide to call in their loans to Platon and his mother, all the while

⁷⁹ "Znachit, ia svoei dolzhnosti reshen?" Mukhoiarov is apparently a distant cousin of Mrs. Malaprop.

⁸⁰ This was an honorific title for non-nobles in imperial Russia.

⁸¹ From a personal conversation 13 April, 2006.

knowing he cannot pay and will thus be sent to debtor's prison. Rather than shade her reactions to these setbacks in terms of a sense of hardship and tragedy, Nikulshina applied her personal understanding of holiday—optimism, excitement, and the anticipation of something wonderful—to Polyxena's circumstances.

Consider Polyxena's first scene.

Mavra Tarasovna: Enough, my dear, you will do what I say. What I say goes. I give the commands in this house.

Polyxena: Command all you want. Who's stopping you?

Mavra Tarasovna: I do command, my dear. It all goes how I see fit.

Polyxena: Well then command the sun not to shine, make it nighttime.

Mavra Tarasovna: What nonsense! How could I do that when it's the will of God?

Polyxena: There's a lot you cannot do, Grandma; you just have an awfully high opinion of yourself. (Act 1, scene 3; Ostrovskii 267)

The main question facing the actress playing Polyxena in this scene, which ends with Mavra Tarasovna threatening to lock her in her room and Polyxena answering that she will find a way out “into the grave,” is, how can she justify speaking to her grandmother the way she does? Nikulshina found the answer in holiday's power to make people kinder, more forgiving, and attentive to each other. She is counting on the transformation in human hearts that happens to people when they approach a major holiday. Nikulshina also informs me that her Polyxena figured that Mavra Tarasovna would be too preoccupied with preparations for the upcoming holiday to bother much with her granddaughter's back-talk.

The upright Platon's experience with this “image of action” would be unique as well. Just as the pious believer gladly refrains from proscribed food and behavior during a fast—knowing that he will be allowed, indeed even expected, to indulge after church service on the holiday, and that such deprivations are merely the outward

manifestation of a “spiritual fast” observed for the purpose of strengthening one’s faith—Platon endures ridicule, humiliation, hardship, and even a sentencing to debtor’s prison assured that his redemption will surely come.

Miller’s image of action for the production—to use “holiday mood” as the key to approaching one’s role—clearly derived from the play universe and the moral position of the author as found in the play-text. Expectations and anticipation of the impending holiday of Transfiguration gave my colleagues and me a specific direction to the exploration of our roles. Image of action focused the determination of our given conditions: we selected, rather than merely collected, suitable given conditions. While allowing us to make our individual roles unique, Miller’s image of action gave the production structural unity and ideational cohesion, the hallmark of an artistically integrated production. This integrity extended beyond the actors’ work. Our makeup subtly suggested the whimsical folk toys from the town of Dymkovo. In the opening “interlude” the cast danced across the stage singing the humorous ditty “chebotukha” accompanying itself on guitar and numerous “found” instruments in the style of traditional holiday mummers. “We’re bringing you this holiday entertainment, give us your attention,” we seemed to be saying, just like village mummers.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have explored two aspects of performance in Russia: modern theatrical acting and the “pre-theatrical” acting of traditional Russian communities. Juxtaposing these two phenomena and analyzing each in terms of the other, I have charted a cultural continuity of Russian acting through an exploration of three main areas: the importance of “holiday” for Russian performance traditions, the concept of “imagination,” attitudes towards collective action, or ensemble.

Continuity exists in Russian performance between System acting and pre-theatrical acting through the separation of performance from everyday life. While this phenomenon exists in many cultures, its Russian dimension is distinctive and crucial in shaping approaches to performance. I discussed this concept in traditional communities as “the holiday complex,” which allowed and conditioned performance. According to traditional calendars, at certain times of year acting is appropriate, at others it is not. Holidays, according to both yearly and family cycles, are set off from “ordinary time.” Examples are Yuletide and the ritual cycle of the traditional wedding. These special, discrete periods bring unique sets of given conditions. Members of traditional communities, by virtue of their acceptance of traditions, embrace these: behaving, eating, drinking, performing, and even believing differently than “normal.”

In the System, “holiday” and accepting given conditions are no less entangled. Sulerzhitskii, for instance, in word and deed, could be said to have deliberately

conflated the System actor's "permanent creative state," a condition of continuous receptivity to stimuli both internal and external for the purpose of creative interaction with one's stage partners based on the nimble acceptance of sets of given conditions, with a "holiday" attitude, the never-ending creation and realization of holidays and an approach to one's professional existence based on the "holiday" mode.

