'Stanislavski Century'

There's madness in his Method

by Lana Murawiec

From Oct. 29 to Nov. 6, 1988, hundreds of people came to Paris to participate in a conference led by 50 of the world's most influential actors, directors, and drama historians. Representatives of the theater world from nearly every Warsaw Pact country, the United States, France, West Germany, Italy, Sweden, Brazil, Argentina, Japan, and the People's Republic of China paid tribute to a man commonly recognized as having most shaped the 20th century entertainment history. The man, Constantin Sergeyevich Alexeyev, known as Stanislavski, was born in Moscow in 1863 and died on good terms with Stalin in 1938.

They called it the "Stanislavski Century"—a symposium with masters of his famous "Method." The American masters of the so-called "Method" or "System" have directly inspired the careers of Hollywood's top draws such as Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe, Jane Fonda, and Dustin Hoffmann. Director Sidney Pollack, whose film *Out of Africa* received seven Oscars, was a participant in a panel including actresses Ellen Burstyn (*The Exorcist*) and Susan Strasberg.

"The master's methods" are a most successful tool to deprive Judeo-Christian culture of its ability to understand its great classical dramatic tradition. Stanislavski is not a harmless purveyor of tricks to help expand the poor actor's imagination, as he is sometimes misunderstood. He deliberately seeks to destroy what Shakespeare has described in *Hamlet* as "that God-like reason." He explicitly wants to deny the audience and the actor their intellectual ability to grasp ideas, in favor of provoking the irrational "unconscious" of the psyche.

Throwing out the text in drama

In his book *An Actor Prepares,* Stanislavski explains that the actor should never communicate ideas to the audience. He should experience instead, "solitude in public" and provoke the same feeling in the audience. For example, when an actor speaks Hamlet's famous soliloquy, "To be or not to be," Stanislavski says: "It is not his sole purpose to render the lines so that they shall be understood." It is only necessary that "the spectators feel his own inner relationship to what he is saying." Stanislavski and his co-director Gordon Craig toyed with the idea of eliminating much of the text in their famous "landmark" production of *Hamlet* in 1911. They finally settled on simply adding atonal music to the play to enhance its "mystical" aspects. In another book, *Creating a Role,* Stanislavski writes that the "essence of art and the main source of creativeness are hidden deep in man's soul . . . in the realm of our inaccessible superconsciousness, our mysterious 'I.' "

The seeds planted by Stanislawski's method have unfortunately borne fruit in Hollywood, where the film and television industry thrives on using quick, brutal psychological images to manipulate viewers.

"Stalin, Stanislavski and Political Power" was the title of one conference panel during which top Soviet cultural officials stood on their heads to clean up the "pro-Stalinist" image of Stanislavski in order to revive their hero in both East and West. L. Kheifetz, Director of the Theater of the Red Army, was displeased that Russians revere the great Russian author Aleksandr Pushkin more than Stanislavski. He also explained, using a flow of religious images, that Stanislavsky has been used as an "icon" but without the spiritual content that must be restored. He equated the idea of going back to Stanislavski to bringing the "soul" to a "state of genuflection and prayer."

What effect would a revival of Stanislavski have now from the standpoint of the Soviet leadership? Firstly, the West would be further culturally weakened from the standpoint discussed above. Secondly, the myth of *glasnost* and openness under Gorbachov would be advanced as the massive old ties of Stanislavski all over the world were re-opened. This would open further possibilities for Soviet penetration and subversion in the West. Thirdly, in the Soviet Union and Eastern countries themselves, food shortages are creating the conditions for rebellion. The Russian leadership has no plans to solve these problems with less suffering, food, and freedom. Therefore, cultural warfare is called for—a return to a world where an irrational unconscious reigns to explain suffering.

This ideology in Russia is as old as the steppes. It is particularly enunciated in the pseudo-religious doctrine of a centuries-old sect in Russia called the "Old Believers." The milieu of the textile trade in Moscow in which Stanislavski grew up was well known for its "Old Believer" adherence. The sect rejected all Westernization of Russia in favor of its domination by an unchangable, unknowable, tyrannical force expressed as God or the Czar. Today it could be called the KGB. In fact, a pseudo-religious revival in Russia of this type has been taking place all this year as the Russian Orthodox Church celebrated the millennium of Christianity in Russia with no problem under a "Communist" regime. No wonder the director of the theater of Mother Russia's soldiers called for embarking on the pathway of a "genuflectory attitude" and to have a "non-self-interested" attitude to better understand Stanislavski and find his "pathway." The best thing we in the West could do for Russia would be to help it reject this cultural monster.