

**Slava Polunin, Natalia Kazmina**  
**A Monologue of the Clown, or A Pie of Ten Layers**

**Translated from Russian by Julie Delvaux (Julia Shuvalova).**

**Context**

*Having left for London from Leningrad, he was out of the Russian cultural context for nearly ten years. Once back, he smashed our straight rows and, delivering chaos to the sober landscape of the theatrical Olympus, he opened our eyes on ourselves. After his tender “sNow Show”, after his street theatre performances during the Theatrical Olympics it became clear – we had a lack of him. We had a lack of this man-clown and a festival-man. We laughed and were not afraid to see, how constrained and set apart, false and envious, mean and timid we were. We realized, how difficult it could be to open your heart to a spectator, or a reader, or a friend, or even to the one you love. Some have a fear that people will not understand them, others are afraid they will be mocked, and some just have nothing to say. Yet he fears nothing. He walks into the crowd and cuts it through, like a breakwater. And what is important, he does not dissolve in the crowd. “I have made an attempt to bring to Moscow everything that had driven me mad earlier”, - he said at the press conference. – “I wanted to shift your appreciation of the theatre to a different path. I wanted to broaden your horizon”. You bet he did! We saw that the clownery, these fantastic mimes, rope- and stilt-walkers, people in masks, the buffoons and street musicians are all a completely forgotten part of our culture. It is a lost joy that Polunin wants to revive. He feels dull when enjoying alone.*

**Clown**

Clown is the most spontaneous creature on Earth. When you start restraining his freedom, he loses himself and whimpers like a child. Basically, it means that you offended him deeply. Clowns are very special, and they need a special treatment. Like the lunatics or, I don’t know, like the drunkards or dogs.

It’s not merely that you see the one like yourself. You sense him, through the means of perception, through certain external moves, the way of life... All of this is for him only, but absolutely useless for the rest of people. At a glance you notice how unusual he is. Like, when you offer him a seat, he answers: “I will lie down here”. His answer is inadequate, but that is not because he wants to show off, rather it is his normal condition, the only one in which he feels happy. I always use my son as an example. I tell him: “Vanya, bring me a teapot”. Vanya lies on the floor, rolls to the kitchen and comes back with the pot on his head. This is his normal enjoyment of the game. To live as usual would be dull and uninteresting, he feels the emptiness of this life. All his being fights against everyday occurrence, routine, and he seeks the festival and the game.

Freedom is everything to the clown. The only thing I cannot stand is when my freedom is restrained. I cannot imagine the situation when I have no freedom of choice. Generally, I might never need it. But, when signing a contract, I do never agree not to be free, and I always ask to cross this clause out. I am annoyed with the very fact that somebody dictates me something. This is the reason, by the way, why the majority of clowns take to drinking, being unable to regulate their free zone in the society. The clown cannot stand against the violence, just like a child. You swaddle him, yet he is screaming,

bastard. He wants to run to THAT bench, he wants to push his head into THAT tube, for the life of you. The child and the clown are quite alike.

The nature of talent is important for the clown, too, but not as much as freedom. When I was creating my troupe for the Licedei (Pagliazzi) theatre, my criterion for the actors was “an electricity-man”. I found some five like this. But there were others – gracious, languid, and tender. Like Robert Gorodetsky, for instance. He has no energy, no aggression. Instead there is depth, subtlety in him, he and Vertinsky are soulmates. Apparently, it is possible not only within the society. There are periods in history that create conditions for the emergence of such clowns. If there were a normal cabaret atmosphere in Russia, we would get a score of perfect melancholic, poetic, metaphysical clowns. But in the revolutionary vortex and cataclysms only the leaders and monsters can survive.

The biggest question for the clown is his mask; sometimes you search for it all your life. You try different ways, different varieties: once you find a piece of make-up, next time – a piece of costume, then – a psychological detail, the rhythm, the walk. Doing that, you can go back to different things. But first of all you’ve got to ‘catch’ yourself.

There are lots of masks nowadays. Life became diverse, a traditional duo-typical system, to which everyone was used, has disappeared. There are no Red Clown and White Clown, Harlequin and Pierrot, no city fop and country bumpkin, no Quick and Slow or Witty and Silly Clowns, etc. As soon as the archetype of social life has broken down, so did the type of relationship between the clowns and the audience.

Today’s clowns, as before, are reflecting the archetypes of our life, and mould their own system. My idea of choice of the clowns for the Theatre Olympics was to recreate the image of the 20th century through their masks. I chose the anarchist, extremist, philosopher, poet, absurdist and metaphysician, - this, I believe, was an ideal choice. The French Dechamp is a true Kharms!

And the Italian Bassi is a fantastic extremist. For nine days I was talking him off an idea to explode a cask of shit at the Duma! That was a real problem to me, for I knew, if it happened, there would be no festivals for me in future. Yet for him it was natural. “The world is a gigantic Coliseum”, he thought, “and I must make people listen to me. But to do so, I need to hear the world: what are its interests, what is topical for it. What is the clown for? – To give joy to people. And what will give more joy to people than if I explode a cask of shit at the Duma?” He is a very logical man, this Leo.

But generally, all clowns are philosophers, in the end.

