

CHAPTER VIII

THE THEATRE

THE Russian theatre represents various forms of the Western theatre with something of its own besides. The conventional theatre and the progressive theatre, crude

The Theatre. melodrama and the finest symbolism are all here. There is dull aping of Western fashions, and there is also an extraordinary acute sense of the theatre as a problem. The problem is stated and faced with characteristic Russian frankness and thoroughness. The remotest possibilities of dramatic art are taken into consideration, including the possibility that the theatre in its present form may have outlived its time and should be superseded. Western plays and players quickly find their way to Russia and, indeed, translated plays constitute the bulk of the Russian theatrical repertoire. All kinds of Western innovations are eagerly discussed and readily adopted, and at the same time in various odd corners in the capitals stale and obsolete theatrical forms stubbornly hold their own. Both the best and the worst sides of the theatre are to be found in Russia. The dullness and shallowness of theatrical routine are most obviously and oppressingly dull and shallow. But over against this is the openness of mind, the keenness of intelligence, the energy and persistence in inquiry and experiment that place the Russian theatre in the vanguard of the modern theatrical movement. And the progressive spirit is steadily gaining ground; theatrical conventionalism is losing its self-confidence, is beginning to doubt of itself. There are no fixed new standards, except that things must be done as well and intelligently as possible, and the old standards are drifting into oblivion. On the whole the Russian theatre is at present a puzzling institution, often delightful, often disappointing, with flashes of brilliant

promise, with moments of unalloyed, aesthetic pleasure, with a great deal of fragmentary and unsatisfactory experimenting, and with outbursts of passionate utterance alternating with long spells of the silence of exhaustion during which a slovenly conventionalism holds sway. The Russians as a people are both unusually impulsive and unusually intelligent and critical. They are capable of blind enthusiasm for the theatre, but in moments of self-criticism they are ready to trample on their own enthusiasm and to insist on radical changes. When the change is effected there is fresh enthusiasm for the innovation, then fresh criticism, and so the theatre moves from phase to phase. Or else the spectator grows weary of the perpetual emotional and intellectual exercise and settles either into complete indifference to the theatre or to placid acceptance of convention. Certain limited groups who are seriously and intensely interested in the drama, like the group associated with the Moscow Art Theatre, hold the balance and ensure a certain steadiness of theatrical development.

Like most other things in Russia the theatre is centralised. Moscow and St. Petersburg take the lead and the Russian theatres in provincial towns follow at a great distance. In towns with a non-Russian population like Riga, Reval, Dorpat, Warsaw, Vilna, Tiflis, Baku, and Kazan, there are German, Lettish, Esthonian, Polish, Lithuanian, Jewish, Georgian, Armenian, and Tartar theatres, that take independent lines of development, and there are Little-Russian companies with their centre in Kiev that enjoy considerable success even in the Great Russian cities. But in the Russian provincial towns generally there are no manifestations of independent theatrical initiative like the *répertoire* theatres in English provincial towns or the Meiningen troupe in Germany. When the season is over in the capitals the city companies tour the provinces, and for the rest of the year second or third-rate provincial companies fill the boards with a considerable show of success.

In the capitals it is the State theatres, the Alexandra Theatre in St. Petersburg, and the Maly Teatr (Little Theatre) in Moscow, that occupy the central position as institutions. They are commodious, well-endowed, are less dependent than private enterprises on the whims of the public, and possess those sanctions of time, custom, and inertia which ensure an air of general well-being and make for continual prosperity. There is a pleasant sense of antiquity about them. Both the Alexandra Theatre and the Maly Teatr are reminiscent of the early years of the last century, of the brilliant dawn of Russian literature, of Pushkin and his brother poets, and of the critic Bielinsky, whose delight in the theatre was unbounded. The past glories of the Russian theatre, the traditional triumphs, the echoes of famous names like Semenova, Asenkova and Streptova, Karatygin and Shchepkin—the Russian Mrs. Siddonses and Garricks—are all associated with the Imperial theatres. Such traditions have a certain binding force. The Imperial theatres may sink into sleepy routine, but they cannot wholly forget their past achievements, their accumulated wealth of experience, their technique. Moreover, time has established between these theatres and the public a certain mutual understanding. The public knows what to expect and the theatres know what the public wants. There is a sort of fundamental good-humour in the State companies, an unaffected pleasure in **the theatre as it is, in playing for its own sake**, on a traditional stage, with the conventional applause, bows, bouquets, suppers, newspaper criticism, and all the rest of it. This good-humour born of use, familiarity, security, and the prospect of a pension, combined with sheer pleasure in acting, **communicates itself to the public.** Varlamov and Davydov, two immensely stout old comic actors, walk out on to the stage of the Alexandra Theatre and the audience at once prepares to roar, as it has roared a hundred times before. Varlamov raises an eyebrow and out breaks a storm of uncontrollable laughter. Madame Savina plays a widow's part, and the

audience watches her with an affectionate interest in which there is little room for criticism. It is the part she is bound by usage and right to play. She has become a part of the tradition and the memory of the older spectators drifts back to the time when she made her appearance as a promising debutante in a play of Turgeniev's, to the great delight of the author himself when, in the late 'seventies, he returned from abroad to St. Petersburg to bask for a little while in the sunlight of his own established fame.

