

# Re-discovering Oliver M. Sayler

*Maria Pia Pagani*

«With all my faith in the vitality of Russian art...»

O. M. Sayler

We just met the theatre critic and writer Oliver Martin Sayler, considering the importance of his work for Russian émigré artists in US.<sup>1</sup> In 1914, as American citizen, he started to study European theatres and his great encounter with Russian theatre took place in winter 1917-1918, when he visited Moscow, St. Petersburg, Siberia as journalist. He narrated his impression of the Revolution in the book *Russia, White or Red* (1919),<sup>2</sup> underlining the positive acceptance received from the Russian people:

Everywhere I went in Russia I found tilings opening up for me and difficulties vanishing and favours springing in my path just because I was an American. It was so on the trains, in the railroad stations, in the streets, in crowded tramcars, in the theatres and the exhibitions and the restaurants and the shops. Always, the fact that I was an American was an asset. I was the beneficiary of a bond of good will which was instinctive and of the heart, rather than reasoned and of the mind. (p. 59)

Sayler was born in Huntington (Indiana), on 23rd October 1887, and obtained a degree from Oberlin College (Ohio) in 1909. At the beginning of his career as journalist, he was on the staff of «Indianapolis News» (1909-1920), and correspondent for «Boston Evening Transcript» (1915-1920). Written in first person, *Russia, White or Red* was the first step of a more intimate “travel”, which led him to publish *The Russian Theatre under the Revolution*<sup>3</sup> in 1920:

The Russian theatre as I saw it, therefore, during the winter of 1917-1918, the first six months of the Bolshevik regime, was essentially the same theatre which in the last two decades has taken the leadership of the modern stage. It is my privilege, therefore, not

<sup>1</sup> M. P. Pagani, Book review for the monograph *Russian Culture and Theatrical Performance in America 1891-1933* (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2011) by Valleri J. Hohman, «Mimesis Journal», I, 2, December 2012, pp. 147-152.

<sup>2</sup> O. M. Sayler, *Russia, White or Red*. With 42 illustrations from photographs by the Author, Little, Brown & Co., Boston 1919. Latest reprint: General Book LLC, Memphis 2012.

<sup>3</sup> O. M. Sayler, *The Russian Theatre under the Revolution*, Little, Brown & Co., Boston 1919. Latest reprint: General Book LLC, Memphis 2012.

only to present the picturesque panorama of the Russian theatre under the Revolution, but also to recount and appraise the men and the institutions and the theories which have made that theatre preeminent in our time. (p. 1)

As Sayler admitted, *The Russian Theatre under the Revolution* can be considered the final result of his work as correspondent for magazines and newspapers in America:

The Russian theatre as I observed it under the Revolution is not the child of Revolution but the guest. It is the theatre of the first two decades of the twentieth century, and it continues today not because but in spite of the social struggle. The theatre as the Revolution will transform it has not yet appeared. All over Russia, under the stimulus of the new-found freedom of the proletariat, workmen's and peasants' theatres have sprung up, but their interest thus far is sociological rather than aesthetic. Through these stages in time the theatre will extend its influence to the masses of the Russian people. From these stages and the talent they develop, new ideas, new visions may arise. But the background, the inspiration of the future theatre of Russia, will be the splendid achievement of yesterday and today in the playhouses of Moscow and Petrograd. (p. 1)

A revised and expanded version of this book, always written in first person, was *The Russian Theatre* (1922).<sup>4</sup> In his brief introduction, Norman Hapgood (1868-1937) – American ambassador in Denmark in 1919 – considered the importance of Sayler's work for the future development of American theatre:

In writing about the theatre nothing today is more appropriate than the explanation of Russian art. That art, carried far by enthusiasm and noble standards, is happily better known to us than it was. The American mind, let us trust, becomes every year more worthy to receive it.

If there is in our country a critic as fitted as Mr. Sayler to discuss this art, I know him not. The book that follows is informed, its spirit moves ever on a high level, its judgments seem to me unvaryingly correct, and the ripe simplicity of the style is a suitable vehicle for the message.

The book is worthy to present to our people the most energetic and intense stage that, in over a century, mankind has anywhere produced. (p. VII)

After his period in Russia, Sayler became conscious of the “diplomatic” value of his work. The new edition of this book proposed also a solution to the American public for the cultural comprehension of «the current Russian invasion of our theatre», in order to live «our own dramatic renaissance»:

<sup>4</sup> O. M. Sayler, *The Russian Theatre*, Brentano, New York 1922. Latest reprint: General Book LLC, Memphis 2012.

