

Act V: Stanislavski and the State

The Second Revolution in Russia occurred in February 1917; the Tsar was forced to abdicate and a Provisional Government was formed. Then, on the night of the 25th of October, the Bolshevik uprising began in St. Petersburg.

On the 26th of October, the Art Theatre performed *The Cherry Orchard*. There was an air of tension in Moscow, and soldiers were massing outside the Kremlin. Yet, at this revolutionary time, the theatre was performing a play that sympathetically portrayed

the life of the landed gentry, the very class the Revolution was directed against. The actors backstage were worried they wouldn't be able to finish the performance. "They'll drive us off the stage," they said.

In fact, the audience sat spellbound. It was as if, Stanislavski said, they wanted to wrap themselves up in the play's atmosphere, and say farewell to the old life forever. The performance ended with a tremendous ovation.



Stanislavski was never very politically aware; but it seems he welcomed the Revolution - although it meant the family business was taken into state ownership, and his personal fortune was lost. He always believed that theatre should have a social and educational function. Now he saw the Revolution as the opportunity to spread knowledge and enlightenment. New audiences were flooding to the theatre ; and they came "expecting something important, something they had never seen before."

During the Civil War that followed the Revolution (between the

"Reds" and the counter-revolutionary "Whites"),

there was severe economic hardship ; but Stanislavski argued that art must be preserved. He declared:



**Theatre for the starving! Starvation and Theatre!
There is no contradiction here.
Theatre is not a luxury in the life of the
people, but a necessity.**

The years following the Revolution saw an explosion of theatrical activity, and experiments in new forms such as futurism and constructivism, but the Art Theatre itself seemed to be stagnating. Stanislavski feared it had lost its purpose and direction. There were rumours that it would be forced to close. The company had split in two when a group of actors, touring in the Ukraine, were cut off from Moscow by the Civil War. This included Kachalov and Knipper. They were only reunited with the main company in 1922. Partly as a result, between 1917 and 1922 the theatre staged only one new production, Byron's *Cain*. This biblical drama was a strange choice for this revolutionary era, and the play only

lasted for eight performances. The repertoire was stuck in the past, and the company was increasingly attacked as outmoded and even "counter-revolutionary." The critic Vladimir Blyum said that it represented the best in Russian bourgeois culture - but it had died a natural death on the night of the October Revolution, when the bourgeois class was overthrown.

Some left-wing critics, indeed, wanted to see the abolition of all "pre-Revolutionary" art. But Lenin said,

If there is one theatre from the past, which we must save and preserve - it is, of course, the Art Theatre!

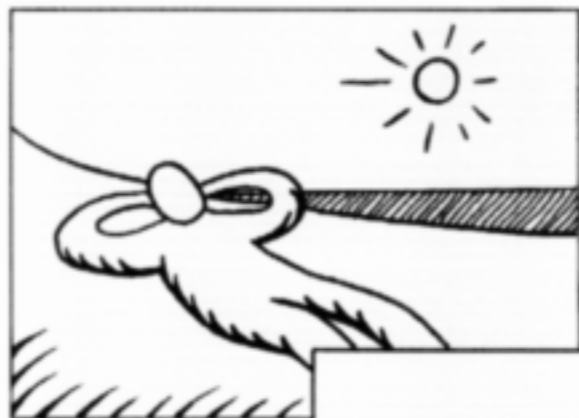
It was given the official status of a State Academic theatre in 1919.



In 1918, Stanislavski was asked to work with the Bolshoi Opera, to help singers to *develop as actors*. He agreed to form a Studio for young artists. He wanted to show that a singer must also be an actor, and *live through the role*.

Stanislavski himself in his early years had hoped to become an opera singer, but his voice was not strong enough. He had trained with **Fyodor Komissarzhevski** (one of the co-founders of the Society of Art and Literature), and together they explored the idea of movement in rhythm.

Now in the Opera Studio, Stanislavski's interest in rhythm was renewed. The focus was not only on the rhythm of outward movement, but also - and more importantly - on *inner rhythm*.



There is a "tempo" and a "rhythm" in everything we do. You experience quite a different tempo-rhythm when you are sunbathing on a beach, than when you are waiting for a job interview.

