

Russian Culture and Theatrical Performance in America 1891-1933

(Maria Pia Pagani)

The history of Russian émigré artists is a very interesting and relevant aspect in Russian Theatre Study, which opens the possibility to draw a map of the most important centres frequented by actors and directors of “Russia abroad”, and to observe the development in a foreign land of their of “Russian identities”.¹ It is possible to write a “chapter” for each country of the world involved in Russian diaspora created by famine, pogroms, revolutionary activity and the beginning of the Soviet period: Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, etc. The result, is a re-thinking (and, sometimes, a re-discovery) of the career of many Russian artists abroad, their work as instructors in the most prestigious schools and academies, the impact of their work on the various national staging, the forms of their artistic heritage.

For the United States, a remarkable “chapter” is *Russian Culture and Theatrical Performance in America 1891-1933* by Valleri J. Hohman (University of Illinois): considering the advancements in communication and travel for the development of

¹ Here I use the terms “Russia abroad” and “Russian identities”, borrowing them from the works of Marc Raeff (1923-2008), professor at Columbia University [*Russia Abroad: a Cultural History of the Russian Emigration (1919-1939)*, Oxford University Press, New York 1990] and Nicholas Riasanovsky (1923-2011), professor at Berkeley [*Russian Identities: a Historical Survey*, Oxford University Press, New York 2005]: they are very useful for the comprehension of the creative mechanism of survival, transmission and theatrical re-invention of Russian diaspora. For Russian artists, the decision to migrate provoked not only a physical, but also a cultural “shift” of the way to understand and practice theatre: in their new life abroad, they brought a “luggage” of artistic experience (born and consolidated in pre-revolutionary, revolutionary and Soviet Russia) which they transplanted, compared but also challenged for the inclusion in a new theatre system. As result, were born important “re-adjustments” on the technical level (working in theatres with different organization and management, playing with not Russian colleagues, dealing with another audience etc.), on the artistic level (working in countries in which direction was poorly developed, with different styles of acting etc.), on the linguistic level (the use of a language different from Russian was a problem partially circumvented only by the actors who worked in silent films). For the artists of “Russia abroad”, the new life in a new country also opened a new artistic season in which “Russian identities” were not deleted, but found new different forms of expression and transmission (in particular, in the case of Russian-Jewish culture). The American *melting pot* is the most obvious outcome of this dynamic process, which also involves much more than Russia. In this perspective, is also important to consider the work of the generations following the first wave of emigration, and the results of the artistic heritage: passing by the time, the cultural elements at first perceived as “different” because “foreign” (*à la russe*, in the Russian style), had undergone a process of integration and assimilation whose traits were relevant and innovative for the theatrical culture of the new homeland. Russian émigré artists realized a very important work of mediation, leading a new life abroad for their national theatrical culture: this re-invention and transplantation in a new fertile soil, gave new – and sometimes unexpected – fruits for theatre.

the international cultural exchange, the Author examines the work of artists, impresarios, financiers and the press, demonstrating how a variety of Russian theatrical styles was gradually introduced and incorporated into American theatre and dance.

In America, immigrants – especially the Russian-Jewish families – had a relevant role as spectators and readers, created literary and theatrical circles, translated Russian dramas into English (Brentano and Brown were the most popular publishing houses, who made accessible the texts of Russian playwrights to the American public). This social and cultural phenomena generated a great respect for Russian émigré artists:

By the 1930s, in association with the performing arts, the term “Russian” signified high skill and technical proficiency, professionalism, bold experimentation, and artistic rigor. The Russian “trade mark”, so-called by the almanac editors, evoked a number of performance styles and traditions, but was understood to indicate “high standards and good taste”. Even as diplomatic relations between the United States and the Soviet Union stagnated and faltered, Americans increasingly celebrated, imitated, and adapted Russian theatrical performance (p. 1).