## **Tradition**

I feel pity for the good audience that it denies the clownery. Historically, there is a great and magic treasure in this world, and that is the clown. For why, then, do we see a figure or a picture of a clown in almost every house? His image is nearly in every book, and almost every poet has a poem about the clown, but why? It means that there is something magical, something eternal in the clownery. I personally belong to such a powerful tradition that I can actually build upon this base whatever I want. But at the same time I feel a perpetual resistance. I feel it in America, in England, everywhere. They say: “Oh, a clown? Then it is for an infant matinee or a birthday party”. Or: “My, the clownery?! Are you mad? Oh, and you even apply make-up... It’s dull and old-fashioned”. All this is because we haven’t seen the real clowns for ages, since the silent films. The tradition of clownery is very sophisticated. The number of true things is fantastically small. Perhaps, in Russia there are no such

things at all. There were good guys – The Southern Birds, The Unison, The Tales of the East, The Mimicrini, and The Masks-show. Because they were not allowed to grow stronger and stand on their own feet, because of the money situation, all of them shook loose: some broke down, some emigrated, some went for big money and now have a fear to leave this path. So, there were people, but no conditions.

People always make traditions. But perhaps, in order to live long, tradition must die, from time to time? Once *commedia del arte* had been all but buried in the sand, then a sudden ‘oops’ – and there came English music hall, Grimaldi circus, then ‘hap’ – all had disappeared again, ‘bang’ – there came French fairs, the pantomimes of the well-known Deburot, the one as whom Jean-Louis Barreau starred in *Les Enfants du Paradis*. Later it disappeared as well. Then it was revived in the silent cinema. The silent cinema for me is the top of the top of clownery. There was no decent clown who would not leave the stage for the silent film. Like in the vortex, everyone was absorbed by it. But the sound came and crossed out all of them. Thus, after a long period tradition had come to grief again. Two or three comedians did survive, and Chaplin was the greatest among them. Almost everything I know I took from the silent cinema. If one day people realized what the silent cinema had been in the art history, and began studying it, they would discover my main secret. Everything I own has been taken from there: bits of pieces, of personages, of atmosphere... I have a huge collection of silent films, assorted by periods, by genres and by personalities. I am a very reasonable man: I do not settle down till I dig to the core. At first, I was collecting Chaplin’s films. Having all 92 films, I began watching them a-new and eliminating them. Then I arranged everything that could be useful for those interested in clownery. Now they may not watch all Chaplin, for I have assorted the finest of him: the best, the typical, the tricky, the tragic. Of all 120 films of Oliver Hardy I’ve only chosen 16. If one is interested in Hardy, I can demonstrate all his aesthetic principles upon the precise examples. I have all de Funes, more than 40 films. Of those, I have only chosen the tricks and arranged them in 3 hours of killing laughter. I know all these tricks by heart. Same for my son Vanya. It is like the ABC, everyone should know it.

However, everyone should know what the Grimaldi circus, the Deburot’s pantomime, the English music hall, *commedia del arte*, and the psychological theatre were. Not forgetting, as well, about the Eastern theatre, i.e. Chinese, Indian, Japanese, No, Kabuki, Buto theatrical traditions, in which I have had a great interest and which I have studied. And yet even that’s not the end. Many different things blended in me. I brought these goods from everywhere, from all the attics where they were buried in the dust, useless. I brought them from all types of theatre that as yet managed to preserve the decent state. My way in art is the way of studying the avant-garde, of looking for the new expression, for the unexpected form, accompanied by the study of folk tradition, of all that had been before us.

Of course, my term for it – ‘clownery’ – is conditional. In fact, my occupation is the world of plastics, of eccentricity, of abnormal behaviour. Meanwhile, a clown, a mime is a man of abnormal behaviour. He behaves conditionally, and by means of this he changes the style of real life, he makes something different of it. Any plastic art at its top must necessarily be a fantastic and strange stylization, unlike any traditional dramatic theatre.

## Theatre

Sometimes they ask me, if I would like to talk on stage. It’s too late now. At one time I realized that life possesses some fascinating mysteries that you cannot express in words. There is much more I can say without words. There are plenty of artists besides me whose inspiration is Gogol, and they are in

perfect command of these techniques. Why should I concur with them when I can embrace that part of life which is no less impressive and which will remain unknown without me?

Generally speaking, I do not like modern dramatic theatre, there is little joy I get from it. That's why I try to visit it as seldom as possible. That kind of acting does not possess you, it doesn't flow over the footlights. It tickles, yeah, but it doesn't inspire. I wonder why, but it seems the modern drama theatre still walks on one leg. For some reason Meyerhold, Tairov, Evreinov, Radlov, the stage reformers of the 20s, had so quickly realized those magnificent opportunities of plastic art and began using them. Meanwhile, today's directors just spit on it.

At the Theatre Olympics I haven't seen a lot, due to a lack of time. But there were some things that I liked very much. The Zingaro's Horse Circus, e.g. It wasn't the best performance of Bartabas, its director, but generally he is a great horse trainer, and his understanding of horses is fantastic. The Streller's *Harlequin* is a great play, and I liked it although I've seen it before. The *Dreamplay* by Wilson is an example of visual performance that I love to bits. Sure, maybe, Wilson is a director for directors. Yeah, sometimes he is boring, dull, but he went so far that it inspires. I learn a lot from his performances: careful attention to the light, the minutiae, the change of colours, the objects' rhythm... His artistic world for me is a feast of ideas.