In a word, the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg or in Moscow is an institution and draws from this fact its strength and its pride. It has established for itself a certain standard of efficiency, and has schools in which pupils are trained up to this standard. There is a complete apparatus, there are well-trying methods of producing actors and actresses. The whole system of drill has been well worked out. Members of the Imperial troupe are well paid and well cared for, and within the limits established by tradition there is considerable room for the display of histrionic talent. But these limits are definite, and the Imperial theatres would not be institutions if there were not very definite limitations. The very weight and dignity of tradition is unfavourable to experiment. The principle that only the attained is the attainable, and that limited achievement is better than high purpose unfulfilled has broad scope here. And the result is at once satisfactory and unsatisfactory. The plays the theatre feels it can produce it produces with great facility and efficiency. The artists play well together. Every actor knows his part, and knows to a nicety the acoustic properties of the building. The play goes with swing and verve. There are no sudden halts, no jars, no awkward pauses. The audience laughs at the right places, is worked up to the proper state of anticipation by the rapid movement of the drama, is appropriately moved to tears, and goes away with a pleasant feeling that an emotional circle has been completed.

This happens usually when the Imperial Theatre produces

one of Ostrovsky's plays. Some of the critics are now saying that the Alexandra Theatre does not know how to stage Ostrovsky. Perhaps they are right. But then Ostrovsky. hardly any other theatres produce Ostrovsky frequently, and none of them make a speciality of his work as do the official theatres. One is more or less compelled to judge Ostrovsky by the Imperial stage and the latter by Ostrovsky. This author, who flourished in the 'sixties and was a friend of Turgenev, and the other famous novelists of the time, is the one Russian playwright pure and simple. Most writers have made experiments in the drama, some of them very successful experiments. Ostrovsky alone made the writing of dramas his vocation. He was of merchant origin, and the subjects of his plays are drawn mainly from the life of the merchant class. This circumstance was a very fortunate one for the Russian stage. The merchant class is bluff, hearty, and original, possesses a wealth of curious customs and odd sayings and, what is most important from a scenic point of view, presents in an unusually vivid and concrete form the relations between character and environment, the play of impulse within the limits of very stubborn convention. Merchant life in Russia fifty years ago presented the broad features, the sharp outlines, the clearly marked situations that make plays effective on the stage and Ostrovsky had a very keen sense of the spectacular side of things. This life is again sufficiently unfamiliar to be picturesque and yet not so remote as to be unintelligible. A great many of Ostrovsky's plays are full of a rippling and genuine humour, not in the least forced, as is most of the Russian literary humour of to-day, but as spontaneous and natural as the proverbs and quaint turns of speech which sparkle in the author's dialogue.

Ostrovsky did not confine himself to the homes of the merchants. In the seven volumes of his published works there are many dramas that deal with the life of the gentry. Only it is not the polished and Westernised gentry of the

towns that he describes, but the old-fashioned landed proprietors who retained customs as characteristic and as full of colour as those of the merchants. All Ostrovsky's plays are described as realistic, which means simply that the scenes are taken from real life and that a certain photographic accuracy is observed in the presentation of visible objects. In any case, realism is a convenient term with which to designate the kind of drama against which the symbolists have been revolting of late years. But the realism of Ostrovsky's work is not so obvious and insistent now that the scenes he describes have been removed by time to an almost romantic distance, while the powerful dramatic element remains sharp and clear. **A great deal depends upon the production which may be stubbornly realistic or tinged with romanticism.** The Imperial theatres prefer a realism that is not quite real, but conventional, a kind of rough, common-sense realism that gives little play to the fancy or the intellect but serves very well as a framework for average histrionic ability and for conventional forms of acting. In such a presentation Ostrovsky is effective. His liveliness, his oddities, his delight in idiomatic repartee are strongly emphasised. A sanguine temperament prevails in the Imperial Troupe, and when it produces such comedies as *The Busy Corner*, or *Every Wise Man has his Follies*, it does so with great gusto. Ostrovsky is probably much bigger and less conventional than he is made to appear on the official stage, but the first impression is one of unusual harmony between author and actors. It is true that the decorations lack distinction and point clearly to a period of art or rather want of art that is now happily passing away in Russia. But this might have seemed a minor matter as far as Ostrovsky was concerned, if new and higher standards of decorative art had not been set up by private theatres, and if the management of the Imperial theatres itself had not, in a number of productions, made vigorous efforts to overtake the times.

