

# Alice Ivanova

## Not Beautiful

If it comes, it is through insight. It gives enormous pleasure to an actor, and once experienced, one dreams of reaching it again and again. It is a miracle for some and shamanism for others: a reincarnation, a re-embodiment.

Is it possible? I believe it is. I have seen it several times and I cannot forget it. I was lucky to experience it myself; it was the most delightful feeling I have ever had while acting. I refer to being a different person, neither pretending nor just being yourself in given circumstances, but really *being* a different person from top to toe.

It is easy to say, but how do I explain it? It comes from nowhere, from darkness, restlessness and listening to oneself. It comes from the fusion of what I feel is important in the character.

My Sonya from Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* is "not beautiful", and this determines her whole way of being. Starting from her being "not beautiful" she loves, suffers, harvests corn, is jealous, prays, etc. I try to apply her situation to myself: what would happen if I were in the same position? Associations, anguish and obsessions flow into my body, scratching the bottomless bowl of my subconscious. I have never suffered from being "not beautiful". Where should I find this complex? How should I catch hold of it?

I pity myself! Oh, how much I pity myself! Something happens in my body: one shoulder rises higher than the other, my arms firmly embrace my body just under my chest so as not to scream or burst into tears. Tears, many tears, quickly appear in my eyes. Why did I want to cry so strongly? Can I push the tears away? Without smiling?

Helen says that Sonya looked at her with an unkind, evil look. How can it be? Usually one plays Sonya as a light, easy, radiant and loving person, although she is "not beautiful". How many times does Anton Chekhov remind us of this? It is not in vain. It injures and hurts: not beauty-full.

Once, while on the underground, I thought of the sentence talking of her unkind, evil look and how one shouldn't look at people like that. I was suddenly able to

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and sometimes I look at her  
from the side.  
I try to become her completely,  
but a part of my subconscious  
nevertheless remains me.  
This "I" of mine walks  
somehow behind Sonya's back,  
suffering with Sonya  
and is surprisingly satisfied.*

smell all of Sonya. The feeling swelling in my subconscious cracked, splintered and broke open. This was probably a kind of insight. In that split second, her way of suffering and walking, the kind of person she was became absolutely and impetuously clear to me. I was at last able to separate myself from the cliché that saw Sonya as a pious, suffering saint.

I rehearsed Sonya for the last time twenty years ago. But I can still become her endlessly. I just have to hump my back and embrace myself forcibly and firmly round the chest and immediately the light switches on. I radiate, milestones appear and cruel aspects become visions. Usually tears run down and my lips start shaking. The subtext is "Lord, oh Lord! What should I do?"

Am I transformed? Seemingly it is I, but somehow another being I don't know very well inhabits me. I live a completely different life. The way Sonya seems to have moved around inside me for twenty years without my noticing is fantastic. It is my body, isn't it? My eyes? And, most importantly, it is my longing for a better life. Searching for a better life belongs both to Sonya and to me. This is what makes my Sonya grow up.

The world is acid, crude, impolite, full of routine, endlessly far from the ideal. Sonya suffers from the incompleteness of the world in the same way as Anton Chekhov probably suffered himself. (Of course, before rehearsals started, I read everything I could about Chekhov, and all his works. This was a condition set by the director of the performance, Yevgeny Sazomov.)

I began by asking her questions: what do you do when you are alone? What do you love or like? How do you pray? How do you sleep? But she forgot herself in the corner of the half dark kitchen and was sitting there silent. (I can describe this kitchen in detail, its smell, arrangement, objects, in spite of the fact that I have of course never been



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there.) Astrov? Who is Astrov for you Sonya?

She was running away in the field on a very hot summer day while comically lifting her legs in the air, sideways and upwards. (This comes from how my sister ran in our old Leningrad courtyard.) Sonya was dressed in a formal white dress, laughing and happy. Is Sonya laughing? She turns around inside me. I catch hold of her character, in order to trouble her with questions. I want to know a lot about her.

Sometimes I become her and sometimes I look at her from the side. I try to become her completely, but a part of my subconscious nevertheless remains *me*. This "I" of mine walks somehow behind Sonya's back, suffering with Sonya and is surprisingly satisfied. This "I" helps search for the colours and adaptations that resonate from this feeling of successful satisfaction or dissatisfaction. If something is not Sonya-

like then it is not from her. It is interesting that my "I" is artistically a little jealous.

Is it so for everyone? Many writings exist about Russian actors on this subject. Konstantin Stanislavski's great student, the director, actor and pedagogue Yevgeny Vakhtangov was capable of unifying "representational" theatre with "lived experience" theatre. He demanded the fusion of the actor with the character at the same time as the actor's existence outside the figure. The actor's law of creativity was based for him on a dialectical unity of two oppositions, confronting the actor/creator with the actor/character.

In this point of view I find the genuine truth of living and expressing the theatre form in which experience is embodied. Vakhtangov's position was very different from Stanislavski's. The latter demanded that the actor completely merge with the character. I don't know if Stanislavski himself succeeded in this, but I know that his beloved Fjodor Shalyapin confessed to his son that "Don Quixote is playing in me, but Shalyapin is wandering around and looking at how he plays."

When you become the "other", the actor's second person (or maybe first?), the "I"-actor/creator/controller appears of its own accord naturally, like the shadow of your body in sunshine. It is important to know that the shadow is just a shadow, and that it should know its place. The character

is a living body and you wish to merge with it and become it. You look forward to its existence. You look forward to it from top to toe when it comes from insight.

Translated from Russian by Annelis Kuhlmann

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