

## ***Nachtsyl* at the Berliner Schaubühne: A Radical View of Gorky's *The Lower Depths***

*Nachtsyl* was received as a radical sensation when it premiered in Moscow in December 1902 under the co-direction of Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky and performed by the ensemble of the Moscow Art Theatre. Stanislavsky himself played Satin, one of the denizens in the asylum while Olga Knipper, the wife of Chekhov, played the whore Nastya, another lodger in the asylum. Gorky taught her how to roll her own cigarettes, and he offered to bring one of the "girls" to live with the Chekhovs so Knipper would get "a deeper insight into the psychology of a hollowed soul." (She remembered that "like a rocket he [Gorky] flew from somewhere into our quiet intelligentsia life, and stirred us with his tales of an unknown life.") However, these tales were of a life that Gorky himself experienced and knew intimately—that of human beings, forgotten and marginalized by society, and who in Russian were called "former people."<sup>1</sup>

In 1902, the play as well as its author augured the revolutions to come. The cast of characters is a cross section of society's throwaways ranging from a bankrupt aristocrat, to workers whose skills are no longer needed, to abused women, to thieves, card sharks, pimps, and prostitutes. The prevailing desperation is countenanced with sharp irony, sarcasm, indifference, or a quick temper. Gorky drew each of the seventeen characters with a fine pen that gave a sharp contour to each one's psyche, language, and background. In his *Observations on Theatre* published in 1923, Gorky writes, "I am always and chiefly interested in man and not the group, in the personality and not the society." Surely *The Lower Depths* [*Nachtsyl/Night Asylum* in German translation] fulfilled his own demand to present the social condition through individuated struggles and wills. He created a dramaturgy that is ideal for a tight-knit ensemble of actors in which each individual actor can play his instrument with the overall effect of a chamber ensemble. This brings me to the production at The Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz in Berlin which premiered on 6 June 2015 and which I saw on 24 June.



*Nachtsyl* directed by Michael Thalheimer. Photo credit: Katrin Ribbe.

Michael Thalheimer, the director of *Nachtsyl*, together with set designer Olaf Altmann, lighting designer Erich Schneider, and sound designer Bert Wrede created a concentrated vision of despair. The audience sat in a sharply raked rectangular auditorium facing a stage that extended the full horizontal width of the house. The set design severely limited any kind of depth or height. We faced what appeared to be a cross section of an underground tunnel; a half vault curved on top with a dark slit to somewhere above; a half tube, cut off towards the audience but curving upward in the back towards the vaulted tube, stretched from stage right to stage left with no openings to the sides. To enter or exit the performance space had to be accomplished by sliding down or shimmying up through the narrow space between the upper vault and the upper edge of the bottom half-tube—an acrobatic feat for each actor at every entrance or exit. No furniture or props cluttered the space or the interactions. The predominant cold white lighting allowed for no shadows. Every now and then streams of brownish muck ran down the curved back wall and collected on the trough-like stage floor like sewage, even splashing occasionally into the first row of the audience. Accompanying the action throughout was a polyphonic boom, increasing or decreasing in intensity and volume. Thus the physical setting produced an effect of claustrophobic confrontation with an underground existential hell. Enter the actor!

The first view was of two hands appearing in the dark upstage slit as the actor was slowly sliding down the back wall. Then a second actor, a woman, tumbled down. Both came to rest on the floor, side by side. The first words on stage were the woman matter-of-factly stating: "Ich sterbe." [I am dying.] It is Anna, the tubercular wife of Kleesc, lying next to her. The verbal beginning is the first radical departure from

Gorky's play in which the Baron's "Go on" interrupts the dumpling seller Kvashnya's innocuous story about her refusal of marriage to a crayfish seller. The labored but intense physical entrance and Anna's words "I am dying"—in Gorky's text these words appear half way through act 2—immediately set the tone of the Schaubühne performance.