For during the last few years the Russian theatre has

undergone a transformation. The taste of the public is changing and the methods that are still dominant in the Imperial theatres are beginning to pall. Fortunately the spirit of reform is at work on the official stage. The management now includes men of culture and energy who are doing their best to counteract the inertia of tradition and to use the abundant material resources of the Imperial theatres as a means of testing the possibilities of new resources in dramatic art. So far the opera houses have benefited from this new tendency more than the dramatic theatres. The Imperial opera houses, in fact, took the lead in that new movement which by attracting the most talented artists to the work of designing theatrical decorations has led during the last few years to such dazzling effects. The dramatic theatres lag far behind, but they too are progressing. The Alexandra Theatre now has an up-to-date stage manager in the person of M. Vsevelod Meierhold, who actively participated a few years ago in the modernist revolt. Various opinions may be held as to the exact artistic value of many of M. Meierhold's productions, but one thing is perfectly clear. **He is the enemy of dead routine. He will have nothing to do with the old way of simply varying on traditional methods. He thinks out his productions down to the minutest detail and experiments with a genuine passion for perfection. Moreover he is alive to modern problems, is versed in the most recent movements in painting and literature as well as in the drama. In a word, he takes a prominent place among those reformers who insist on the subjection of the theatre to the standards of true art. But one stage-manager, even when he is supported by a number of broad-minded men like Baron Driesen, the editor of the Annual of the Imperial theatres which has been published since 1909, and leading actors like M. Hodotov, cannot effect radical changes. The troupe is attached to the old methods and does not adapt itself readily to the new. Changes are only gradually making their way, and except on rare occasions**

The Imperial theatres are rather dull places for those who have acquired a taste for modern drama.

It is a noteworthy sign of change that the répertoire of these theatres has recently been considerably extended. Ostrovsky's dramas, together with translations of carefully chosen French and German plays, formerly had a monopoly of the official stage. Mr. Bernard Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* was produced a few years ago, but had very slight success, the general verdict being that the problems it dealt with were exclusively English and were uninteresting for Russia. Modern Russian authors of note were coldly treated by the Imperial theatres. Chehov's play, *The Seagull*, was produced in the Alexandra Theatre in 1896, but the troupe, with the exception of Madame Kommissarzhevskaja and M. Davydov, displayed such an absolute incapacity to enter into the spirit of the play that the production was a complete failure and Chehov fled from St. Petersburg in despair. In the season 1912-13, however, the works of modern authors were staged with considerable success. A play by Sologub, *Hostages of Life*, a work of inferior value giving evidence of the decline of the author's remarkable powers was generously treated by the management and admirably staged. Sologub's earlier and better dramas were played in the Kommissarzhevskaja Theatre at a time when they were banned on the official stage, and the present apparent victory of symbolism in the Imperial Theatre is no real victory. The staging of a play of Andreiev's, *Professor Starytsin*, marked a very definite break with the old tradition of academic exclusiveness.

The Imperial theatres can still point with pride to their veterans Davydov and Varlamov in St. Petersburg, and the actresses **Ermolova and Fedotova in Moscow**. None of the younger actors on the Imperial stage can be compared with these. There was one brilliant actress, Vera Kommissarzhevskaja, who made her appearance in the Alexandra Theatre in the later 'nineties, but the prevailing routine, the heavy formalism oppressed her, and in the midst of her triumphs

she left the official stage to become one of the leaders of a **new movement**. This movement, which is of the greatest importance for the Russian stage, and the effects of which have been felt in Western Europe, is associated in St. Petersburg with Kommisarzhhevskaja's name, and in Moscow has as its centre the Art Theatre of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko.

Vera Kommisarzhhevskaja, who died in February, 1910, at the age of forty-five, had a courageous and tragic career.