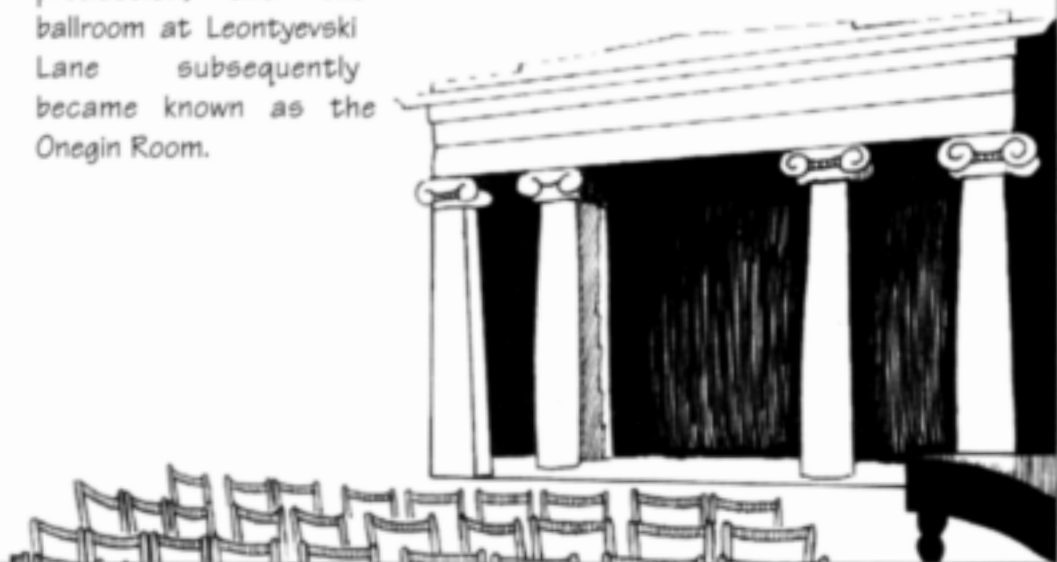


A sense of tempo-rhythm on stage, Stanislavski argued, makes you act and even breathe differently. This was an important development in the Stanislavski "**system**"; in his work with actors, he increasingly emphasised the need to find the right tempo-rhythm for every moment in a scene.

On March 5, 1921, Stanislavski was given a new home at 6 Leontyevski Lane. On the first floor, there was a large ballroom that Stanislavski determined to use for

"chamber" productions by the Opera Studio, beginning with *Eugene Onegin* in 1922. Stripping the opera of clichés, Stanislavski created a real sense of the world in which the characters lived. In rehearsal, he stressed the need for the singers to put meaning into every word. There were no "artificial histrionics." Anatoli Lunacharski sensed an affinity between the rhythm of the music, and the inner rhythm of the actors.

It was a legendary production, and the ballroom at Leontyevski Lane subsequently became known as the *Onegin Room*.



In 1921, the First Studio staged Strindberg's *Erik XIV*, directed by Evgeni Vakhtangov. Vakhtangov was one of Stanislavski's pupils. He joined the Art Theatre in 1911, and began to act and teach in the Studio. In fact, Stanislavski declared that he could "teach my system better than I can"; he even asked Vakhtangov to coach him in his own "system," when he was working on the role of Salieri...



In the aftermath of the Revolution, and perhaps influenced by the views of left-wing critics,

Vakhtangov began to distance himself from his mentor - at least in private. He said that "Stanislavski's theatre is dead and will never be reborn." When he staged *Erik XIV*, he wrote :



Up to now, the studio, true to Stanislavski's teaching, has doggedly aimed for the mastery of inner experience "perezhivanie". Now the studio is entering a period of search for new forms...

He wanted a vivid and theatrical style of performance - or, as he termed it, "**imaginative realism.**" In the search for "new forms," he became interested in the concept of the "grotesque," which he defined as acting which went beyond "realism" into new realms of fantasy and exaggeration. In *Erik XIV*, non-naturalistic make-up was used to create a sense of the

"grotesque."
Stanislavski debated the concept with Vakhtangov and later recorded their conversation. He argued he had seen few real "grotesque" performances in his time (Salvini's *Othello* was one example). The "grotesque" does not mean external exaggeration with no internal justification.

No, a real grotesque is the outward, most vivid and bold justification of a tremendous inner content, exhaustive to the point of exaggeration. An actor must not only feel and live through human passions in all their component elements - they must be condensed and made visible, irresistible in their expressiveness, audacious and bold, bordering on caricature.



Simply sticking a crooked eyebrow on an actor's face (as Vakhtangov did in *Erik XIV*) does not create the "grotesque."



