



MASHA

The International Theatre Festival and Meeting Roots in Transit at Odin Teatret, Denmark, in January 2004, was dedicated to Maria Alekseevna Valentei, the granddaughter of the well known Russian theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold. Béatrice Picon-Vallin, a French university professor and Meyerhold expert, and Janne Risum, a Danish university professor and researcher in Russian theatre, were asked to write about Maria Alekseevna Valentei to present her to the Roots in Transit participants and guests. These articles give a clear example of an anonymous struggle and a life dedicated to a cause, and therefore have been included in this issue of The Open Page. They both speak of Maria Alekseevna Valentei, with Béatrice Picon-Vallin's informative testimony being followed by Janne Risum's more personal account.



Maria Alekseevna Valentei died on the 15th of January 2003. For all those who have studied the work of Vsevolod Meyerhold in Russia and in the wider world, she was quite simply Masha. Masha, the granddaughter of the great theatre director, had transparent light blue, inflexible eyes. In the 1930s, she had frequented the home and theatre (GosTiM) of one of the last century's greatest directors.

Daughter of Tatiana, one of Meyerhold's three children by his first wife Olga Munt, Masha was fourteen years old in 1939 when her grandfather was arrested; and she was seventeen in 1942 when her mother, Tatiana Vsevolodovna, who worked at the "New Life" *kolkhoz* near Moscow, was sent to a camp "for having sung praises of her father, an enemy of the people".

Tatiana was condemned to eight years of *Siblag*. Masha also left for Siberia, to live in Novossibirsk with her uncle, the husband of Irina, Tatiana's sister. Her uncle was the actor V. Merkuriev, a member of the Leningrad Pushkin Theatre company, at the time evacuated to Novossibirsk. Thanks to the intervention of a famous actress solicited by V. Merkuriev, Tatiana was liberated before the end of her eight years of punishment. It was then that Masha began to tirelessly send letters to the Soviet authorities asking them to make account for her grandfather's fate.

Meyerhold was imprisoned in June 1939 and shot on the 2nd of February 1940. In 1946 a first (false) official paper was delivered to Masha concerning Meyerhold's death. She received three more, all just as

untrue. Masha really entered the "arena" at the moment of the trial for Meyerhold's rehabilitation, when she began meeting influential personalities and asking them for written testimonials in favour of Meyerhold, to place in the dossier put together by the military attorney B. Riazsky. Masha will always remember the composer Dmitri Shostakovich's sobs, and the recollections he had poured out in a torrent before her in favour of her grandfather and his work: Shostakovich could only write the letter the day after meeting her because of the enormous emotions her request had brought up in him.

After Meyerhold's judicial rehabilitation in 1955, Masha continued, often alone, in her struggle against the totalitarian power - David against a Kafkaesque Goliath - with an indomitable energy, just as convinced of the artist's genius as of his innocence. She had dealt with - and this had filled her whole life - his political (she demanded that he should be reintegrated into the Communist Party) and artistic rehabilitation. She was able to keep her head with everyone. She managed to access Meyerhold's terrible 537 dossier in the KGB archives which was constructed following his interrogation, have it photocopied and then, from 1991 to 1994, progressively acquire 12, Bryusov Street, the Moscow apartment which had belonged to the Meyerhold family, as part of the Bakhrouchine Theatre Museum. The home had been divided in two parts and Masha managed to put them together again and transform them into an Apartment Museum

that opened in September 1997 as a section of the Bakhrouchine Museum. The rooms were in a state of total disrepair but, without becoming discouraged, Masha pulled up her sleeves and started a new campaign to find the money and have the apartment restored. She reassembled the furniture that she could find and tried to buy objects similar to those that had occupied the rooms in the Meyerhold family's era. In the Apartment Museum original documents - photographs, sketches, models, posters - bought with funds from the Bakhrouchine Museum can be seen.

From 1991, she happily received all those who wanted to know more - students, journalists, actors and directors. Peter Brook, Matthias Langhoff, Eugenio Barba, Ariane Mnouchkine and her company, and many others, have met her in one of the five rooms of this terrible and yet warm Museum. Mistress of the place, she offered her force of conviction alongside tea. In the living room she "received" around the oval table; in the little room to the right of the entrance door - which I was going to call the kitchen although it was not - she announced future projects, she talked of struggles to come, dangers, difficulties, offences, and also of successes. Masha organised *soirées* on the anniversaries of the birth and death of Vsevolod Emilevitch, and dedicated other evenings to the artists who had worked with him. She was also a distant "caretaker" of the Meyerhold Museum in Penza, the director's birth town.

In Russia she was the scientific secretary of the commission for Meyerhold's Artistic Heritage which, founded in 1956, looked after editions of Meyerhold's writings. Masha also collected, in an old cupboard that dominated the director's study and had without doubt belonged to him, all that was published on Meyerhold world-wide. Masha was delighted every time she received a new

testimonial of remembrance and recognition about the man whose work she had made it possible to recover, so that it did not disappear as a result of the terror and passivity created by the political regime.