If in its modest way the First Edition of this work was instrumental in stimulating American curiosity concerning the Russian theatre and in making smooth by anticipatory interpretation the path of its advent in force on our stage, perhaps the present reissue in revised and enlarged form will encounter a public opinion that has learned to distinguish between the eternal and the ephemeral aspects of the Russian scene and will serve even more fully to establish that permanent contact between the dramatic activities of the two countries which is essential to the richest fruition of both our own theatre and the Russian. (p. X)

This position is also evident in Saylor's edition of the volume *Max Reinhardt and his Theatre* (1924, with revised edition in 1926)<sup>5</sup> and in his critical survey entitled *Our American Theatre* (1923).<sup>6</sup> He continued the analyses of the aesthetic impact of "foreign" performance on the American stage also with *Revolt in the Arts* (1930).<sup>7</sup>

In the 1920s, Saylor worked as theatre critic for "The Saturday Review", proposing his opinion in the column "The Play of the Week". Moreover, he became the press agent of Morris Gest (1875-1942), the impresario emigrated from Vilna who mostly involved cultural exchange with Russia.

Saylor's experience became precious for the active construction of contacts between American artists and Russian artists, as evident also in many articles for "The North American Review",<sup>8</sup> "The Bookman",<sup>9</sup> "The Century Magazine".<sup>10</sup> "Theatre Arts".<sup>11</sup> The most important and prestigious result of his collaboration with Morris Gest was the Moscow Art Theatre's tour in US, in 1923 and 1924.

In order to go over the obstacle of the language barrier, the plays that the company would perform in Russian were made available in new English translation with the

<sup>5</sup> O. M. Saylor, *Max Reinhardt and his Theatre*, Brentano, New York 1926. Latest reprint: Kessinger Publishing, Whitefish 2011.

<sup>6</sup> O. M. Saylor, *Our American Theatre*, Brentano, New York 1923.

<sup>7</sup> O. M. Saylor, *Revolt in the Arts. A Survey of the Creation, Distribution and Appreciation of Art in America*. With Contributions by Thirty-Six Representative Authorities in the Several Arts, Brentano, New York 1930.

<sup>8</sup> For ex. *Russia Looks to America*, «The North American Review», February 1919, pp. 188-198; *Turgeneff as a Playwright*, in «The North American Review», September 1921, pp. 393-400; *Translation and the Theatre*, «The North American Review», January 1922, pp. 109-116.

<sup>9</sup> For ex. *The Russian Ballet in its own Home*, «The Bookman», March 1919, pp. 79-85; *The Deeper Roots of the Russian Theatre*, «The Bookman», September 1919, pp. 350-356; *Meyerhold and the Theatre Theatrical*, «The Bookman», November 1919, pp. 350-356.

<sup>10</sup> For ex. *Our Awakening Theatre*, «The Century Magazine», August 1921, pp. 514-524; *The Real Eugene O'Neill*, in «The Century Magazine», January 1922, pp. 351-359; *Our Theatre at Cross-Purposes*, «The Century Magazine», September 1922, pp. 747-756.

<sup>11</sup> For ex. *The Neighborhood Playhouse*, «Theatre Arts», January 1922, pp. 15-19; *Year Ahead, with Europe as Preceptor*, «Theatre Arts», October 1922, pp. 267-275.

volume *The Moscow Art Theatre Series of Russian Plays*,<sup>12</sup> edited by Saylor. The same strategy was applied for Italian with the volume *The Eleonora Duse Series of Plays*,<sup>13</sup> always edited by Saylor in 1923, for the tour of the great actress in US.