May one say that modern dramatic theatre is surviving a crisis? I know not. It only seems to me that the dramatic theatre forgot where it had begun. The stage directors have desperately crippled upwards and eventually lost their base. They were possessed with the analysis of a synchrophasotron, but they forgot about the theatrical spirit. I would love to try and turn everything back to the beginning, where the magic of theatre and the aesthetics of it were the one, where the theatrical ritual conjoined us to the Space, to Time, to our destiny, to our contemporaries and predecessors. The moment of truth had importance not as itself, but as a touch to Infinity. What about the dramatic theatre then? – It has to wait for a caravan that walks behind. It is a wrong situation when the audience doesn't understand the language of director. This language must be readable, at least in some respect. A spectator comes to the theatre, where he is to undertake a certain voyage during the play. The task of the director is to prepare him and to give him all he needs for this trip: a bag, a stick, and details of where to go. And only after that can the director take the spectator to the woods, saying: "You've got to search for it somewhere there". And then he'll be doing it on his own. But he won't do so otherwise; instead he'll let the grass grow under his feet.

## Carnival

Carnival is an ideal formula of existence when everything is a theatrical performance and life is a festive occasion. All my performances are easy to arrange by the level of carnival in blood. I love a lot this type of art that I consider unjustly forgotten. It is a powerful tradition. It could provide immense nourishment to the clownery, but nobody is interested in it. I was horrified when I found it out, and jerked to it. Now I have hundreds of books on carnival, I know all about it. Once I've come through a plenty of manipulations to pay a fee to represent Russia at the world's carnival fund to attend one of their meetings. I wasn't invited, of course. But when I came to the banquet of this association wearing sandals and shorts, they did not let me in. They didn't let me attend the carnival tie-less! It proved symptomatic to me: modern carnival tradition came to its end. That association became senseless to me. They make money on keeping their trousers on the waist. It was then that I began studying the real roots of carnival and started looking for those who've done the same. I found Misha Shemyakin, his carnival sketches; I came to him and persuaded to work on the play together, basically, to revive the

carnival. (Their play *Il Diabolo* about Devil and Fool is almost finished. Polunin showed it in Holland and Poland. Perhaps, one day it'll reach Russia. – N.K.).

Today there is no place on Earth where you would see a real carnival. Save for one, that is Trinidad and Tobago, a small island not far from Cuba. The world-known artists come there, they create unbelievable costumes, they realise mad projects and just spend their time away from the rest of the world. My attendance of the Venetian carnival was hazardous; I came there together with Misha who twice was an artist-general of it. February at the Venetian carnival is his favorite time in life. At last he finds himself in that very place where he had to be born to live, in the 17th century. Granted, by his own initiative, he erected a statue of Casanova in Venice. It was supposed to stay there for a limited time, but it just made the place look complete, and I am sure, there is no way of getting rid of it now. Everyone has a feeling that it has been there all the time. It is the main 'course' of the carnival: people barge there to session, to take photos. Unfortunately, Shemyakin's presence as an artist-general did barely affect the carnival. It was impossible to push it anywhere, whatever he did. The Italians are very stingy. Finally Misha said: "Fine, damn it! I'll find money myself. How much? 5 million? Okay!" He got in touch with different companies, showed them his sketches and books, they made him an order for advertisement 'with these your little devils' and paid him 5 millions. He gave money to the Italians: "There are your five millions, please, spend them on the carnival". – "No", the Italians answered, "we have 5 millions ourselves". Then, for God's sake, why didn't you change anything in your carnival; and instead your 5 millions had come to grief? The Italians and Russians are but all the same! Nobody has money, but everyone is absolutely happy.

Of course, the Venetian carnival, tender, aesthetic and showing-off as it is, is the remains of the late splendour. The laces turn to ashes, there is no flame, but mere sparks. It is dying, but this death is so beautiful! There are people who visit the carnival every year; they're waiting for the day when they wear their costumes on which they've probably spent their last penny. It's a star hour for them. They walk out into the square, and other people, star-eyed, give them a loud applause. There you've got a feeling of a life's festivity, of a second reality. There's such architecture all around, and nobody will throw a sidelong glance on you. The audience is colossal, all staring! It's running for a marvel, you do "Ops!" and it says: "WOW ?!" Anywhere in Europe for your 'Ops' you'd get: "What ?! You want a punch in the mouth?" Meanwhile, this is a perfect place for provocation. Here I love playing up with usual things. I observe the environment, take a notice of the system and bring it to the top. People in the café make the perfect pit. Once I took a notice of pigeons, bought a pocket-full of seeds and began throwing them around. All Venetian pigeons rushed to San-Marco. Hell! People covered their heads, the pigeons hustled and bustled, tables fell over. The waiters applauded me. The carnival in Venice is a good place to try your ideas. You have a character, you dress him up and walk about with him for hours: there's always the audience, always joy, irresponsible atmosphere... Irresponsibility is a very important word for the theatre.

## **From A to Z**

There's no relationship between what I have studied "officially" and what I am doing now. At first I was a student of the Economic Institute, then of the Culture Institute, a faculty of the Mass Show. But in fact I studied in the library, from 9 am till the closing hour, for 7 years, including a visit to the army. The rector, when giving me the graduate diploma, said: "The fact that Polunin has graduated from our institute proves that there are no eternal students". I had no particular choice for reading; I read everything as a mean of self-education. I especially loved the Silver Age newspaper files. In the army I fell for Dostoevsky. He is a top of the top for me, too. I was thinking: "You feel bad? Then you'll feel even worse". *Notes from the Underground* was my table-book. With Dostoevsky one manages to keep

aloof of their occupation, to observe a process from the side, - this being the only way of life in our country till this very day. Granted, after Dostoevsky I compiled a list of other 100 books I had to read, but he is fundamental for me. Today I have a huge library that is my favorite thing and my treasure. I am like a stingy knight, trembling at it, and I can't wait to please myself with my favorite book or a book I haven't yet read. In fact, a pleasure of reading is the biggest in my life. I am like this only because at the beginning I got stuffed and gained such a pleasure of digesting what I have read.