This skill requires a well-developed imagination. Pre-theatrical and System actors both demonstrate abundant imagination. In Stanislavsky's words, by exercising imagination

The actor is relocated from the place of the casual viewer into the center of events, becoming a *dramatis persona* [lit. an active person] in the imaginary life... The actor becomes spiritually active, and this gives him the right *to be, to exist, and to live* in [the play].
(Venetsianova 64, her italics; quoting *Ezhegodnik*)

The steps the performer takes to achieve this transposition—accepting a set of given conditions about a reality different from his current circumstances and existing in that imaginary universe as himself or as an assumed character—describe not just what the Stanislavskian actor does but the acting process in Russian pre-theater as well.

Performing together encouraged a sense of collective among members of traditional communities, especially within certain age groups. Broadly seen, collective and ensemble are two different ways of looking at the same phenomenon in Russian performance culture, two aspects of an approach to performance where aesthetic and social performances are deeply intertwined in both System acting and pre-theatrical performance.

The relationship between pre-theatrical acting and the System is not a simple progression or evolution. These two aspects of Russian performance culture exist along

the same continuum, reflecting deeper convergences on the level of patterns both culturally distinctive and universally human: attitudes towards holiday and appropriate ways to observe them, the use of performance with an aesthetic aspect to consolidate and regulate members of communities, the establishment of tight collectives to further artistic aims, and the existence of imaginary worlds of given conditions, the importance of which can be artistic, social, or both.

Integrating Pre-Theater into the History of Russian Theater

Traditional performance is typically treated as little more than a prelude in histories of Russian theater. Its connection to modern approaches to acting, specifically the System, has not been considered in the historiography. In Russia, the theater has often appealed to traditional culture, or to their imaginary versions of it, for subject matter: motifs, textures, plots, characters, images, and picturesque details of all sorts.

Russian writers, composers, painters, academics, politicians, revolutionaries, and reactionaries turned to traditional culture for material and inspiration repeatedly during the 19th and 20th centuries. Theater was no different.⁸² Scholarship on Russian theater, however, has, to my knowledge, always dealt only with *images* of traditional culture, as material to be controlled, edited, and reproduced at will. As a *process* for making performance, in terms of technique or method, in this case specifically with regard to acting, traditional culture has never been *acknowledged* as an influence on the high-culture, professional Russian theater.

Part of the problem is historical. There was no professional theatrical tradition—in the sense of proscenium style stage-plays—in Russia before the last third

⁸² Ostrovsky's play *Snegurochka (The Snow Maiden)*—based on traditional folklore—is one example.

of the 17th century. Beginning with the creation of a court theater in 1672, Russia looked to foreign models in all aspects of theatrical creation for inspiration. Native Russians in theater who eventually came to be looked on as worthy of study and imitation were products of the professional theater tradition, a product of Russian high culture, which, in many ways, was the antithesis of traditional culture. Therefore, while the Russian stage traded in images of traditional culture, it could not conceive of any debt it might owe to folk ways of performance in terms of its working methods, specifically its approach to acting. This debt, however, is real and forms an important thread in this study.

The linear trajectory from ritual or social drama to theater, the position that rituals “evolved” over centuries, eventually becoming mere games or shows, is inadequate, and not just because certain intermediate degrees in the process of acting exist in pre-theatrical performance. Aspects of the social dimension of performance are also present in the System, especially its pedagogical dimension, what Russians would call the actor’s *vospitanie*, not just education but training, up-bringing, shaping a person according to the standards of the culture. I explored the connection between the social functions of pre-theatrical performance and the way the System is taught to beginning actors, especially with regard to the formation of the System as an approach to actor training under Stanislavsky and in its first “testing ground,” the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theater led by Leopol’d Sulerzhitskii. Fostering a sense of the collective was important in establishing qualities of ensemble acting in the First Studio and has ever since been a pedagogical goal of the first priority in Russian actor training.

Reevaluating Approaches to Traditional Performance

The integration of pre-theater into Russian theater history through noting similarities in the actor's process between traditional and proscenium-style performances prompts a reevaluation of the methods used to consider traditional performance, the questions asked about it, and the answers proposed. An example of the benefits of a deeper understanding of the pre-theatrical actor's process based on Stanislavsky's System is the shift made possible by this approach away from a primary focus on the material elements of performance to a perspective where props and costumes are returned to their rightful place of playing a supporting role to the actor.