To inflate something, which is not there, to inflate emptiness - that makes me think of blowing soap bubbles.


This did not imply a rejection of "theatricality," but only of a false theatricality. "New forms" cannot simply be imposed on the actor.

In productions such as *The Government Inspector* (the 1921 revival), *The Burning Heart* (1926), and *Dead Souls* (1932), Stanislavski demonstrated his approach to the "grotesque." The performances were heightened and exaggerated, yet based on internal truth, on a "refined and intensified" inner realism. This was the "life of the human spirit," expressed in an "artistic scenic form."

Vakhtangov's final production was Gozzi's fairy tale, *Princess Turandot* (1922). It was a dazzling theatrical spectacle with a sense of an almost childlike spontaneity and naivety in the performances.


Vakhtangov, ill with cancer, could not attend the final dress rehearsal. In one of the intervals, Stanislavski rushed to his apartment to congratulate him.






It's a resounding success. Your young actors have matured considerably...

Did you believe them? I always demand that they really live on the stage - cry, laugh...



Love, jealousy, joy and sorrow - these are universal feelings, the spectator is familiar with them. They only move us in the theatre if the actor really experiences them... Today, you have captivated us completely.

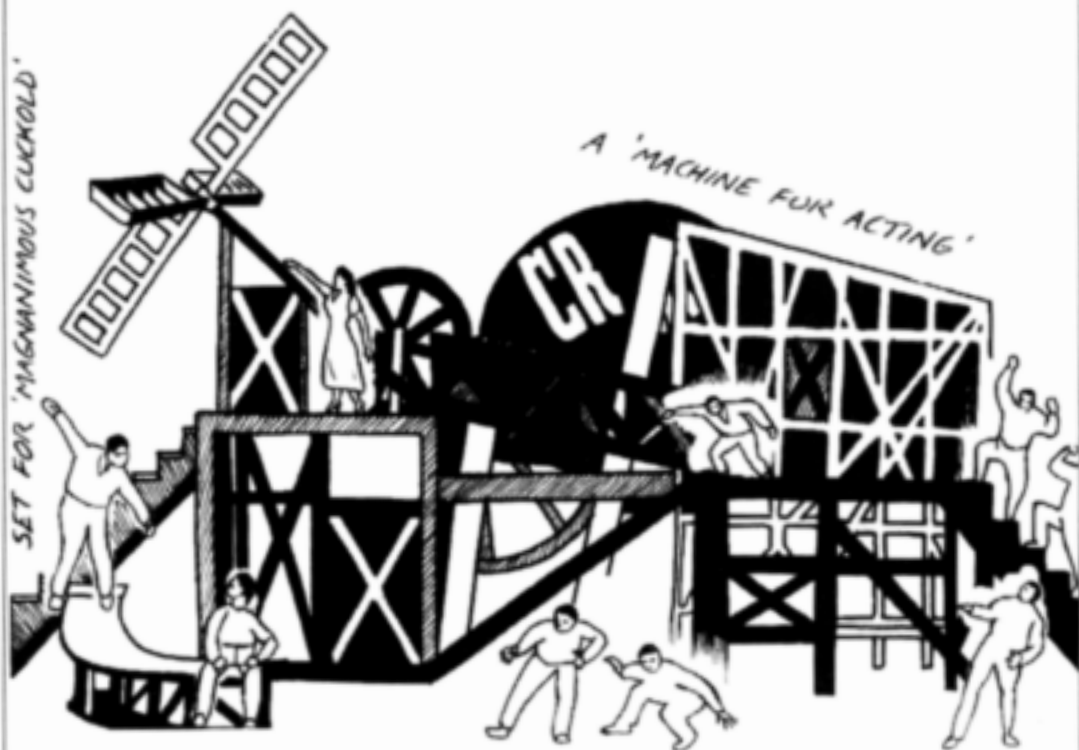


Three months later,
Vakhtangov died.

The leading figure in the "search for new forms" in post-revolutionary Russia was Vsevolod Meyerhold. Every new production by him was a major event. He did not want to create the illusion of real life on the stage but to celebrate the "theatricality" of theatre. In his production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922), he experimented with

"constructivism" - replacing "realistic" sets with functional constructions or "machines" for acting. The actors wore loose overalls rather than costumes.