As for my profession, here I started with the naïve things, a mere eccentric pantomime. My ideal was an early Chaplin. I took eccentricity very seriously and studied a theory of trick. When Buster Keaton worked at the film studio, he carried two suitcases of tricks with him – two actual suitcases with files of enlisted tricks, a real collection. I did the same. I even elaborated a theory: if a turn consists of 25 tricks, it can be considered classical. I worked at the rhythm, at the techniques; I elaborated a whole eccentric scale. But when I reached the top, I lost the interest: quantity didn't provide quality. I could make people roll in the aisles, it didn't take any effort, but I suddenly understood: laughter is not so important. I began doing only 5 tricks instead of 25, so the techniques did not go against the rhythm of a character's development. I concentrated on the personage, on his condition and thoughts. Thus eccentricity changed to poetical process. At this point I staged my favorite performance *The Dreamers* – about children at play. They didn't play war; rather, they played romantic games: they went into space, they traveled by sea to the unknown lands, they told fairy tales to each other, they examined insects. A child is one of the symbols of clownery. He has different moods and conditions. At play he is reactive, and when talking to the adults, he's trying to imitate them. But I chose a condition of exploring the life, as the one I prefer the most. By the way, when the child is exploring something, he is very slow and careful with details. My guys were doing all this so ardently, so freely, with such a gift! The dynamics of the play was great, and the performance was very beautiful. On the example of a child we demonstrated that fantasy on its own is good, and by its means the child is creating his world. That was my good-bye to eccentricity and hello to the next stage.

I needed a perpetual change. It took me 2 or 3 years to penetrate one tendency in the art of theatre from the bottom to the top, to consider its aesthetic opportunities, to provide a creative potential. But as soon as I've reached the top and gained success, I felt bored. Once the audience has accepted you and showed you its preference, you run out of you "energy drink". I personally experienced the decay. So, I didn't leave one performance for another, but rather I went from one aesthetic system to the next. I went from eccentricity to lyrics, from simple action to meditation; afterwards I began getting into contact with the audience. It seemed to me that the classical pantomime of Marcel Marceau, for instance, was too far away from the audience. It was as if he said: "Look at me and follow me, I am your ideal. Keep your mouths wide open and admit that there is something magical in this life, like, say, me, a boneless man". That was in the 70s, the era of aesthetism. Then another borderline manifested itself because aesthetism did not satisfy the audience anymore. People began taking it offensively: "You all are the stars, and we're but nothing and nowhere?" I felt that pantomime is losing its spectators, they have a lack of something. And against the usual clownery I began to bring down the number of tricks, I hid my skill, the techniques in general, so that nobody at all would see that I was capable to do something. That cut down the distance between the audience and me. If the former believes that one of it can go on stage and do the same thing as you, it means you became the next best thing for them, not a great actor. And if you're the next best thing, the type of relationship changes immediately. At that time I had a turn *Ni-iz-ja-a!* (*No-o-o-o!*). I didn't demonstrate any professional skills there at all. A turn *The Blue Canaries* came to be a red cloth for the bull: four clowns are marking time – and that's it. One TV-maker told us: "Take this nonsense with you and keep it for a good memory". And he wasn't wrong: none of us was doing a double somersault, nobody could actually sing, the harmonies were paper-made. What is the trick then?

The example of the circus helped me to understand this trick. The circus began to lose its audience when it lost poetical emotion and simplicity. It reached unbelievable technical quality – the entire world said ‘Oh!’ when they saw a somersault on the stilts through a double ring. But what’s next? There was no simplicity, like in Picasso’s *A Girl on the Ball*. There was no tenderness and naivety, like in Fellini’s films. The Skill reached the top, but what about the Soul? And I understood that nobody needed my experiments with a boneless body. At first I demanded my guys to be straight, slim, brawny, to do yoga, ballet dancing. But later it became clear that good-looking people do not fulfill their task; they rather broaden the precipice between the audience and us. We were in deep shit. And it was then that I forgot any former principles and began to take in the troupe the one-eyed, the cross-eyed, the ugly, the strange, the bold, the paunchy, as long as they brought something nice to the performance. I’m joking, of course. Different to it, what was I like myself? Oh, how I was dreaming to make an ‘aesthetic regularity’ of myself! But then I thought: why the hell do I need it? And I stopped caring about it. I was arching my back, and my wife hit me on it, but eventually she gave up, and this hump became a part of my personage. A count-off point had changed; I began paying more attention to the inward, not the outward. And I said to everyone: “I prohibit any professionalism in my theatre. The main things are the eyes, the atmosphere, my pleasure and the involvement of everyone in my pleasure: it is the touch to the people in the first row, - we are all together”. So we began crushing the wall between the stage and the audience, we began clutching people at the hitch. The more hitches are there between them and us, the more successful the performance is, as I thought. Nobody could guess what had happened: “They cannot do a thing, then why do they possess the audience?” Simply the mood became a measure of it all.