The book is divided into three parts, which focalises all the Russian emigration waves in the United States between the 1890s and the 1930s, the development of America’s interest in Russian theatre and its progressive introduction through performance and the press, the reaction of the American theatre critics in front of Russian productions. In fact, elements such as the ensemble playing, the athletic physicality, the professionalism of the artists, the effectiveness of design and makeup used by Russians, were very important for the advent of modernism in American theatre.

Part I is entitled *Russians in America: the Early Years* and considers the period from about 1891 to 1908: it is an introductory phase of interaction, when Russian theatre started to be present in the United States. In particular, the Author underlines the work of the Russian-born Yiddish playwright Jacob Gordin (1853-1909): he emigrated in America in 1891, translated Russian plays for the Yiddish theatre and became a central figure in the transmission of Russian culture. (In Italy, his *Mirele Efras* was known thanks to Tatiana Pavlova).²

He is often seen as the initiator of the serious drama in the Yiddish theatre, but he made also a great fight for the development of the Yiddish stage in general. He was encouraged and supported by the actor Jacob Adler (1855-1926) and the actress Bertha Kalich (1874-1939):

Gordin’s modern, progressive views included replacing traditional religious beliefs with scientific beliefs, advocating socialism, and improving women’s access to education and independence. His socialist-feminist views are clear in a number of his plays that seek to criticize the constraints placed on women in traditional household. His plays generally critique the view of women as subservient to their fathers and then their husbands, advocating instead for women’s rights to education, the professions, and choice in marriage (p. 26).

² See A. Attisani et al., *Actoris Studium – Album # 2 – Eredità di Stanislavskij e attori del secolo grottesco* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2012).

Moreover, in part I the Author considers the first tours of Russians:

A successful tour in America would secure artists an international reputation that would bolster their success at home or lay the groundwork for their success as artists in America, should they choose to stay (p. 39).

The St. Petersburg Dramatic Company was the first Russian group on tour in the United States, in 1905-1906: Alla Nazimova (1879-1945) decided to continue her career abroad, while her partner Pavel Orlenev (1869-1932) decided to return home and became the master of Tatiana Pavlova (1894-1975).

Another important Russian actress on tour was Vera Komissarzhevskaya (1864-1910), in 1908: she accepted the invitation to bring her troupe to the United States with the hope to revitalize its reputation and to raise some capital for the next season in St. Petersburg, but obtained a financial failure. That was also the first American period of her brother Theodore (1882-1954),³ who was invited to direct several plays for the Theatre Guild's 1922-23 season and definitively settled in America in 1939.

Part II is entitled *The Russian Invasion of the American Theatre* and considers the period from 1909 to 1925: it can be considered a popular phase, when Americans come to hold Russian culture and art with the highest regard. The Author underlines the great contribution of the financier Otto Kahn (1897-1934), the impresario Morris Gest (1875-1942), the theatre critic and writer Oliver Martin Saylor (1887-1959).

A special focus is on Morris Gest, who

has received very little attention in our histories of the modern American theatre. Yet without him, some of the most significant developments in the American theatre, particularly those involving cultural exchange with Russia, may never occurred (p. 75).

He organized the Moscow Art Theatre's tour in 1923 and 1924, studying all the publicity tactics to obtain a financial result:

Historians who have studied Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre in America often diminish Gest's role in establishing the important relationship between American artists and the Russian artists (p. 95).

In the same period, he also organized Eleonora Duse's (1858-1924) last tour in the United States.⁴

In this perspective, it can be interesting to analyse Oliver Martin Saylor's publications in the 1920s as Gest's press agent, in order to raise the interest of the public: for ex. *Russia, White or Red* (1919), *The Russian Theatre under the*

³ M. P. Pagani, *Fëdor Fëdorovič Komissarževskij*, ad vocem, *Dizionario dell'emigrazione russa in Italia*, in www.russinitalia.it

⁴ See *Eleonora Duse. Viaggio intorno al mondo*, a c. di Maria Ida Biggi, Skira, Milano 2010.

Revolution (1920, revised and expanded as *The Russian Theatre* in 1922), *Our American Theatre* (1923), *Inside the Moscow Art Theatre* (1925).