Meyerhold declared that the production "was meant to establish the basis for a new style of acting." He rejected the need for realistic



character "psychology" and "authentic emotions." Instead, he said that the actor's art is the art of gesture and movement, or "plastic forms in space." The performances in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* were physical, even acrobatic. Movement was synchronised and rhythmic.

But when Stanislavski saw the production, it did not seem very revolutionary to him. He thought it should be even bolder in its theatricality. "I've been doing all that for a long time!" he said. (Presumably, he meant the kind of experiment in rhythmic movement, which was evident in his work as early as the 1887 production of *The Mikado*.)

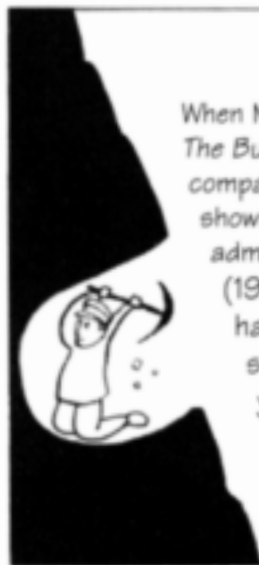
Stanislavski and Meyerhold have been portrayed as theatrical opposites: one concerned with inner "content," the other with external "form"; one celebrating "truth of feeling," the other "theatricality." But this is simplistic.

Meyerhold was one of the Art Theatre's most persistent critics, though he continued to profess his admiration for Stanislavski personally. "I am Stanislavski's pupil," he declared; and Stanislavski called him his "prodigal son." Meyerhold observed:

The assertion that Meyerhold and Stanislavski are antipodes is wrong. This notion is meaningless in such an ossified and static form. Neither Stanislavski nor Meyerhold represents something completed. Both are in a constant process of change.



When Meyerhold saw Stanislavski's production of *The Burning Heart*, he said that his own young company "could not even dream of the brilliant skill shown today at the Art Theatre." Stanislavski much admired Meyerhold's production of *The Warrant* (1925): he said that in the third act, Meyerhold had achieved "what I have dreamed of": a sense of the "genuine grotesque." In later years, Meyerhold concluded that the two men were ultimately working towards the same goal: combining the actor's creativity, with the demands of theatrical form. They were:



... like the builders of a tunnel under the Alps: he is coming from one side, and I from the other, but somewhere in the middle, inevitably, we must meet.

In 1922, the Art Theatre began a new tour abroad, to Europe and America - partly in order to raise much-needed income; but it also gave the company the chance to regroup, and reflect on its future.

When they sailed into New York in January 1923, they were greeted with suspicion in some quarters; indeed, before their arrival, the American Defence Society protested against the visit, declaring that the company were Soviet spies and would use profits from the tour to promote World Communism.



One reporter asked Stanislavski, "Why did you choose these particular plays to include in your repertoire? I mean *Tsar Fyodor*, *The Lower Depths* and Chekhov's plays?"



I understood immediately the hidden meaning behind the question, because I remembered what had been said and written in Europe - that we had chosen *Tsar Fyodor* to show a weak tsar, *The Lower Depths* to demonstrate the strength of the proletariat, and Chekhov's plays to illustrate the feebleness of the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie.

He told the reporter:



We've brought the plays we were asked to bring, and no others. They were asked for because they are the most typical of an earlier period of the Art Theatre, and because we performed them in Europe in 1906 and just recently. And America wants to see what Europe already knows.

The tour was a sensational success and left a lasting influence on American acting.

Critics and audiences were deeply impressed by the strong sense of ensemble playing, and the truthfulness of the performances.

Diana Bourbon pointed out three important lessons for American actors : *"trying to play together instead of competing"*; *"developing the art of expressive listening"*; and *"learning the technique of playing spontaneously after long experience with their roles."*

The choice of repertoire, however, concentrating on the Art Theatre's early successes, created a misleading view of Stanislavski's work. The company became forever associated in people's minds with a form of "poetic naturalism," seen mostly clearly in Chekhov's plays. When, in 1965, the Art Theatre returned to the States, critics were surprised by the bold and theatrical performance style in Stanislavski's production of *Dead Souls*; it confounded all their expectations and preconceptions.



'LOWER DEPTHS'

'TSAR FYODOR'



RICHARD BOLESLSKI

American theatre practitioners wanted to know more about Stanislavski's methods. **Richard Boleslavsky** had been an actor and director with the Art Theatre; he appeared in *A Month in the Country* and directed *The Wreck of "The Hope"* at the First Studio. He emigrated after the Revolution, and he was in New York to greet his former colleagues when they arrived in 1923. Articles by him about the Stanislavski "system"

appeared in magazines, and they were later assembled in the book, *Acting: The First Six Lessons*. In 1924, he founded the American Laboratory Theatre.