Vera Kommisarzhhevskaja. She was the one actress of deep and original power who has appeared in Russia in the present generation, but her talent was of the restlessly searching kind that refuses to be bound down by conventional methods and is constantly endeavouring to find some absolutely perfect means of expressing an ideal. She was a remarkable actress, even from the conventional point of view. Her diction and her mimicry were admirable, and her whole manner of impersonation was full of grace and charm. But even more impressive was her unceasing effort to conquer for her art some spiritual sphere hitherto unattained. She had in her the perpetual longing, the strange religious craving that possessed the great Russian writers. She was an unconquerable idealist and, loving her art passionately as she did, she denied it in the end for the sake of an ideal. She chose thorny paths and met with failure after failure, yet, though death came on her suddenly before she could see a gleam of success, the influence of her personality is through the very strength of her aspiration incomparably more powerful than any influence that could have been secured to her by conventional triumphs on the stage.

Vera Kommisarzhhevskaja was the daughter of a singer, and in her childhood displayed remarkable dramatic gifts. But it was only in her twenty-third year, after an unfortunate marriage, that she began to study for the stage under Davydov of the Alexandra Theatre. After successful appearances in provincial theatres, more especially in Vilna, she accepted a

position in the Alexandra Theatre where she very soon became a popular favourite. In Ostrovsky's plays, *The Wild Girl* and *The Bride without a Dowry*, and as Gretchen in *Faust*, she startled and delighted the St. Petersburg public by her careful and original interpretations of familiar parts. If she had remained in the Alexandra Theatre she might have looked forward to securing in time a position amongst the serene and honoured veterans. But the very conception of such a career was repugnant to her, and in the ponderous mechanism of the Imperial stage she found nothing to correspond to her artistic ideals. In 1902 she gave up her position and set to work independently. A series of brilliantly successful tours in the provinces provided her with the funds with which to open a theatre of her own in the Passage in St. Petersburg. The two years (1904-06) in the Passage Theatre were a transitional period in Vera Kommisarzhenskaia's career. She still played the parts in Ostrovsky's plays which she had long since mentally outgrown, but in addition she produced Ibsen's *The Master Builder* and *The Dolls' House*, giving in the latter play a most charmingly capricious Nora, plays by the Austrian authors Schnitzler and Hermann Bahr, and two plays by Gorky, *In Summer Villas* and *The Children of the Sun*. The Passage Theatre was a very good private theatre and Kommisarzhenskaia played well in it, but it was not by any means the ideal theatre of which she dreamed. It practically amounted to an attempt to be modern to the degree in which an average German theatre is modern, and also to do justice to contemporary Russian authors. It was a theatre of compromise.

In 1906 Kommisarzhenskaia took a further step forward. She rented a theatre in the Offiterskaia Street in St. Petersburg, and here she began a series of deliberate experiments, sparing no time, money, or labour in the effort to establish an ideal theatre. No artistic enterprise in St. Petersburg in recent years has aroused keener interest or more violent discussion than this little theatre with the white columns on

the *Offiterskaia*. It was opened during a period of social and political excitement, at the moment of a sudden revival of interest in questions of art. And the new theatre at once associated itself closely with the latest movements in art and literature. The younger painters and poets flocked around it. Its first nights were among the most important events in the artistic world. Those were the days when it seemed as though new horizons were opening up for all forms of art, when everything seemed possible.

In her effort to perfect a symbolical drama *Kommisarzhenskaia* was aided at first by M. Meierhold as stage-manager. The methods of the new theatre were violently attacked by most of the critics. Acting, staging, and decoration were all condemned. It was complained that the actors were made subject to a rigid scheme, that they were deprived of their individuality, and that the stage-manager exercised a tyrannical authority. These complaints were not wholly unjustified. The plays produced at the new theatre often resembled a series of conventionalised living pictures in which the postures of the players were most skilfully combined with quaint and suggestive backgrounds. The dialogue was reduced to a secondary position, it was made colourless, the players were compelled to speak their parts in a strained, monotonous voice which was a mere echo of their normal utterance; all the spoken element in the drama became, in fact, a mere undertone of the changing moods which were more vividly expressed by the striking combinations of colour devised by talented young artists in costumes and scenery, and by the sharply-outlined gestures and groupings to which M. Meierhold attributed such importance. This method proved very successful in two productions. In Alexander Blok's pretty *Pulcinello* it was in entire harmony with the spirit of the play which is a Punch and Judy show turned into dreamy allegory. In Maeterlinck's *Sister Beatrice* again the method was so applied as to maintain that atmosphere of half-utterance, of pregnant silences that is so characteristic of Maeterlinck,

while enabling Madame Kommissarzhevskaja to reveal to the full her faculty for the finer forms of spiritual expression. But in other productions the method had an oppressive effect, and in the staging of Maeterlinck's *Pelleas and Melisande* the players were so hemmed in, so completely stifled by the excessive narrowing of the stage and the elaborateness of the scenery, that Madame Kommissarzhevskaja decided that the path chosen was a false one. M. Meierhold, she saw, was doing his best to reduce the stage with its living actors to a theatre of marionettes, was, in fact, trying to realise with the existing material the ideal of Mr. Gordon Craig. She had other views and accordingly parted with M. Meierhold.