We are all in the course of art history, and we cannot forget about what has passed by us and developed into solid categories in the heads of people. If the crowd is moving in one direction, screaming, then, maybe, you should take an opposite direction and keep silence? We need to find the means to be heard and to be noticed, we need to make people want to listen to us. The circus has lost the poetic emotion; I’ve decided to bring it back. It was a resistance to the flood that I thought was heading to the dead-end.

Afterwards there were new visions. At first we performed in small halls, for 100 people. Then we realised that we can hold attention of 10 thousands. That demanded a change in the space for a performance, we needed more freedom. And we went down to the audience, I found interest in the carnival, in a street performance. Suddenly I realised what I had really wanted all my life: I wanted a colourless life to be beautiful and colourful every day. When we went out into the street, we wanted people who were walking towards us to stand still awkwardly, to open their mouths wide, then to drop their bags and to follow us, as if they were charmed. Like in the film *The Jolly Fellows*, if you remember. At first the audience stared, commented, then it began to follow us, to help us. Finally it got used to all this. I was satisfied as I brought it up: it learnt to work on its own.

## **Audience**

English audience was one of my biggest ‘finds’. It takes everything very seriously. Perhaps, if I were occupied with another kind of theatre, it would be an obstacle, because the English are too concentrated, but it’s very good for me, actually. Just as me, they like digging to the truth till the end of time. Their absurdity, nonsense, English humour, ‘Alice in Wonderland’ are on to a good thing for me... They come to the theatre well prepared. The Italians are easy to accept any unexpectedness, any novelty, they agree to any experiment. The English say: “Now, wait, an old bird is not to be caught with the chaff. We will watch it ve-e-ry attentively”. It’s impossible to make the Italians watch something attentively. It usually goes like: “Wait, guys, let me say just one more word!” – “Relax, it’s

fine as it is! Nothing more to say!” While in England there is a ringing silence in the audience. It’s such a pleasant thing for the theatrical performance, you don’t know!

As Grotovsky stated, there is a special exercise for every kind of theatre. Same for national traditions: a special theatre for every nation. For me personally, America is bad. But when I came there with my troupe for the first time and we began running on their heads, an excessively free American spectator quickly understood that he is besieged by the true anarchists, and he cocked them a snook and said: “Now you will see what the real freedom is”. But this game wasn’t interesting to me. It made sense in Russia under Brezhnev; it was my hobbyhorse there. Licedei (Pagliuzzi) was an island of spiritual freedom in the country where there was no freedom at all. That was the reason why the audience supported us. People thought: “At last, there is freedom somewhere, at least in the clownery some do what they want, they crush the aesthetic canons, at least it’s them who get the joy”.

America is not a bad country, it’s just too young. In fact, Americans are like children, they can only understand eccentricity at the moment. When I came there for the second time, accompanied by the Canadian Cirque du Soleil, I already knew that I wouldn’t clutch them on philosophy or poetical emotion. And I decided to conquer them: I went for the techniques, I based my performance on a simple attention to it. I’d make a turn, and while a spectator swallowed a hitch and felt pleased, I’d stop and immerse in thoughts. I’d take a strange thing off the stage, and the spectator began to wonder what it was for. Once I heard the grumble, I’d make next turn. I extended the pauses up to 10 seconds, till the silence became static. It’s a great problem for the Americans – to keep a mind on something that doesn’t move. They do not watch Bergman in America. But fighting with them gave me an immense professional pleasure!

This year I was ‘fighting’ with the French when we had performances at the Casino de Paris. I was looking for a hitch for a long time. Whatever I tried, didn’t work. It was so till I guessed that poetical emotion would be a place of our meeting. Good for me, ‘cause fortnight of my ten weeks tour had already passed. Now I know exactly which countries do need me, and which do not. For example, Spain doesn’t need me. All our attempts to demonstrate tenderness in Barcelona last year failed miserably. They couldn’t understand a thing. The Spanish audience doesn’t forgive if you do not address it personally. Columbia needs me. While in Belgium or in Portugal I am absolutely useless: their society is in such condition that my ideas have no meaning there.

And our Russian audience is just like me. We are so similar. I prefer when comedy and tragedy are together, for me it’s the top of the theatre, and here it is everywhere around you. There is nothing to think up. Who is the favorite character in Russia? The exhausted, the drunk, a fool, a blockhead, an outcast. My personage was an easy-going member of this company. I don’t mean it ironically, it’s true. It’s in our blood – to sympathize with the lost people, with those who didn’t succeed in life. There are not many heroes and victors in Russia. The success of my clownery here based upon the fact that this is the country of anti-heroes. But at one moment I felt that I have nowhere else to go. People loved me, I didn’t have anything to do, I only had to come out to the stage to get applause. It wasn’t just dull – it was scary. There was nothing to overcome. And I left my country. But what is funny – now in Russia there is a nostalgic feeling for what I have done in England and what was absolutely up-to-date there. Nostalgia is one of the most profound emotions in Russia. People need a base to stand on. “We want to get back to what was necessary or even seemed important”, they say. That’s why novelty is impossible here at the moment.