A copy of these two volumes arrived in Gardone Riviera, as gift for Gabriele d'Annunzio, who became "spectator" of the last encounter between Stanislavsky and Eleonora Duse.<sup>14</sup> Emblematically, this great final artistic contact took place in America – the land of emigration for thousand of people from Old Europe.<sup>15</sup> In the private library of the Poet, there is also the volume *The Story of the Moscow Art Theatre 1898-1923*,<sup>16</sup> published in Leipzig after 1924, with introduction by Saylor. In order to raise the interest of American public for the genial fellow of Stanislavsky,<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, Saylor wrote the book *Inside the Moscow Art Theatre* (1925)<sup>18</sup> and the introduction for the volume *Plays of the Moscow Art Theatre Musical Studio* (1925).<sup>19</sup>

Saylor emphasized the deep cultural "debt" of American artists also in the foreword to Nemirovich-Danchenko's autobiography *My Life in the Russian Theatre* (1936):<sup>20</sup>

For the first time in the history of the American stage, we saw exemplified the *possibility* and the *necessity* of the Organized Theatre, of the Art Theatre – if our theatre were ever to be more than amusement. For the acclaim which these player artists received, our own players, great and small, took new pride and confidence in their calling. And, finally, the American people and the Russian people won a new respect for each other which culminated years later in restoration of normal diplomatic relations between the two countries. (p. XIV)

<sup>12</sup> *The Moscow Art Theatre Series of Russian Plays*. Direction of M. Gest, edited by O. M. Saylor, Brentano, New York 1923.

<sup>13</sup> *The Eleonora Duse Series of Plays*. Direction of M. Gest, edited by O. M. Saylor, Brentano, New York 1923.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. M. P. Pagani, *The Spiritual Lesson of Eleonora Duse*, «World Literary Review», vol. 1, n. 1 (2011) "Multi-Cultural Voices in Literature, History, and Arts of the 1920's", edited by M. D. Sollars, pp. 84-93.

<sup>15</sup> M. P. Pagani, *La biblioteca teatrale russa di d'Annunzio*, in *Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi Percorsi russi al Vittoriale: archivi, testimonianze, prospettive di studio* (Gardone Riviera – Gargnano sul Garda, 14-15 ottobre 2011), a cura di M. P. Pagani, Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo 2012, pp. 77-89.

<sup>16</sup> *The Story of the Moscow Art Theatre 1898-1923*. With introduction by O. M. Saylor, Leipzig, C. G. Roder, s.d.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. Attisani et al., *Actoris Studium – Album # 2 – Eredità di Stanislavskij e attori del secolo grottesco*, Edizioni dell'Orso, Alessandria 2012.

<sup>18</sup> O. M. Saylor, *Inside the Moscow Art Theatre*, Brentano, New York 1925.

<sup>19</sup> *Plays of the Moscow Art Theatre Musical Studio*. With introduction by O. M. Saylor, Brentano, New York 1925.

<sup>20</sup> V. Nemirovitch-Danchenko, *My Life in the Russian Theatre*. With a foreword by O. M. Saylor, Little, Brown & Co., Boston 1936.

Saylor had also the opportunity to organize the tour of Nikolai Evreinov in US, in 1926-1927,<sup>21</sup> and wrote the introduction to the English edition of the most famous theatrical treatise of this great émigré artist: *The Theatre in Life* (1927):<sup>22</sup>

America, apparently, is not going to be satisfied until it has commandeered the entire range of Russia's contemporary artistic, dramatic and musical talents. The same season that added Vladimir Nemirovitch-Dantchenko and his Moscow Art Theatre Musical Studio to an already full roster also brought Nikolai Yevreinoff, or, as he prefers to be spelled, Nicolas Evreinoff.

Evreinoff's play, *The Chief Thing*, helped to distinguished the Theatre Guild's first complete season in its new Guild Theatre. *The Chief Thing* has been published, too. But it is only with this book that the fecund and versatile playboy of the eastern world emerges full stature in our presence. (p. VII)

In the 1950s Saylor had a particular attention for dance, considering Diaghilev<sup>23</sup> and Ballet Theatre.<sup>24</sup> He donated a precious collection of some 1200 photos of Russian players and productions to The New York Public Library. His letters and manuscripts are also in Harvard Theatre Collection, Yale University, University of California, Vassar College Libraries.

Oliver Martin Saylor died in New York, on 19th October 1958,<sup>25</sup> but many of his books are still published. In particular, in 2011 was realized in US the reprint of *Max Reinhardt and his Theatre*, and in 2012 of other three volumes: *Russia, White or Red*, with *The Russian Theatre under the Revolution* and *The Russian Theatre*. This is a very important cultural operation, which testifies that the memory of this author is not alive only for the antiquarian books: now his voice can be used to explain better the "Russian past" (and Duse's heritage...) of American theatre.