Masha travelled to France to assist at the International Meyerhold Symposium, *La mise en scène dans le siècle*, organised in Paris in November 2000 by the Laboratoire de Recherches sur les Arts du Spectacle of the CNRS, bringing together scholars and practitioners from all over the world. The old lady of seventy-nine, with the curious eyes of an eternal little girl, was always the first to arrive at the beginning of the sessions; she followed all the events of the Meyerhold Week without taking any break.

Returning aglow from these meetings, she continued to organise visits and evenings dedicated to the Master or to those who surrounded him, in the Moscow Apartment Museum. Although her legs carried her badly, it was she who supported all those who were interested in making a place for the assassinated director in the theatre history of the 20th century. These people always went to see her to ask her for advice.

Some hours before dying, Masha got up saying: "I must go to the Museum". Without doubt she wanted to prepare the *soirée* of the 2nd of February, the anniversary of Meyerhold's assassination.

Masha rests in the Vagankov cemetery, where she was solemnly and luminously accompanied by a multitude of theatre people. The Meyerhold Centre (opened in 2001, after numerous tribulations), of which she had so ardently and actively wished the creation, watched over her last journey.

I was not able to accompany her on this last winter journey. Later I went to take her flowers, finding the tomb hidden among the prolific disorder of the strange and lively place that an orthodox cemetery is. It was a sunny spring afternoon, and the roses

opened in the water of the glass jug dug into the earth, just like they opened in her hands when Masha placed the bunches of flowers given to her in a vase on the floor under Meyerhold's portrait in Bryusov Street.

Masha is no longer. It will certainly be more difficult for scholars to move forward without her, without her help and confidence, without her obstinate courage, her cold and determined rage, without her gaze that always seemed to repeat the last words of the great Meyerhold actor, Erast Garin, who could not stop saying, just before dying, "Tell me, why did they kill him?"

But her luminous, penetrating, incorruptible presence seems to accompany us still, to scrutinise and sustain all of us who have experienced the fortune and delight of going along to the end of the road - the road

of theatre, justice and humanity - beside her.

Translated from French by Julia Varley

BÉATRICE PICON-VALLIN (France) is the Director of CNRS (Laboratory of Research in the Performance Arts) in Paris. She has published books on Russian Jewish Theatre and many volumes on Meyerhold and is currently preparing a book on Théâtre du Soleil and on Piotr Fomenko's workshop in Moscow. She organises international workshops on "Directing: History and Theory", "Stage and New Technologies" and on "Actor's Technique".



Homage to Masha at the Théâtre du Conservatoire National Supérieur d'Art Dramatique de Paris. Masha standing beside Béatrice Picon-Vallin expresses her thanks with the gesture of a little soldier. Photo: D. R. Vallin



In 1991 Maria Alekseevna managed to reclaim the apartment of her grandfather Meyerhold on the first floor of 12, Bryusov Street in central Moscow. Never seen again he had been arrested in June 1939, and some weeks later his then wife, the actress Zinaida Raikh, had been stabbed to death in these rooms. By now they were dilapidated. From scratch Maria Alekseevna started transforming the site of a crime not just into a museum, but a hospitable international centre for everyone interested in the work of Meyerhold. In June 1994 I rang the door bell.

She was a small and slender woman with her greying hair arranged in a bun, a grave face, and a delicate and unobtrusive voice. But her bright light blue eyes were watching me intensely. Those she had clearly inherited from Meyerhold. So far only two rooms were available. Apart from a Bechstein piano, a divan, a glass-fronted bookcase (the only authentic piece of furniture retrieved), and some pictures and photo-stats on the walls, they were uncomfortably empty. On some shelves a small collection of books by Meyerhold and about him in foreign languages was on display. She knew no foreign languages and I no Russian. Luckily for me my colleague did.

Over the tea Maria Alekseevna had one agenda: whether we liked it or not to give us as much information about the fate of Meyerhold and Zinaida Raikh as possible. Her rare smiles revealed a self-assured and cheeky girl. I returned the next day with a gift, the book *The Secret Art of the Performer* by Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese,

showing her its sections on Meyerhold. She put it on the shelf with the others and took us to visit the common grave at the Donskoy cemetery which holds the ashes of Meyerhold and numberless other victims of Stalin.

At the florist some white and pink lilies had caught my eye as appropriate to bring along because of their theatrical beauty. She made me explain. She was bringing only one white rose. In the soil of the small common grave all kinds and colours of small flowers were growing closely side by side, planted by how many hands above the ashes insensibly mixed so long ago. Maria Alekseevna insisted that I bring a poster from one of Meyerhold's performances as a gift from her to Mr. Barba in Denmark. She gave me a book about Meyerhold in Russian and invited me to come back to study his work with her assistance. After that we stayed in contact by letter, or met at symposia in Europe. I took her hint and studied Russian. She sent me more books, needless to say, in Russian. It took quite some time before I could read anything in them.