During the following years there was a series of difficulties and failures. Kommissarzhevskaja could find no real and permanent helpers. She staged a number of plays with the help of her brother and of M. Evreinov; sometimes the productions were successful, sometimes they were not, but the theatre, in spite of the interest it aroused, was never materially prosperous. A badly managed trip to New York did not improve the financial position, and a final effort to retrieve matters led to catastrophe. Oscar Wilde's *Salome* was put into rehearsal, and M. Evreinov's management and the glowing and dazzling scenery of M. Kalmakov led to results that seemed to promise certain triumph. The play was licensed, the bills were out, the tickets were sold, when suddenly deputies of the Right in the Duma and priests raised a protest against the performance, declaring the play to be blasphemous. A large number of politicians attended the grand rehearsal. The production in its amazing combination of light and colour effects was something unprecedented in St. Petersburg, but even the Assistant-Prefect who was present saw no reason to prohibit the play. It was forbidden, however, on the following day, just before the performance. The prohibition proved ruinous to the theatre for the preparations for *Salome* had involved an enormous outlay. Shortly

afterwards the enterprise was wound up and Madame Kommisarzhavskaia and part of her company went on a tour in the provinces. The tour was financially successful, but the experience on the *Offiterskaia* made a deep impression on Vera Kommisarzhavskaia. She had been practically alone throughout. She had no real and constant helpers. Her troupe, which like all troupes was composed of players, good, bad, and indifferent, only vaguely understood her aims. Her successes had been fragmentary. She had been dogged by a failure that seemed to her to be implicit in the theatre itself as at present constituted. Reflecting on her experience she came to a radical decision. She resolved to abandon the stage entirely. "I am leaving," she wrote to her troupe, "because the theatre in the form in which it now exists no longer seems to me necessary, and the way I have taken in the search for new forms no longer seems to me the true way." In another very characteristic letter she explains her determination to open a school. "I have arrived at a great decision," she writes, "and, obedient always to the bidding of the artist that is in me, I gladly submit to this decision. I am going to open a school, but this will not be simply a school. It will be a place in which people, young people with hearts and souls, will learn to understand and love the truly beautiful and to come to God. This is such an immense task that I only venture to undertake it because I feel with my whole being that this is God's will, that this is my true mission in life, and that it is for this that something has been given me which draws to me the hearts of the young. It is for this that my spirit has been kept young and joyful until now, for this end I have been brought through all trials, it is for this that faith in myself through God has been strengthened and confirmed in me." The school was never opened. In Tashkend in Central Asia, when the tour was drawing to a close, Vera Kommisarzhavskaia caught small-pox in the bazaars and died within a few days. Her body was brought to St. Petersburg and buried in the cemetery attached to the

Alexander Nevsky Monastery. The funeral, which was attended by thousands, was a demonstration of popular affection such as has never been seen at the funeral of any actor or actress in Russia.

The abandonment of the stage by the most talented of modern Russian actresses was not an accident, nor was it the outcome of pettishness or chagrin. It was simply the frank and deliberate admission by the most highly sensitive of all persons connected with the stage that the theatre must be something fundamentally different from what it now is if it is to serve the purpose of true artistic expression. Eleanora Duse once said, "To save the theatre the theatre must be destroyed, the actors and actresses must all die of the plague. They make art impossible." In Russia actions follow on words much more readily than in other parts of the world. Kommissarzhevskaja's refusal was one of the symptoms of a general crisis in the theatre.

But her work has had a very distinct effect upon the theatre as it now is. The public that takes a real interest in the drama has been made to reflect deeply, and will no longer tolerate the slovenly methods that a few years ago so easily passed muster. Dramatic critics, too, have learned something, and, as custom has it, those who bitterly attacked Kommissarzhevskaja during her lifetime are loud in their praise of her now that she is dead. The Imperial theatres have reaped some of the benefit. M. Meierhold is now stage-manager in the Imperial theatres of St. Petersburg. Bravich, the leading actor in Kommissarzhevskaja's troupe, secured an engagement in the Maly Theatre in Moscow. The higher standard of stage decoration now established is largely due to the bold initiative of the theatre on the Offiterskaia. Vera Kommissarzhevskaja was not the sole agent in the change, but no one has stated the necessity of change so forcibly as she. And in spite of the great improvements effected the fundamental questions she put as to the artistic value of the theatre still remain unanswered.