Moreover, it can be important to analyse Gest's strategy to go over the obstacle of the language barrier: in fact, the plays that the company would perform in Russian were made available in new English translation with the volume *The Moscow Art Theatre Series of Russian Plays* (1923). The same strategy, in the same year, was applied for Italian with the volume *The Eleonora Duse Series of Plays* (1923).

Several members of the Moscow Art Theatre remained in the United States, where continued their career: for ex. Richard Boleslavsky (1889-1937) and Maria Ouspenskaya (1876-1949) founded the American Laboratory Theatre in New York, which helped to teach a version of Stanislavsky's approach to actor training to an influential generation of American artists.

Part III is entitled *Revolutionary Theatre: from Russia to America* and considers the period from 1926 to 1933: it can be seen as a great phase of change and adaptation, when Russian theatre and performance were basic for the American artistic renovation. The Author examines how Americans became familiar with all the experimental techniques of the Russians, considering the incisive role of the Habima Theatre and the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre (GOSET) in their international notoriety.

The Habima company left Russia for an international tour in 1925, and never returned; the American tour was organized by the impresario Sol Hurok (1888-1974). The so-called "Habima style" was represented by *The Dybbuk* in Russia and abroad:

Although the company performed several other plays, *The Dybbuk* became the primary attraction for audiences of artists and intellectuals, probably because the play was widely known by these Americans; therefore, the language barrier, which existed for nearly every audience member was less of an issue: Hurok had not made translations of the plays available in English as Gest had done for the Moscow Art Theatre (p. 118).

Considering the American social and political context, the Author underlines the development and the importance of the Yiddish art theatres with their experiments in style, the Artef with the artistic director Benno Schneider (1902-1977),⁵ the growth of the Workers' Theatre Movement, revealing the multiple lines of influence of Russian performance and the various forms of artistic heritage:

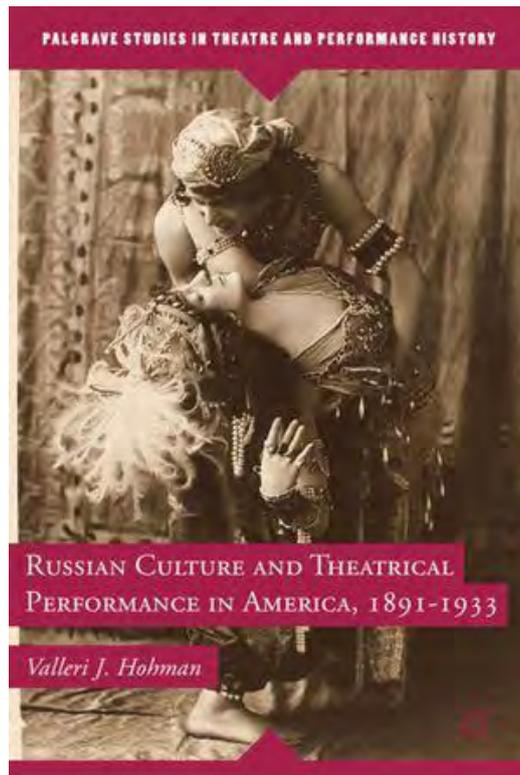
Certainly, Stanislavsky's influence on the modern American theatre has been great, but our attention to his influence has overshadowed the work of other Russian stage artists and their lasting contributions to the American theatre (p. 140).

The book has also a very useful appendix (*Representative U.S. Performances Featuring the Work of Theatre and Dance Artists from the Russian Empire*) and 10

⁵ V. J. Hohman, *Searching for Benno Schneider*, Paper for the International Conference *Theatre Historiography: Genealogies and New Directions* (Chicago, 10th-11th August 2011), Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE).

beautiful illustrations, taken from Harvard Theatre Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (Washington DC), Archive of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (New York).

Valleri J. Hohman, *Russian Culture and Theatrical Performance in America 1891-1933*, Palgrave MacMillan, Palgrave Studies in Theatre and Performance History, New York 2011, pp. 230.



Cover of Hohman's book



Bertha Kalich in *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1906).
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington DC.