## Method

I seldom come across a question of how to do something. The most important thing is to understand what I want to say. As soon as I understand it, it takes a certain form. Some 10-15 years ago I had to learn how to do it, because I didn't have enough knowledge. 15 years ago you've just got to learn to have a free mind in order to think only of what you want to say, and not how to show it. Now there's no difference for me between 'what to do' and 'how to say'; it turns me on by itself. Of course, I do analyse something, but I try to do it as late as possible. I am even afraid of analysing. Usually your discovery is unexpected, and you wonder: "You don't say, something I was doing, means that and that ?! That had never occurred to me". But when you're trying to do it 'scientifically', you produce carrion.

I read one very beautiful story about Meyerhold. In fact, he gave me everything that has to do with the theatre and directing. For all the techniques I know and use, I'm indebted to him.

His best period for me is the year 1914 when he worked at the studio in Borodinskaya Street; there he was occupied with the essence of the theatre, its magic and ritual based upon *commedia del arte*. That captured joy of play resulted into the story with the Alexandrine theatre and directing of *Don Juan*, which, though, had nothing common with that idea of his. At one time Meyerhold enchanted me, and I began to study the tradition of theatre. So, once I read in his book that the power of art depends upon the length of a rocker arm, which one shoulder is consideration, another is anarchy and freedom. The longer this arm, the more consideration and freedom the artist has at once, the more powerful is then your piece of art. An Artist is the only one who is capable to spread this arm as wide as possible. So, you need to seek harmony but remember: the more you incline to the right, the more you got to stand to the left. It's impossible to take one direction without taking the opposite at the same time. The cleverer you want to be, the sillier you got to appear. You may explore the process, the techniques, but afterwards you got to spit on all this to become free and earnest, natural and impulsive, and not think of how you do this or that. Like, for example, Shalyapin. He was a genius and a fantastic workaholic. He worked at the very minutiae of his part, but sometimes he stopped constraining himself and never knew what would be in the end. He flew into a rage and spread his arm unbelievably. So, the more anarchy, freedom, intuition are there, the better, not forgetting, though, about consideration. Meanwhile, Stanislavsky meant it too.

I often seem to share Stanislavsky's 'apartments' in the sense of a method, especially as far as the Western public is concerned. However, subconsciously I try to avoid his influence. I am more concerned with a 'playing man', which often means a disruption of psychology. My understanding of the nature of play is Meyerhold-like, - it's a performance, a joy, an improvisation, it's like the decorative volutes. I always say to my actors: "Let's cut the psychology down, it precipitates us, it makes our rhythm heavy". And still I feel myself on the way there, regardless. Yet I got acquainted with Stanislavsky through Grotowsky. I found interesting this phenomenon of an artist's fantastic self-sacrifice during the performance that he had already finished calling so by then. There he fell into hysterics, he revealed his subconscious, even some very intimate parts of it. Once I was told about one actor from the Komissarzhevskaya' theatre who had starred as Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich and eventually had gone mad. That was a fine lesson to me: I have realized what physical depth an actor can reach, which is mysterious to everyone else; I have seen that he could wear the shoes of his character and do so till his own end. Once again, this is where one needs intuition and consideration.

I followed Grotowsky to see, whether an actor can perform tragedy, burning himself down and trying his physics. By means of the clownery as the most conditional of arts, I wanted to reveal the real human pain. And eventually I came to Stanislavsky via Grotowsky. I realised that psychology and

clownery can co-exist. Initially I pinned a photo of Chaplin on the wall, the one with a flower, and then I began looking for similar images in the theatre and cinema. I found a photo of Marseille Marceau as Bip, when he watched a butterfly and fell dead. There were many others who had commemorated this moment of unbearable pain. And I understood that even the clownery has some things that were impossible without psychological filling. I even suspect now that this psychological clownery is a sort of national feature of the Slavic culture. I saw it in the works of Junjo Edwards, of Boleslav Polivka, who were those who steeped forward in the clownery, in their time. Most of those who had seen Junjo's performance at the Olympics, only noticed its wild *joie de vivre*, but one can also find it a picture of disruption of a soul, an image of pain. It is reflected in the features, in behaviour. Polivka, with his tender psychological mist, is a pure Stanislavsky. Generally speaking, in the end I saw that I wasn't alone. But I still avoid a bold identification with Stanislavsky's system. An actor must possess a secret; there is no need for a full explanation. The actor must be a magician.

Besides Meyerhold with his depth of understanding, I had a lot of other crushes. I came across Artaud and his book *Theatre and its Double (Le Theatre et son double)*, which had sent me to the magical theatre. Same thing goes for Decroux, a teacher to both Marceau and Barreau. His book gave me a lot, including the idea of minimalism that I appreciate a lot. It happened in the years when nobody talked about minimalism yet. What Decroux said, was generally this: let's get rid of all theatrical garbage, for we know not how to use it, and begin all a-new. We take a naked man onto a bare stage and let him do a step. Later another step will follow. Then we allow him to wear knickers, but at first we got to decide which exactly knickers: of what style, form and colour. Then we let him do one more step and say a letter 'A'. And let him live with this 'A' for a year. We have so much, but we are not keen on using it. This idea of Decroux became basic to me. The stage must be as empty as possible. One should only put something on it when he is absolutely sure in its necessity. Every object must become a symbol. As Eisenstein said, every thing has its life, its secret, character, its soul; our purpose is to reveal it. A chair has its own idea, and if we do not show it, we cannot put the chair on the stage.