The material elements of performance attract scholars because they are tactile and durable while acting is ghostly and ephemeral. Material elements form a convenient and accessible common language for ethnographers and informants, neither of which is typically able to engage in a discourse about the actor's inner process. Discussing the choice of material elements of production—what actors wore and used for props: straw, worn-out bast shoes, tools, vegetation (in the case of spring-summer period performances)—seems also to have been dictated by the ritual or magical schemes, such as the model proposed by Vladimir Propp in *Russkie agrarnye prazdniki* (*Russian Agricultural Holidays*), invented by scholars to explain their data.

These abstract models of cultural processes, however, denied performers agency. Accordingly, straw was used by traditional performers not because it made an interesting (scary, comical) costume but because its presence supports notions of an agricultural cult. Tow (raw flax fibers), for example, was not chosen because of particular scenic properties (it burns quickly), or even because this material was

ubiquitous in the peasant dwelling during winter, but because it fit into ideas about the pagan worship of yearly vegetative renewal or an ancient cult of labor.

An example of the typical over-emphasis on the material accoutrements of traditional performance is Liudmila Tul'tseva's description of Shrovetide mumming with a "horse." The technology used to create the animal—two mummers, a head of straw on a stick, and a framework covered by a piece of coarse fabric—was typical for many local performance traditions. Tul'tseva's conclusions about this practice include "ideas of fertility" and the connection of mummary to agricultural magic (90).

Following Propp, Tul'tseva bases her argument on the non-holiday use of the piece of coarse fabric: the object's primary designation. This *torpishche* or *vospishche* was a piece of rough cloth spread over the threshing floor when grain was being dried and also used to cover carts loaded with grain (90). Since the cloth was used both for grain and as part of the mummers' costume, Tul'tseva concludes that the purpose of the horse skit was to favorably influence the next harvest.

This conclusion is obvious to someone wishing to find "meaning" in performance. If your goal is to find meaning, you probably will. Without this overwhelming need to find meaning, however, things appear differently. Consider the performer's perspective. Here the folklorist or the theater scholar can put himself into the given conditions of the pre-theatrical actor. "What if I lived in a traditional agricultural community, a village in Riazan' province, for example, and my friend and I wanted to dress up as a horse to have some laughs at Yuletide or Shrovetide?"

Tul'tseva arrives at her conclusion by decoding the product instead of entering the process. In acting terms, she "plays" the end result rather than thinking like a

performer. According to the System, the actor should not play the end result but rather “stand with his back to the event.” Applying this principle to the initial ethnographic data at Tul’tseva’s disposal would result in the following “inner monologue”:

My friend and I need a horse costume. The head can be made of straw quickly, easily, and cheaply. What can we use to cover the two of us while the one in front sticks out the head? We need a large piece of cloth. There’s one out on the threshing floor. No one will need it until harvest time, many months from now.

For Tul’tseva, the *torpishche* used to complete the mummers’ “horse” brings the baggage of grain, and therefore fertility, from the everyday world with it into the holiday world. There is no reason why it should do this other than it fits into Tul’tseva’s *a priori* conclusions about the “meaning” of this performance.

The Nature of Innovation in Performance and Reception

According to Tul’tseva’s line of thinking, decisions about materials and their use were dictated entirely by “magical belief systems” which “belonged” to the local tradition, and thus to no one in particular. Denied of agency in the creation and adaptation of performance, no person or collective was responsible for making specific choices for a performance since these decisions had already been made by “tradition.” With no decisions to make, there was no reason to inquire about how they were made and under what circumstances. With regard to the individuals and collectives responsible for its creation and innovation, traditional performance in Russia, unlike historical theater, is mute. This silence does not mean that traditional performance was not the work of people with a talent for theatrical expression. To see only the preservation or adaptation of systems of belief and practice in pre-theater is to deny the contribution of creative individuals in traditional culture.

Who such individuals were and when they lived cannot be known. But we can be sure that every innovation made in a performance tradition was the work of a specific individual or collective motivated as much, or more, by considerations of theatrical effect and expressiveness, than by a concern for ideology and the preservation of accepted beliefs and practices. Innovations accepted by a traditional culture and incorporated into it were those which found resonance within the existing parameters of that culture, or those which could be incorporated without causing too much damage to the existing fabric of belief and practice. These mechanisms of incorporation are fascinating and important, but ultimately subsequent to the primary act of theatrical creation. Therefore, an understanding of the role of the actor in pre-theater must focus on the mechanism of creation: the genesis, selection, testing, evaluation, and judgment of scenic techniques and methods.