The Moscow Art Theatre works within the limits of the attainable, and within these limits has achieved results that make this theatre in the opinion of competent observers absolutely the best in Europe. It stands wholly apart from the rest of the

**Moscow
Art Theatre.**

Russian theatrical world. It is privately financed. It trains its own actors and actresses, has built in Moscow a theatre specially adapted to its own requirements; in a word, it has the poise and steadiness which come from a complete dependence on its own resources and from a sense of solid achievement. The founders and leading spirits of the theatre are MM. Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko. The latter is the manager; the former is the principal actor, the teacher, the inspirer, and the theatre is frequently spoken of under his name. Stanislavsky is a pseudonym. Its bearer is a member of a well-known family of manufacturers in Moscow, the Alekseievs, and his brother was at one time mayor of the city. His grandmother was a French actress, and he inherited her passion for the stage. In his early youth he played in a private theatre in his father's house, sang in opera, studied in the Paris Conservatoire, was strongly influenced by the Meiningen company and associated in Moscow with the most progressive actors and critics. Being a man of alert intelligence and very versatile talent he formed very pronounced and original views on the aims and methods of dramatic art, and in 1908, at a time when the older theatres were clearly demonstrating their hopeless inadequacy and inefficiency, he founded in connection with Nemirovich-Danchenko the Art Theatre. Fifteen years of unremitting work have made of this theatre an "institution" of which Russians are rightly proud. The aim is sufficiently indicated in the title. Dramatic production as an art in the strictest sense of the word is what this theatre, with rare consistency, holds in view. Stanislavsky has described scenic art in the sense in which it is cultivated in the Moscow theatre as "An artistic unfolding of the life of the human spirit." The phrase is not

particularly illuminating and may obviously be used of any of the arts, but the fact that Stanislavsky applies it to the stage at least indicates the intellectual purpose of his enterprise.

Given intentness of aim there is room for considerable catholicity of method, and the promoters of the Moscow theatre have been very open-minded in this respect. If Kommisarzhenskaia's theatre was a theatre of revolt, of revolt amongst other things against certain tendencies in the older enterprise in Moscow, Stanislavsky's theatre may be described as a theatre of reform. The idea was that brains must be put into the work of the stage. Everything that was done on the old stage may be done on the new, only it must be done infinitely better and a great deal must be done in addition. The stage must reveal man to the modern man. There is realism in the Moscow theatre, in fact it has been reproached with an excessive cultivation of realism. In its productions minute attention is paid to details, and with this object an extraordinary wealth of resource and, indeed, erudition are displayed in the elaboration of various aspects of scenery and acting. The striving after faithfulness to real life is pronounced, but if the result attained is one of genuine beauty with a direct appeal—and in the productions of the Moscow theatre such a result is usually secured—the method adopted is of secondary importance. Sometimes one might wish that the machinery were less ponderous, the evidence of design less apparent. Ibsen's *Brand*, for instance, as staged by the Art Theatre is a very finished production. The appeal is made by means of a number of stage effects that are in their totality beautiful, but the impression is marred by a certain sense of strain and over-elaboration. A few years ago the Theatre produced the principal scenes and dialogues from Dostoevsky's great novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Scenery and costumes were very simple. A great many passages from the novel which served as connecting links were simply read from a corner of the stage by the light of a

reading lamp, and the work of the actors was very like that of the reader, except that the former was raised into greater spectacular relief. There were many who felt that the production of *The Brothers Karamazov*, for all its simplicity, probably because of its simplicity, was more deeply moving than that of *Brand*.

But whatever the methods adopted the productions of the Art Theatre always give the sense of a mind and minds actively at work. There is nothing shoddy, musty, or hackneyed. The whole company is on the alert and each player has a feeling for the whole as well as for his own special part. It is an intelligent and admirably trained company with a strong conviction of the seriousness of the work to be done. It includes several actors of exceptional ability. Stanislavsky himself presents a singularly happy combination of a keen intellect with a rich temperament. Kachalov is an actor of a markedly intellectual type. Moskvin has a fortunate gift of spontaneity with a wide emotional range. Luzhsky is vigorous and versatile. Leonidov is a younger actor who displays a powerful, if uneven, temperament. The company is not nearly so strong in respect of actresses. Madame Knipper, Madame Lilina, and Madame Germanova, who take the leading parts, play competently, but rarely rise above a certain rather sober level of excellence. Among the junior members of the company there is an abundance of talent.