In May 2001 I was ready. By now the stage director Valery Fokin had opened his Meyerhold Centre, a theatre close to her heart which she supported in any way she could. Fokin had invited Odin Teatret over to make a guest appearance. I joined them, but only to disappear the first morning into the Moscow metro heading for the suburb where the archive holding the material on Meyerhold and his theatre is situated. I just walked in from the street with a recommen-

dation from my university. Soon a librarian set me to work to order what I had come to see.

In the evening we all met Maria Alekseevna again at the Meyerhold Centre. I told her what I was going to do at the archive during my stay. When Saturday came we were her guests at the museum apartment. By now its five rooms all had pieces of carefully selected period furniture, original exhibits from Meyerhold's productions, and various plants growing in pots on the windowsills. Maria Alekseevna had recreated the apartment from memory, but she had wisely left ample space for its present function and included a television and a collection of videos.

During her last two years I returned, each time for a month. I became a house guest. From my hotel near the Kremlin it was just a short walk. Despite her growing Parkinson's disease, she kept going. By now she was only able to move very slowly and tired quickly. Her light blue eyes shone as determinedly as ever.

During the week I was working in the reading room of the archive until closing hours. I never asked for her help, but she had her ways. She would call me at night and invite me for lunch at the museum the coming weekend, or instruct me to be at a certain theatre on a certain evening at a certain time, where a ticket would be waiting for me, and sometimes herself as well. So I became a house guest at the Meyerhold Centre too. Or I entered the Taganka behind her, only to find her steering straight toward the office of Yuri Lyubimov, ending up being introduced by her to him. She put me in touch with people and places who might be useful to my research.

Having wriggled out of me that as a foreigner I had to pay the archive four dollars for each photocopy (which I under-

stood since it gave top quality service but had a strained budget), she came and told me that she had intervened on my behalf. I did not have the heart to tell her the result. They kindly gave me a special price reduction. For Meyerhold material I only had to pay three dollars per copy. I did so with pleasure (the following year they made the rate much lower and the same for everybody).

One Sunday in May 2002 she announced to me that she would be coming to the archive on Tuesday morning to study there as well. That morning I set out extra early for the long metro trip to be sure to be at the archive at nine sharp when it opened, and to greet her when she entered. I ran the last bit of the way. She was already there!

We entered the light green reading room together and sat down at two desks. Nobody else had arrived yet. The librarian handed us our study materials. Maria Alekseevna insisted that I set to work immediately. I spread out my things, opened a document in front of me to continue reading from where I left off the day before, and started my portable computer to make notes. I noticed that she was watching me. When she saw me start the computer her eyes were shining. I sensed why: she was rejoicing at the simple fact that it was possible for this to happen right here. She came over to study the screen and what I had written on it, and when she saw the name of Meyerhold, she was satisfied and returned to her desk. In front of her lay some big flat heavy volumes, prompt books from some of Meyerhold's performances. She had some difficulty opening the first with her shaking hands. After a while she tried to turn the page, but did not succeed. I came over, sat down opposite her, and turned it for her. She did not like being fussed about and could be very stubborn, but accepted it.

I was happy for once to be able to give

her some real help. She concentrated on the page, only moving her eyes. Now her face looked young. Her eyes moved so quickly that I could see she was more than familiar with the text and was trying to find some quote. Reaching the bottom of the page she put out two fingers to turn it, and I lifted it from the top in the same rhythm. As we continued I lost the sense of time. When she had finished, she ordered a photocopy of a special page.

Her friend Alla Mikhailova, who had driven her to the archive and who had been sitting in her car parked outside reading a book in the meantime, materialised with a wry smile and left with her.

And so it came that I saw Maria Alekseevna perform. The following Monday she held an evening at the museum dedicated to the work of Meyerhold's actor Samoilov. In keeping with Meyerhold's claim that the theatre needs "*de la musique avant toute chose*", she always opened her evenings by having a young pianist sit down at the Bechstein and play us some classical pieces.

This time I brought her a bouquet of bright yellow lilies. She had put the photocopy and some photos on special display. An experienced actor spoke to us of the way the Meyerhold's actors acted. Asked afterwards by a young actor what was so special about that, he answered: "The attitude. But you may not understand that today". We applauded him. Maria Alekseevna had disappeared. Suddenly she flung open the door, slowly entered the room with "my" bouquet, still wrapped in cellophane, and presented him with it. He was moved and kissed her cheeks. We applauded again. Then we all sat down for tea, open sandwiches, vodka, chatting and singing.