Jürgen Gosch and Wolfgang Wiens, using the German translation by Andrea Clemen for their adaptation, severely cut the original text, re-arranged dialogue sequences, and eliminated four characters. This enabled a densely structured dramaturgy and tight-knit ensemble performance that allowed no escape and no relief. For two uninterrupted hours the audience was steeped in contemplation of relentless agony transmitted individually and collectively by the cast of misfits and outcasts—the poorest of the poor. Gorky's inspiration for the play was his own experience at age eighteen in a flophouse, the *Marussowska* in Kazan that he describes in his autobiographical work, *My Universities*, an excerpt of which is printed in the Schaubühne program. One passage seems to be of specific importance to the director's approach: "Everything that I observed with my own eyes was nearly devoid of any human feelings of empathy. Life transpired before me as an endless chain of hardhearted animosities, as an uninterrupted dirty fight for trivial possessions...And I saw often enough that people were kind and charitable only in their talk while in their actions they succumbed without noticing it to the general order of life. All that depressed me very much." [My translation from the German text.]<sup>2</sup> In his autobiographical segment "Notes on *The Lower Depths*," Stanislavsky vividly describes the original Moscow Art Theatre cast visiting the hovels of the Thieves Market (Khitrov), actually located underground, and getting first-hand impressions, images, and inspiration for the realistic production of Gorky's play.



*Nachtasyl* directed by Michael Thalheimer. Photo credit: Katrin Ribbe.

Thirteen actors assemble gradually on the Schaubühne "underground" hovel to enact thirteen characters in a living gallery of intimate shared misery—they chatter, they stare, they fight, they strut their stuff; there are moments of tenderness, of sexual attraction and dysfunction, of self-deprecating humor that turns like a switchblade into deadly aggression. Above all, each has to reaffirm his or her value as a living being to themselves and the others under the constant threat of anonymous death. Within the ensemble, each character performs a specific role that is in part defined by a social category. In this production, the eclectic costuming by Nehle Balkhausen subtly underscored the specificity of a character while each actor used body language to delineate his or her social role in the group. For example, Anna wore a nondescript dirty-white short skirt and top with blood stains from end-stage consumption and spousal abuse. The Baron's tawdry striped silk pajama and fox-fur neckpiece showed the last vestige of his former elegance. Vasilissa, the whorish wife of the asylum owner Kostylov was decked out in fishnet stockings, a black patterned clinging silk dress that she took off quite easily to reveal her red bra and white cotton panties. The pilgrim, Luka, in Gorky's version an older man, was in this production played by a handsome tall young man dressed in a soft and pale outfit of pants and jacket. The policeman, Medvedev, wore a yellow uniform and green cap to identify his status; as uncle of Vasilissa and her younger sister Natasha, he became a corrupted part of this underground society. The other characters are dressed in the dark hues of old discarded clothing.

Director Michael Thalheimer may very well have been inspired by the gritty reality which Gorky and Stanislavsky describe in their various writings about their research for *The Lower Depths*. The dramaturg, Bernd Stegemann included Gorky's significant passage about the Marussovskas without comment at the front of the program for the audience. However, Thalheimer took the demand for unalloyed realism and radicalized the aesthetics to a degree that befits the catastrophic global displacement and impoverishment of today. The brutalization of large segments of society throughout the world as a result of unbridled capitalism and growing economic inequity—while, ironically, the symbols of this same capitalistic system are broadly adulated in the name of "freedom"—this brutal energy was manifested on stage in a tightly choreographed "dance of death." Stanislavsky wrote about his experience in the underground hovel: "Freedom at any cost! that was its meaning for me. That freedom for the sake of which men unknowingly descend into the depths of life and become slaves." Alina Stiegler plays the consumptive Anna with an exhausted stoicism that sets her apart from the explosive energy of the others but also gives her a certain quiet beauty. The pilgrim Luka, played by Tilman Strauß, becomes an interesting counterpart to her—he is the outsider who sees through all with empathy but without faith in any transcendent value; he is therefore able to release Anna from her suffering by gently squeezing the last breath out of her (on stage). Peter Moltzen as her husband, the worker Kleesc, is a serious but helpless man who feels his uselessness as a husband and worker and manifests these deficits by a gloomy yet sympathetic disposition towards others. In Gorky's text he fixes an accordion for the young man, Aleska (played in this production by the young actor Bernardo Arrias Porras) who enters the play towards the end. Felix Römer plays the Actor as an agile drunk, the only one dressed in a suit as though for an audition, who gives a final passionate virtuoso poetry recital after which he exits. He hangs himself offstage, as we find out a bit later from Aleska. Ingo Hülsman as the charming but vapid Baron together with his dyspeptic sidekick Satin, played by David Ruland with sharp sarcasm, contributed somber levity (a contradiction but accurate) to the proceedings on stage. Christoph Gawenda invested Vasja Pepel with an aggressive charm that made him credibly attractive to the two sisters Vasilissa and Natasha. However, his explosive temper thrusts him quite literally to commit the murder of Kostylev, the asylum