The capacities of this carefully chosen band of workers are enhanced by endless training. Not more than four new plays are given every year, and these are rehearsed over and over again until every detail has been brought to the utmost possible pitch of perfection. The intelligence of the players is constantly enlisted. Attached to the Theatre is a training-school called the Studio, the pupils of which under the guidance of Stanislavsky form a kind of autonomous company which chooses plays for preparation, and after careful study produce them before semi-private audiences consisting chiefly of relatives and friends. In 1913 the Studio gave several

public performances of the Dutch author Heyerman's *The Wreck of "The Hope,"* in a tiny hall in St. Petersburg, and the freshness, vigour, and enthusiasm of these performances was in marked contrast to the routine playing of the average theatre and explain the secret of the Art Theatre's success. Many of the members of the Studio take minor parts in the performances of the chief company.

The element of commercialism is absent. The actors and actresses of the company are paid salaries ranging from £10 to £60 per month and all receive a share of the profits at the end of the year. The profits are not very large, however. The expenses of production are heavy. The theatre in Moscow is a small one: the interior is beautiful in the simplicity and severity of its architectural lines, the ceiling is perfectly plain, devoid of all decoration, concealed electric lamps give a pleasant and mellow light. There is a revolving stage, and the stage appliances are the most up to date and most nearly perfect that can be found. This theatre is always filled during the season, and it is difficult to secure tickets. Yet the Moscow season does not wholly recoup the outlay, and it is only the annual St. Petersburg season after Easter when the performances are given in a larger but invariably crowded theatre that now secures the enterprise against financial loss. The original capital of the theatre was subscribed by a number of Moscow merchants out of pure interest in dramatic art and without any visible hope of return.

Among the ideals which the Moscow Theatre sets itself is the encouragement of Russian literature. Its early triumphs are associated with the plays of Chehov, which gained public recognition only because of the extraordinarily minute, intelligent, and enthusiastic effort which the Moscow Theatre put into their production. Two of Chehov's plays, *Ivanov* and *The Seagull*, met with complete failure on the Imperial stage before the Art Theatre came to the rescue. *Ivanov* was never recovered from oblivion, but *The Seagull* was, and it has become a symbol of Chehov's dramatic success as well as that

of Stanislavsky's theatre. Chehov's plays are clearly beyond the scope of the conventional theatre. They are almost entirely lacking in action, they consist of a series of situations representing changing moods and not the development of a plot. **The events described are of the most ordinary character**; the scenes are such as are familiar to every member of the audience. Unless extraordinary care is taken Chehov's plays on the stage may prove simply dull and uninteresting. The Moscow Art Theatre found the secret of producing them in the only way in which they could be made to utter a dramatic appeal. The sober realism of the plays had to be made expressive. All the petty details of the very ordinary situations described had to be made significant. Every tone and every movement in the players' parts, every detail of stage management, had to be so determined and so adjusted that their combined effect would inevitably be to infect the audience with the mood and temper expressed by the author in the given situation. The problem was solved with wonderful success, and Chehov's plays lived on the Moscow stage. The performances of *The Seagull* aroused eager interest and violent controversy, but the opposition was gradually worn down by the unmistakable emphasis of the popular verdict. It was indeed a triumph of art to create out of that contradiction in terms, an actionless drama, a scenic work with a genuine power of aesthetic appeal. The Moscow Theatre simply made Chehov as a dramatist. Without Stanislavsky he would probably not have been a dramatist at all, because it was only the successful production of his first plays by Stanislavsky that encouraged him to write others. These others, *Three Sisters*, *Uncle Vania*, and *The Cherry Garden*, were treated by the Moscow Theatre with an affectionate care and with a success that has made them classics of the modern Russian stage. Other theatres can now venture to produce Chehov clumsily and imperfectly and yet attract an audience. Even in Bulgaria, which draws its intellectual inspirations directly from Russia, *The Cherry Garden* is now

successfully played. In the répertoire of the Art Theatre Chehov's plays are now the popular favourites, and it was the effort to make Chehov's work expressive and intelligible on the stage that gave this theatre its characteristic stamp.

It was the Moscow Theatre, too, which made a playwright of an author who at one moment seemed to possess greater dramatic power than Chehov. In the year 1900 the production of *Uncle Vania* in Moscow had met with a success which was challenged by a great many of the critics. Chehov who was ill and living in Yalta, a health resort in the Crimea, was unable to see the performances. The management accordingly brought the whole company down to Yalta in the spring in order to learn his judgment. A large number of literary men and women and artists from St. Petersburg and Moscow were at that time living in Yalta, and the production of *Uncle Vania* in the local theatre aroused unbounded enthusiasm. One of the most enthusiastic of the spectators was Maxim Gorky, who at once determined that if this were the drama he, too, would write plays. He accordingly wrote *Mieschane*, which the Art Theatre produced in the following season, and later his most successful play, *In the Depths*.