In the works of Brecht I came across a parable, another nice thing. The construction of all Brecht's plays is very complicated, but in the end it's a mere parable, and I found it very good. Of course, we cannot reach to the Bible, but it's a fixed idea. All Bible is a story of something simple, like a donkey, a stick, or a road. But generation after generation has been reading it for ages, finding something specifically for itself. Simplicity is as important for the clownery as associations. Symptomatically, Eluard, a Surrealist and an aesthete, wrote: "The last shelter for a complex soul – a simple clownery". Just think about it. If the synopsis of the play is a simple story, like, how one had beaten you with a stick, or how you've fallen over your own shoe, it's easy for everyone to understand. The next question though, is what lies underneath this story, how many layers of sense you have made into it.

What I love about Chaplin is how he managed to touch all social classes with his films. A boy with an ice cream laughs at him. An old woman sympathises with a protagonist who is offended by many. A girl is moved by how touching he is, how deep his love is. Chaplin baked a pie of ten layers and gave everyone a piece. I took it as a law for myself. If we want our work to be understandable, we have to remember about spectators' tastes: some like it salty, and some – sour, and we need to take it all into an account and try to bake a puff pastry. Every single thing must have an infinite meaning. Take an apple as an example: it means seduction for a lover, a home for a worm, taste for a gourmet, or a perfect round form for an artist. Or a maple leaf: mostly it's a symbol of Canada, but for a yardman it's dirt, for a tram-driver it's a danger, and for a child it's a toy. You can find up to 20 or 30 meanings of any object and fill it with innumerable associations. Same thing you need to do with the theatrical space; the level of imagery must be simple and infinite at once. At the Olympics one asked me: "Well, you've made a *Fools' Ship*, and sailed on her somewhere... What did you mean to say?" I said: "I don't know.

It's you who adds the content to an image, not me. I do one half of the way; the second you do yourself". One spectator told me: "Yes, the ship has gone, together with our Russian soul, she crossed the horizon, and a fiery curtain fell behind her. You have showed us the Apocalypse". But it was him who pictured Apocalypse to himself. Another said: "Finally, now you've brought these insanes here, and we're having a festival". Everyone has his own view. We create a certain image, and people find in it whatever is possible, - either what they can find, or what they need at this very moment.

There was a following scene in one of my performances. One man was running around, while another was trying to stop him hitting his head with a case. The first is very quick, the second is slow, it's as if he says: "Wait, sit down, let's share a drink, for what's sake you keep running?" When we performed it in Russia, everyone sympathised the slow. The Americans preferred the quick: "That's a nice dude", they said, "he has such energy, such vigour, and he's doing right". Then one day I tagged a label 'Taxi' on to the quick's head. They have rolled in the aisles with laughter! But the artistic feature disappeared. There was but a simple joke, which everyone forgot soon. Since then I do not use 'Taxi' labels in my performances. The director should not tell everything about an image, but let a spectator finish this phrase with his own words. The spectator gets the biggest joy from his own creative work, not ours. If you provoke his creative force, and then leave him in the moment when he is ready to follow you, then the most interesting thing begins. My biggest joy is to create our fantasies together with the audience.

## Joy

People often ask me, why in the final of my *Snowshow* when people in the audience play with gigantic balloons of all colours, I sit among them, not even taking off my make-up. But I find it very clear. I am enjoying the process. For why did I do all this? I have modeled a situation and am watching now how it works without me being in the midst of it.

I am fond of my performances until I understand them completely. I like when every single person, upon leaving the theatre, tells a different story. Basically, we're only *agents provocateurs*. Our main purpose is to make a spectator create his own world, while a performance is just a pretext to it. When you're contemplating the performance, it's impossible to predict for how long it's going to live. All depends on how long its idea will live in me. At one point you have an awkward feeling that you do not express yourself in this performance, and this feeling may arrive in five years after the first performance, or in fifteen. For example, once I had a performance called *Insects*. It was great, but its energy was so bad, that I've closed it in half-a-year. People left the theatre, depressed, and I was scared.

In the mean time, the *Snowshow* has such a scheme that it survives in any audience, even when it's insensitive, or even if I do not play. The audience is conquered if not by the play's tenderness, or by the very spirit, then by its structure. Its mood varies from tender and discreet to aggressive and openly nasty. The mood depends on the audience. The performance varies, as does your behaviour, depending on the company you join. In one, you silently take a place in the corner, in another you ask for a drink at the threshold. I still do not have enough of this play. I run to the theatre like a lover to a date.

Joy has become the law of my life. I consider a day lost if I did not enjoy it. If I do not get my joy back from the performance, that means something's gone wrong, and I finish with this idea. Each of my performances has a very elaborate system of physical and psychological rhythms. For instance, I know that at the third performance I reach the peak, and the fourth will be a flop. For this reason it's already been 20 years that I have the day-off instead of the fourth performance, and no producer can make me do otherwise. There is no sense to act hard and then at home to cry about it. By the fourth performance

I am physically exhausted, therefore I can't enjoy it and make others enjoy it, too. I've discovered these things by intuition and since then I try to follow them exactly. You need to know yourself, to listen to yourself. You need to learn how to gain an everyday pleasure. And the performance should not be the only, or an absolutely necessary pretext to gain it. To inhabit a new space, to make it a space of your activity can be pleasant as well. Say, you come into an audience hall where you're going to perform. And if there's a lack of light or the ceiling is low, - then make it even lower, search the backstage, and turn a hall into a cellar using old decorations for it. The emotion of the space will be completely different. You just got to guess, where to go.