In order for performance traditions to survive and develop in traditional communities, those individuals who were most daring and creative as actors, skit writers, and directors needed “amnesty” from normative restrictions on behavior. The holiday complex, by temporarily suspending indicative reality and through its collective nature, supplied this amnesty. Holiday participation in traditional communities was catholic. Exceptions were only those individuals who deviated from normative age and gender roles, such as old maids. Within a community, equal participation was the rule for specific age and gender sub-sets. The only difference involved degree: the individual known in the community as an especially zealous holiday reveler versus the participant undistinguished by any drive to excel in performance, i.e., to show off.⁸³ There was a certain degree of latitude in this respect for men. For young women the

⁸³ See Morozov and Sleptsova on “*Balagurstvo i skomorshestvo*” (2004, 67-68).

range and degree of participation was typically much narrower. Girls had to participate, for example, in Yuletide revelries because tradition expected it, because this was a large part of the matchmaking process in traditional communities, and because most if not all aspects of it were enjoyable. Participation in specific, often much less pleasant, performance situations such as mumming skits involving violence, were more palatable because all unmarried young women of a certain age at a party were expected, if not forced, to take part. Thus everyone in a specific group was equally implicated in the behavior that under normal, indicative circumstances and in the case of a performance by a single individual would be highly censurable.

Another way in which holiday allowed for innovation in performance was by rehabilitating and reincorporating the performer back into indicative reality at the close of the holiday period. An example is the practice of ritual ablution at Epiphany. The “sin” of masking was redeemed by submersion in the “Jordan.” Masking must be understood not only as simply wearing a mask but also the behavior made possible by the mask. Thus everyone could participate because everyone could transition safely from holiday mode back to the everyday with no permanent consequences.

Thus holiday sensibility has ways of ensuring that at least some of its innovations in performance are accepted and transmitted across generations, but the mechanism for it relies upon the community as a whole. In other words, performative creativity is made acceptable in the holiday context by being the function of a group, rather than individuals. This, along with guaranteed redemption at the end of a period governed by subjective reality, ensured that individual performer-innovators were not

unduly censured in indicative reality to the point where their everyday functioning in the community became compromised.

While we do not know by whom, where, and when they were made, identifying these innovations is easy: they are nothing less than every aspect of performance culture, which, when observed, appear as behaviors recreated faithfully thousands of times over. For example, the fur-lined winter coat turned inside-out is ubiquitous in Russian mummery. The decision to turn a coat inside out in order to better imitate an animal for one's audience and to enhance one's own ability to identify with the given non-human character-image was first made by a specific individual at a specific time. Perhaps the experiment was conducted with equal success countless other times in other locations. Nonetheless, the origin of this behavior was a *theatrical* response to a problem solved intuitively by an individual and then accepted by his community.

Perhaps wearing the fur-lined coat inside-out was meant to replace a simple animal skin that had been worn previously, thus recreating not the animal itself, but the practice of performing an animal with a skin as a costume. Even so, putting on the coat to replace the skin represents an innovation, rather than a continuation of tradition, just as the original decision to dress oneself in a skin and *become* that animal was at some point an innovation in performance culture.

Final Thoughts

My hope for these pages is that scholars of Russian traditional culture and theater studies might both reflect on the convergences I have indicated between pre-theater and the System. While tradition was certainly important and determining exactly when and how “innovations” occurred is often impossible, traditional culture,

as its performance demonstrates, was constantly changing. Individual performers were ultimately responsible for generating these changes. Applying Stanislavsky's System to pre-theater provides a useful theoretical model for mapping a comprehensive description of an actor's process onto certain aspects of performance in traditional communities. This model privileges the role of individual creation as a key factor in the dynamic process of challenging and reinforcing cultural continuity. As such, this study offers an alternative to schemas in which impersonal social and cultural processes predominate. For the theater scholar, my research represents both an alternative to "evolutionary" accounts of Russian theater history and a consideration of the fundamental cultural roots of the System, those aspects of actor training and approaches to embodied performance which transcend not only 20th century acting theory but all of Russian theater as a national variant of the European stage-play tradition.

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