I was one of the last to leave, and I discovered the bouquet discreetly put away

in a dark corner in a side room, cellophane and all intact. It had been just show, but what a show, worthy of the occasion, when even the receiver knows how to hand over the prop afterwards backstage so as not to spoil the illusion! Meyerhold calls that kind of thing "antics appropriate to the theatre".

Much the same happened in the autumn when she asked me to join her for Lyubimov's 80th birthday at the Taganka. The day before I had arrived at the museum with a bouquet of orange lilies. "Thank you," she said, "they will be just right for Lyubimov". And this time she handed them over for real.

She gave me a lot. There was really nothing I could give her. So I kept bringing her flowers, mostly lilies, knowing that she did not consider them to be for herself, but at first invariably put them under Meyerhold's portrait in the side room, and later went on to putting them on his writing desk in his study. There almost nobody saw them, except the occasional visitors. But from the dining room you could smell them.

She took her naps in the study on his divan. One Sunday afternoon she came out from there and stood in the doorway after a nap; she saw me reading at the window and beckoned me to enter. When I reached her she pointed to the desk, where the lilies had opened more, and without thinking I responded: "Yes, there he is". Indeed time was not insuperable to her. On the contrary she had made the most of it by being able to wait, and in her passion for justice and to retrieve what had been wrongfully lost and make it grow again, she was at home in two dimensions.

Appointments she gave me as small handwritten notes. The last time I left her for Denmark, in October, I asked her if Meyerhold had a favourite flower.



Béatrice Picon-Vallin, Janne Risum and friends visiting Meyerhold's Museum Apartment in Moscow, 2002.
Photo: Risum

"Hyacinths," she replied, "all colours". As usual we were having tea in the small former kitchen of the apartment, which served as her personal space, salon and office. I told her I would be back in May. She wrote me this note: "In May bring hyacinth bulbs," explaining that she wished to plant them on Meyerhold's grave. The evening before I left she took me to a performance at the Meyerhold Centre. Afterwards, putting on her coat, she was unable to button it up. I did it for her. She gave me a twinkle and raised her index finger: "Don't forget the hyacinth bulbs!" and disappeared into the night supported by her companions.

I figured that hyacinths behave much the same in Russia as in Denmark. The right time to plant the bulbs is in the fall. Yet I bought some light blue and pink ones and stored them in a cold cellar. After all

hyacinths also belong to the Lily Family. When I heard she had died, I thought that this metaphor was just right. She knew her condition, and winter comes before spring. But facing that kind of paradox is exactly what theatre and research is about.

I have been told that for the last two months she was confined to a hospital bed. Even now she worried about how she could arrange her annual celebration of Meyerhold's birthday at the museum apartment in February. On the 15th of January she asked to sit up. Her family assisted her. Then she wanted to get up. Once she was standing unassisted on the floor, she announced: "I am going to the museum to prepare Meyerhold's birthday," and dropped dead. And so she died as she had lived, keeping her back and her purpose straight,

and her last word was "Meyerhold".

(Translated by Stephen Garry)

She had loved her own husband dearly. After his death she had lived for the museum. And so - without being misunderstood - I can reveal that I was reading Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* in my study one of those long dark evenings of early January in Denmark. By coincidence it was shortly before her death, but I had no idea of her critical condition in far away Moscow. When, at the end of the novel, the haunted Master and his beloved Margarita escape and enter eternal life, her soothing words to him brought back to me the spirit of the evenings Maria Alekseevna had been hosting in the museum apartment.

"Listen to the silence," said Margarita to the master, the sand rustling under her bare feet. "Listen to the silence and enjoy it. Here is the peace that you never knew in your lifetime. Look, there is your home for eternity, which is your reward. I can already see a Venetian window and a climbing vine which grows right up to the roof. It's your home, your home for ever. In the evenings people will come to see you - people who interest you, people who will never upset you. They will play to you and sing to you and you will see how beautiful the room is by candlelight. You shall go to sleep with your dirty old cap on, you shall go to sleep with a smile on your lips. Sleep will give you strength and make you wise. And you can never send me away - I shall watch over your sleep."

In June I was able to visit her grave in the Vagankov cemetery. It is protected by tall trees. As it should be, our small party of female mourners was international. We were a Russian, a Japanese and a Danish woman. I lay three long-stemmed white lilies across her grave and sang for her, knowing that I was singing for a great gardener.

JANNE RISUM (Denmark) was born in 1947 and is Associate Professor at the Institute of Dramaturgy at Aarhus University. Her area of research is acting and history and the theory of theatre and performance. She is a member of the Universities' Commission in IFTR (International Federation for Theatre Research) and of the Association of Nordic Theatre Scientists. Janne directs the Centre for Theatre Laboratory Studies (CTLS) created by Aarhus University in 2002.