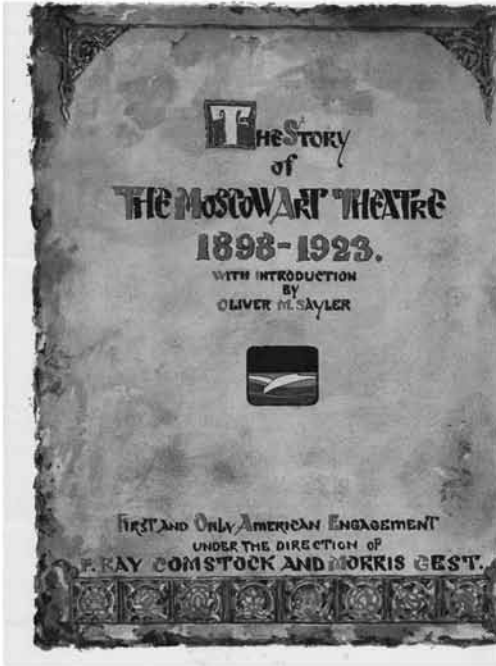
<sup>21</sup> For the Italian tour and fortune see M. P. Pagani, *Un regista in esilio e la sua traduttrice: Nikolaj Evreinov e Raissa Olkienizkaia Naldi*, in *Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi Russi in Italia* (Milano, 20-21 maggio 2008 e Venezia, 23-24 maggio 2008), a cura di A. d'Amelia e C. Diddi, Salerno, "Archivio Russo Italiano V", 2009, pp. 191-217. [Russian translation: M. P. Pagani, *Režisser v izgnanii i ego perevodčica: Nikolaj Evreinov i Raisa Ol'kenickaja Nal'di*, in "Personazi v poiskach avtora": *žizn' russkich v Italii XX veka*, sost. A. d'Amelia i D. Rizzi, Russkij Put', Moskva 2011, pp. 203-212].

<sup>22</sup> N. Evreinoff, *The Theatre in Life*. Edited and translated by A. Nazaroff, With introduction by O. M. Saylor, Harrap & Co., London 1927.

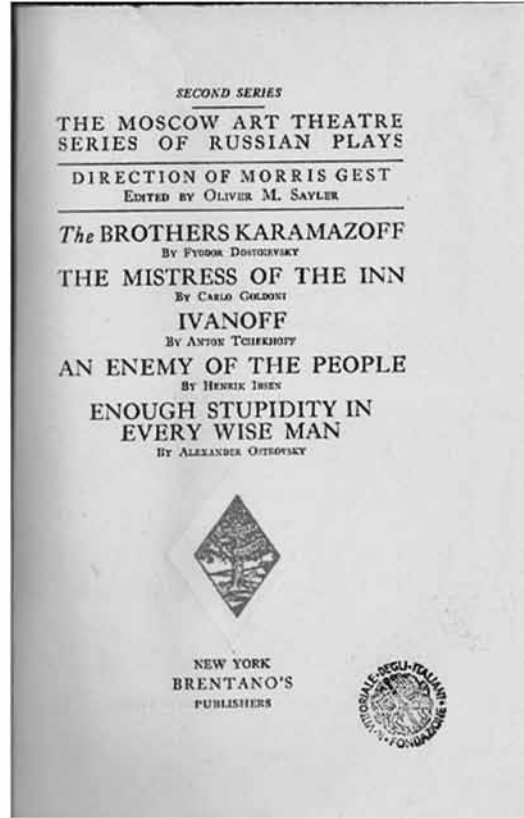
<sup>23</sup> O. M. Saylor, *From Diaghileff to de Cuevas, in two decades*, «Dance Magazine», November 1950, p. 13 and 45-46.

<sup>24</sup> O. M. Saylor, *Toward a History of the Ballet Theatre*, «Dance Magazine», May 1955, pp. 29-31 and 68-69.

<sup>25</sup> An obituary was published in «Dance Magazine», November 1958, p. 4.



*The Story of the Moscow Art Theatre 1898-1923*, C. G. Roder, Leipzig s.d. [Private library of Gabriele d'Annunzio, Gardone Riviera, "Il Vittoriale degli Italiani"].



*The Moscow Art Theatre Series of Russian Plays*, Brentano, New York 1923 [Private library of Gabriele d'Annunzio, Gardone Riviera, "Il Vittoriale degli Italiani"].