I gain an immense pleasure from breaking solid aesthetic systems. Each of these breaks holds a gigantic flood of creative activity. There was a case at one festival. We performed a chapiteau, but later we learnt that a railroad station was nearby, the trains passing it every 15 minutes. So, we've changed the plot like it's taking place at the halt. We've created new characters, a switchman waved away with his signal flag, and we had a great pleasure from entering the reality. Or take this example, now in France. The audience likes us, in the end we bow to the spectators, step backwards, the curtains go up. We stepped further and further backwards when I was struck with an idea, and I said: "Listen, lads, do not stop, keep moving back". We moved further back. What's behind? - A door. We opened the door, and found ourselves in the street, on a square covered with the snow, with a lonely streetlight there. And we kept walking, and bowing, although it was absolutely freezing, and we were wearing our costumes. The audience applauding us, not understanding a thing. Then suddenly a taxi appeared. I stopped it, and we all jumped in this taxi and rode away. It was fantastic! What a chance! When you extend a certain topic to the infinity, when you're not afraid of this extension, if you do not lose a moment for it, it produces very beautiful stories. Another story to finish with it. It took place in Anapa. We decided to perform a procession, to awake the resting people. The crowds followed us in this procession. We went to the beach, and so did they. We approached the water, and so did they. We went into the water, - and they stopped. We entered the water till ankle, till waist, till neck... finally, till head. We disappeared. Everyone thought we're going to pop back up. Two minutes passed, three, five minutes - none popped up. They were shocked; they even called for the savers! The trick was that we've hidden the aqualungs in the water. This unexpected, unpredictable break of a usual situation releases a great energy... So, if there is water, you got to sink, nothing to do. Generally, an actor or a director is like a child who plays with his own toys. The difference is that their toys are sometimes bigger.

Many people try to analyse my performances from the point of their plot or character. Well, there is something like that in them. I cling to a different thing, to something you cannot catch by eye or by word, - to atmosphere. I stretch bonds between my personage and each of the spectators. These bonds are my strings. There is no plot, but our relationship. If I feel that I hold the audience, I can create there whatever I want. Sometimes I regret I cannot hold the audience without any plot whatsoever. At times the plot precipitates the performance, but I need it because a part of the audience cannot sink in the flood of conscience, of sensuality, in the rhythm. I might narrow the audience. But in that case I will lose a part of my spectators, while I want all the audience to be mine. I am trying to create my world that would influence a spectator with its harmony, aura, its contagion, and not with a concrete story of a character. When at the Olympics, why did I try to circumscribe the carnival by the frontiers of a cosy place, like The Hermitage Theatre? Firstly, Moscow on the whole is not ready for something like this yet. Secondly, we wanted to control our clown life according to our own laws. And, thirdly, we wanted a spectator to understand upon his own example what the 'unbound theatre' is like, to penetrate this free, natural life. It's not strange that people came to The Hermitage Theatre for the second, for the third time. They did not just attend a performance; they wanted to return to this atmosphere again, to feel an overall unity. And this result is bigger than just a skill.

## Hero

*His road home appeared to be long. Three years ago when I asked him if they were going to come back here, he said unconditionally: "I don't know, maybe. Can you guess?" And suddenly he burst into our house with noise and whoops, he put everything on its head, and nobody found possible not to notice him. When he as the chief director was preparing the street performance during the Theatre Olympics (due to which Moscow lived on a powder-cask for three months, being completely happy at the same time), he received a title of a popular artist. It's ironic to be a clown with this title... Another one seems to suit him better: he is a citizen of the world, an image of a Soviet dream born behind an iron curtain. His story is a story of a guy who was born in a town of Novosil, near Orel, and became a world-known clown. He is an adult achieving his childhood dreams. He is a fantastic workaholic who had turned his life into a festival.*

*When he came back, at once we recalled him as Assissyai, a loving clown. It was a nostalgic feeling from our youth, and we all wanted to get it back: a scarlet ball on his nose, a scarlet flame of his scarf, and the chicken-yellow overalls. But it could not be so. He changed a lot. Long ago he turned from an eccentric to a metaphysician. His character became pensive, slower, and sadder. His gesture is inadequate, but his feelings are clearer. This did not make him any worse or more protected from the world. Rather he became more tender and closer to us. Every time he meets the blizzard face to face, we want him to withstand it as we're wishing it to ourselves. And long after the performance we have this fabulous picture from the Snowshow in our mind: a little boy, with a bright white make-up, in chicken-yellow overalls and scarlet scarf, pulls his little train through the blizzard – a chain of small houses with lightened windows and steaming chimneys... It seems that Eluard was right. A simple clownery is really the last shelter for a complex soul...*

*A translator's note: the interview was published in The Herald of Europe journal in 2001 in Russian. I was offered to translate it for then forthcoming first English edition of the same journal. I and other translators prepared many texts for the editors, so it was no surprise that of all texts I translated they published an essay on Matthew Barney. In 2008 the Snowshow was visiting Manchester where I then lived, and while I could not attend the performance I suddenly thought it would be an idea to share this interview with the audience of my English blog. Since then I've received grateful messages for bringing this text online. Given that Slava prefers working rather than lecturing, this brilliant interview by Natalia Kazmina is a concise digest of his character and "system" (if the latter word may be applicable). So I assembled all parts into this PDF and uploaded here. I wonder why it didn't occur to me earlier, but better later than never.*

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