proprietor/manager, played by Andreas Schröders as a spineless yet wily cuckold. Jule Böwe as his wife Vasilissa misses no chance to make a fool of him as she bosses over him and everyone else with a physically seductive vulgarity devoid of any emotional content and utterly solipsistic. In contrast the other two women: Nastya, the whore who is pimped by the Baron, and Natasha, a young innocent who is in futile love with Pepel, are played by Eva Meckbach and Lise Risom Olsen as two generous women undefeated in character who remain strong despite abuse. Ulrich Hoppe as the corrupt policeman Medvedev displays a sort of bumbling but cunningly stupid character who would be nothing without his uniform. Thus each actor invested each character with a specific quality and tonality that made for a dynamic ensemble. The sum total of all aspects of the production became an extended metaphor for that part of humanity whose life is kept largely out of sight, underground if you wish, but whose mass threatens to shake the very foundations of those who live on the side of light.

To dispel any doubt in the audience's mind about the intended political significance of the Schaubühne production, the program brochure includes an article by Wolfgang Streeck, "How will Capitalism End?" in which the author posits that "the forced 'marriage' of capitalism with democracy since 1945 is breaking apart bit by bit because the regulatory institutions that tamed the progress of capitalism have collapsed in the three areas of commodification—Labor, Nature, and Money. . . . The capitalist system suffers from at least five worsening functional disturbances: diminishing growth, oligarchy, the decimation of means in the public sphere, corruption, and international anarchy." In 1902, Gorky and the Moscow Art Theatre presented the lives of those that live in the underbelly of society to a Moscow audience who wildly applauded at the end of their "excursion" into the theatrical gallery of human horror. In 2015, I felt a certain discomfort about being torn between admiring the pure artistry of what transpired in this highly subsidized theatre and feeling utterly inadequate in the face of the reality outside; being part of a sophisticated comfortable middle class, we "wildly" applauded the stage proceedings while outside the beggars (real or organized) represented the anonymous "other" humanity. However, I also feel that theatre is at its best when it functions as a laboratory in which the plagues of human society are isolated and magnified and the stage becomes the petri dish where the audience can observe and recognize the pathology that ails human society. Perhaps even the question arises: "What's to be done?" One can only hope the answer is not the equivalent to the Russian "Shto delat?" of 1905 with all its horrific consequences.

NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Maxim Gorky, *The Lower Depths: An Authoritative Text Edition of a Great Play*. Translated by Alexander Bakshy in collaboration with Paul S. Nathan. Edited with an Introduction by Jacques Chwat. (Avon Bard Books, 1974). The quotations and references relating to the historical background of the play and Gorky's text are drawn from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Program for Maxim Gorki *Nachtasyl*. Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz. Berlin. 53. Spielzeit [53rd Season] 2014/2015. The quotations from *My Universities* by Maxim Gorky and from the article by Wolfgang Streeck have been translated by Beate Hein Bennett.

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Beate Hein Bennett, Ph.D. Comp. Lit., has worked as a teacher, translator, and freelance dramaturg. Born and raised in Germany and trained in all aspects of theatre arts, she has a high respect for the art in all its

complexity from front to backstage, from spoken language to the language of the body. Her latest involvement has been as dramaturg for the New Yiddish Rep/Castillo Theatre premiere production in Yiddish of *Waiting for Godot* in New York. A theatrical highlight was as translator and dramaturg for The Living Theatre production of Else Lasker-Schüler's IANDI on Avenue C. She is currently translating Judith Malina's book *The Piscator Notebook* (Routledge, 2012) into German.

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