Among its early members were **Stella Adler**, **Harold Clurman** and **Lee Strasberg**.

Adler said :



STELLA ADLER

It was marvellous training. It was thorough and complete, well rounded and systematic, at an unmatched level. And remember, we all had the recent model of the Moscow Art Theatre players to goad us, and to inspire us.

The programme included work in affective and sense memory. Clurman said that this was "the element that most excited many of the Lab's actors" - it was so novel.

In 1931, Clurman, Lee Strasberg and Cheryl Crawford founded The Group Theatre. From the beginning, Strasberg hoped to develop a shared approach to acting in the company, through improvisation, and through exercises in affective memory.



Clurman recalled:

The first effect on the actors was that of a miracle... Here at last was a key to that elusive ingredient of the stage, true emotion. And Strasberg was a fanatic on the subject of true emotion. Everything was secondary to it.



But more than one actor with the Group came to resist this emphasis on affective memory. Phoebe Brand said :

I lent myself to it for a while - it is valuable for a young actor to go through it, but it is too subjective. It makes for a moody, personal, self-indulgent acting style. It assumes an actor is an emotional mechanism that can just be turned on. Emotion can't be worked for in that way - it is rather a result of truthful action in given circumstances. Lee insisted on working each little moment of affective memory ; we were always going backwards into our lives. It was painful to dig back... Lee crippled a lot of people.

Another actor, Margaret Barker, recalled how Strasberg, to prepare her for a role in *The House of Connelly* (1931), made her go over and over a painful experience - "my roommate had been killed the year before - until I thought I was going to crack."

In 1934 Stella Adler met Stanislavski in Paris and told him that in using the "Method" she had stopped enjoying her acting. She did not like affective memory at all: "I said I thought it was sick." He replied:



If my System doesn't help you, don't use it ... but perhaps you're not using it correctly.

Stanislavski told her that he now only used affective memory when all else failed. He stressed, instead, the importance of action, and creating a score of the character's objectives.



When she had learnt this, she acted so brilliantly that we absolutely "howled" with delight.

Adler returned to the States and shared what she had learnt with the Group. Strasberg's response was unequivocal.

Stanislavski said we're doing it wrong.



Stanislavski doesn't know. I know.

The debate led to a historic split. Adler continued to oppose affective memory, which she maintained induced hysteria.

It's polluted water, and yet Americans, typically, continue to drink it. Stanislavski himself went beyond it. He was like a scientist conducting experiments in a lab; and his new research superseded his earlier ideas: the affective memory belonged to the older, worn-out ideas. But Lee always thought it was the cornerstone of the Method, and in this way he became a laughingstock.



But Strasberg's influence on a generation of actors, through his work at the Actors Studio, has been profound. The stars that attended the Studio, such as **James Dean** and **Marilyn Monroe**, helped to build his reputation as the guru of the American "Method."

In fact, our understanding of Stanislavski has been warped by Strasberg's teachings. We now tend to associate the "system" with a particular style of acting - "moody, personal, self-indulgent" - seen at its best in the work of actors such as **Marlon Brando**. But this has very little to do with Stanislavski.





The Russian director, Georgi
Tovstonogov, once attended some
of Strasberg's classes. He
observed that Strasberg

... is considered a famous pupil of Stanislavski and I would have believed that if I hadn't seen those lessons myself. But in actuality everything he did was in complete opposition to Stanislavski: building on mood and atmosphere, demanding an emotional state all the time. That's just what Stanislavski fought against. Strasberg took all of Stanislavski's terminology... but he didn't possess the essence of Stanislavski at all.

After some two years abroad, Stanislavski finally returned to Moscow in August 1924. Some of the company remained in America. The tour had only postponed and not resolved the theatre's

problems. Nemirovich, who had stayed behind in Russia, continued to worry about its role. What would it be like in future?

This question, this *memento mori*, is becoming ever more urgent, acute and frightening... What plays should we put on? Who should act in them? How should they act in them?





Part of problem was that the Art Theatre did not have a single play about the Revolution in its repertoire.