Several of Andreiev's plays have been produced by the Moscow Theatre, but all the care bestowed fails to make them very convincing on the stage. And in spite of all the encouragement given by the existence of such a theatre, Russian authors show a strong disinclination to write plays, and when they do write they are not often successful. The Art Theatre has, therefore, had to look farther back and farther afield for material. It has tried Shakespeare—the staging of *Julius Caesar* was raised to the utmost pitch of realism, while *Hamlet* was staged with the aid of Mr. Gordon Craig. It has applied its vividly realistic method to the production of Russian classics like Gogol's *Inspector-General*, Griboyedov's *The Mischief of being Clever*, and Alexis Tolstoy's historical drama *Tsar Feodor Ivanovich*. A charming idyll has been made of Turgeniev's *A Month in the Country*. Ibsen's *Brand*,

The Enemy of the People, *The Master Builder*, and *Peer Gynt* have been produced. The production of several plays by a living Norwegian author, Knut Hamsun, has led the Art Theatre from the open ways of realism into by-paths of symbolism in which interesting decorative results were achieved, although in symbolism the company is not altogether at home. During the last few years the Art Theatre has been experimenting in new methods, has adopted the suggestions of some of the reforming theatres in the West, and has fallen into line with the new Russian movement for securing the co-operation of the most talented painters as designers of costumes. The recent appointment of Alexander Benois as designer and general adviser in the decorative work of the theatre, seems to symbolise the fusion of those modern movements in painting and dramatic art which have now reached the dignified stage of general recognition.

It must be admitted that in becoming an institution the Moscow Theatre has lost some of its charm. An intellectual theatre of this type runs the danger of becoming academic. Its very success sets limits to its efforts. There is no diminution of energy and care in the management, but the freshness, the enthusiasm, the inspiring atmosphere of ideas which characterised the theatre in former days are giving place to a routine that is probably inevitable, but is none the less disappointing. There is still great power in the theatre. A performance of *Peer Gynt* with Leonidov at his best in the chief part and with the scenery designed by Röhrich, who has an unrivalled sense of northern landscape and of mythological atmosphere, may still move very deeply. The Art Theatre is becoming set in its own methods. It has fixed a high standard, and yet after many of its performances one is left with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction, and one wonders whether Kommisarzhenskaia's failure may not have been rather more worth while than the brilliant success of the Stanislavsky Theatre.

An essential element of the theatre which the Moscow

Theatre in its seriousness is apt to miss its sheer fun, spontaneous and unrestrained merriment. Players should play, but, as a rule, the Moscow players work very hard even when they produce comedies. Their excuse is that nothing is more insipid and intolerable than that accumulated atmosphere of stale and habitual humour that gathers around the conventional theatre. As though to meet a demand for fun that none of the regular theatres supply, a new type of playhouse has arisen, the so-called Miniature Theatre. Some of the members of the Art Theatre Company under the leadership of Baliev have established a theatre of this type in Moscow under the name of the Flying Mouse or The Bat, while a corresponding enterprise in St. Petersburg founded by an actress of the Imperial Theatre named Holmskaia, is known as The Crooked Looking Glass. These theatres give a variety of clever, quaint, and odd scenes, one-act comedies, pastorals, and the like. The Bat tries to arouse the hilarity of its audiences by inducing them to sing a chorus, by provoking a general sneeze, or by letting loose toy balloons when the lights are out.

The Crooked Looking Glass has produced an amusing parody on the conventional opera under the name of *Vampuku*, and an extraordinarily clever parody on the methods of stage-managers in which a scene from Gogol's *Inspector-General* is produced in the old style, then in parodies in the style of the Moscow Art Theatre, of Max Reinhardt and of Gordon Craig. These Miniature Theatres maintain a high level of taste and humour and avoid coarseness, which is more than can be said of the average variety theatre in Russia.

Dramatic criticism is fairly represented, but cannot be described as excessively impartial. There is a great deal of interest in theatrical questions and the crisis of the stage, which so patently exists, is hotly discussed. MM. Meierhold and Evreinov and Prince Sergius Volkonsky, a former director of the Imperial theatres, have published books on the art

of the theatre, and the controversy on a theatre of marionettes, as against the further cultivation of expressive power in the actor, is being waged with energy. The popularity of the Dalcroze system of rhythmical gymnastics suggests that further developments will hardly lie in the direction of the marionette theatre. Great things have been dreamed of the theatre in Russia, and in a country where artistic instincts are so keen and the spirit of inquiry so strong it is quite possible that some of these dreams will be realised, although the present position is very like an impasse.