Nemirovich decided to reorganise the company. Students from the Second Studio, which had been created in 1916, were drawn into the main theatre. Stanislavski was now concerned that the older generation of actors, and the younger actors from the Studio, should blend into an ensemble. But some of the older actors were suspicious - and the younger members were looking for an opportunity to prove themselves...

Their chance came in a production of *The Days of the Turbins*, by **Mikhail Bulgakov**. The play was given them as an "experimental" production. It is set at the time of the Civil War, and follows the fortunes of the Turbin family, supporters of the "White" cause, as they wait out their last days before the victory of the "Reds." It is a realistic portrait of a way of life that had so recently vanished. It does not caricature the "White" forces, as Soviet plays of the period usually did; instead, the characters are portrayed sympathetically, with all their strengths and weaknesses.



Between 1925-8, Stanislavski was responsible for nine productions at the Art Theatre. They were usually assigned to young directors supervised by him; he then reworked the results. After seeing a run-through,

he would give his comments, thanking the company, and noting the things he liked. Everyone would wait for the "But" - which could mean, "Scrap the whole thing and start again..."




The Days of the Turbins was directed by **Ilya Sudakov**. On 26 March, 1926, there was a run-through for Stanislavski. As he watched, he seemed to "live through" every moment: he sat laughing and crying, biting his hand and throwing down his pince-nez in his excitement. Afterwards, he said, "Well, you could perform it tomorrow."

In fact, the first performance was on October 5. At the end, some in the audience cried out "Nonsense!

Counter-revolutionaries!" while others said, "Thanks for the truth!" The theatre's left-wing critics were outraged by a play that seemed to support the White cause. Out of 301 reviews, Bulgakov counted 298 hostile ones. But *Turbins* was popular with audiences. The emotional impact of scenes such as the death of Aleksei Turbin was so great that hysteria and fainting in the audience were common, and a first aid team had to be on standby.

The morning after the premiere, the young actors in the play woke up famous. They came to see *Days of the Turbins* as the *Seagull* of their generation. But in 1929, it was banned. The story goes - and it may be apocryphal - that three years later, there was a call to the Art

Theatre from Stalin's secretary: "Stalin wants to know when *Days of the Turbins* will be playing." The Great Leader liked the play and had seen it a number of times. The manager said the play had been taken out of the repertory. Within minutes, Stalin himself called and said,



Today is Tuesday; I will come to see this play on Saturday; put it back in the repertoire.

The theatre worked frantically to reassemble the cast and sets in time. With Stalin's blessing, the play stayed in rep for the next nine years.

Stanislavski followed *The Days of the Turbins* with *The Marriage of Figaro* by Beaumarchais (1927). This was one of his most famous productions. During rehearsal, he said that every scene should "sparkle like champagne" and "pulsate with rhythm and tempo." The colourful designs by Aleksandr Golovin helped to turn the evening into a festive celebration of theatre. One spectator wrote to Stanislavski: "All around us there is monotony and tedium, but in your production of *The Marriage of Figaro* everything is radiant and light, joyful and alive. One is amazed above all by this sense of the joy of life..."



Armoured Train 14-69 by Vsevolod Ivanov was chosen to mark the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. Compared with *Days of the Turbins*, it is a much more conventional "Soviet" play. It shows the capture of an armoured train from counter-revolutionary forces. The central character begins as a peasant farmer and ends a hero of the Revolution. The Whites are portrayed as sadists and fools.



Playgoers at the time thought that, through this production, the Art Theatre was trying to prove its loyalty to the Soviet Union, and atone for *Turbins*. During rehearsal, the company was forced to make a number of changes to the script, and Stanislavski reported to his wife that...



Armoured Train has been half-banned. Pity they didn't ban it completely.

On the thirtieth anniversary of the theatre (27 October 1928), Stanislavski made a speech, in which he thanked the Government for allowing the Art Theatre to come to an understanding of the Revolution in its own way, and its own time.

Any other way would have pushed us into pseudo-revolutionary hackwork.

In an apparent reference to the campaign that had been waged against Bulgakov, he declared:

We must be patient and show good will, otherwise the most talented writers will be frightened off or pushed aside.



Two days later, there was a gala evening to mark the theatre's jubilee. Extracts were performed from past productions, including Act One of *Three Sisters*, with Stanislavski as Vershinin. During the performance, he felt sharp pains in his chest. Somehow he managed to carry on to the end, but then collapsed. A doctor diagnosed an attack of angina pectoris.

It was the last time he appeared on stage.

