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Stanislavski Studies >

Practice, Legacy, and Contemporary Theater

Volume 4, 2016 - Issue 2

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Introduced and edited by David Chambers  &Translations by Maxim Krivosheyev 

Pages 125-135 | Published online: 16 Nov 2016

 Download citation  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20567790.2016.1234017>

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Mikhail Butkevich: the bridge to the contemporary Russian avant-garde

Introduced and edited by David Chambers

Harvard University: Theatre Dance and Media

Translations by Maxim Krivosheyev

Part I

Mikhail Butkevich (1926–1995), a crucial figure in the development of the contemporary Russian theatre, is almost completely unknown in the West. Aside from two short pieces published 10 years ago in an American academic journal, nothing by him or about him has been seen in English. Yet in Russia, his influence and impact is palpable today in the works of contemporary experimental theatre artists such as his pupil Anatoly Vasiliev; the brilliant director Yuri Butusov (from whom I first heard about Butkevich); and Dmitri Krymov who reads Butkevich for “confirmation of what I am doing.” Butkevich might best be described as the “missing link,” the bridge between the deep Stanislavskian social/psychological realism of the late Soviet era (Dodin, Ginkas, *et al.*), and the post-modernist theatricalism of the post-Glasnost generation of experimentalists.

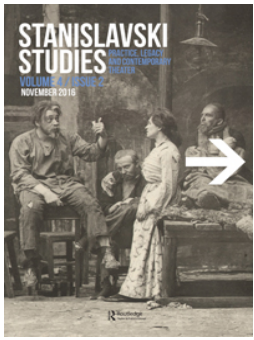
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The general definition of the *Theatre of Games* is embedded in its name. A playing field for games is what actors enter into, in the rehearsal hall and on the stage. Just as in any other game, football or chess for example, each rehearsal or performance is a theatre game which has its own discrete set of self-generated rules that cannot be violated; inside that playing field with those rules, every player/artist has their own individual roles and goals, just as does a football or chess player. Continual improvisation and the pervasive game-playing state of mind gives the actors the freedom of being alive – *as themselves not as their character* – on stage, moving along their own personal paths to their own self-determined goals. It is the actor who enters the stage – not a *character*, but the *actor* him- or her-self – and it is that actor who exits.

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Stanislavski Studies

Practice, Legacy, and Contemporary Theater

ISSN: 2056-7790 (Print) 2054-4170 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfst20>

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To cite this article: Introduced and edited by David Chambers & Translations by Maxim Krivosheyev (2016) Mikhail Butkevich: the bridge to the contemporary Russian avant-garde, Stanislavski Studies, 4:2, 125-135, DOI: [10.1080/20567790.2016.1234017](https://doi.org/10.1080/20567790.2016.1234017)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20567790.2016.1234017>



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Part I

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Initially deeply influenced by his renowned teachers Maria Knebel and Andrey Popov at GITIS (Moscow’s premiere drama school), Butkevich later rejected their methodology, known as Analysis through Action. Fascinated by game theory tracing back to Huizinga, Caillois, and others, as well as captivated by the theatricalist ideas of Michael Chekhov – whose works were banned in Russia until the late 1980s – Butkevich synthesized an intuitive and improvisational process that he taught to his own students at GITIS. He called this *Theatre of Games*. This was not an attempt to align new discoveries with accumulated experience. It was a transition into a wholly different theatre space, a different theatre territory, a different dimension with fundamentally different rules of playing the game.

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Just as the individual actor plays a game with their character, all the participating players and the director play a game with the play. The text is an organic object (oxymoron intended) that can be toyed with like an animate Rubik's cube, twisted in any direction and configuration desired; a character is a vacant space in that cube, which can be totally psychologically and physically fulfilled and at the same time overtly manipulated, puppeteered by the performer. Each production, indeed every performance, will necessarily be unique and idiosyncratic based wholly on the creativity and individuality of the participants at hand. These participants include the audience – the presence of which the player continually “plays” with, even if not always in direct connection. Today's rehearsal will not look like yesterday's; tonight's performance will resemble, but not replicate last night's. This is taking Stanislavski's maxim of “here, now, never before” to its most vital logical extreme.

Theatre of Games is not a system; it is an attitude, an approach, a spirit of open play within self-determined boundaries. The end result is never predetermined; it is discovered today and will be rediscovered tomorrow. But always, the actor must be able to (1) on cue fully inhabit their role; (2) at will agilely step outside their character and play a game with it; and (3) always be playing a performative game with the audience acknowledged or not.

From the mid-1960s to his death in 1995, Mikhail Butkevich developed his ideas through teaching, directing, and most significantly writing. His seemingly meandering meditations are at once profound, entertaining, and often on first encounter, obdurate. What appear to be charming digressions, personal circumambulations, and perplexing conundrums ultimately turn out to be tensile threads of the rich tapestry of arguments he slowly weaves. His obsessive quest was to transform an actor/performer into a self-generative actor/artist, and for a director to create a self-organizing structure for each theatre performance. Ultimately his writings filled two large volumes. These 1300 pages read like a gigantic Tarot deck, like the I Ching; the books are games in themselves. There are no proscriptive how-to instructions; instead there are provocative riddles, challenging puzzles, unorthodox and profound insights, and utopian visions designed to ignite idiosyncratic eruptions of individualized theatrical imagination.

As the reins of Soviet realism slackened and the censors looked the other way, the artists jumped out of the troika and ran into the woods to play. Butkevich was there to welcome them.

After an interview with director Yuri Butusov, who cited Butkevich as perhaps his greatest influence, I immediately began seeking more information about this cryptic figure. In English, I found a brief article and a short excerpt, but no more. Via social media, I found the source of these pages: Moscow translator Maxim Krivosheyev, who kindly sent me many more pages he had translated from Butkevich's first volume. Some of those pages are included in the samples which follow.

I join Maxim and other Russian theatre colleagues in hoping that one day there will be an English-language publication of Mikhail Butkevich's *Towards a Theatre of Games, Volume One*. Meanwhile, enjoy the following excerpts from Butkevich's *oeuvre*. There is much more where this came from.

David Chambers with assistance from a video featuring Rosa Tolskaya, a director and former student of Butkevich, interviewed by Maxim Krivosheyev.

A note from Maxim Krivosheyev

For a long time I wanted to find an all-encompassing theatrical structure which would be able to include and integrate in itself all numerous tendencies and manifestations of the modern stage. I was lucky I came across the concept of Theatre of Games.

Mikhail Butkevich

Towards a Theatre of Games is a book-game. The author sets up his own rules, which the reader has to learn along the way. For me as a translator, this book has been my most exciting and unprecedented professional journey to date. This book does not fit into any existing genre; it is a genre itself.

First, it is important to say that this book is not a scientific volume, nor a textbook, nor a comprehensive description of a new method. It is all of those things altogether – and it is also poetic. Butkevich himself defined the genre of his book as a “lyrical tractate” – almost an oxymoron. The beauty, uniqueness, and, value of the book lie in its incoherent coherence of initially seemingly incompatible particles. For some, it is a kind of task just to read it. It takes effort to adjust to the style; only then can you begin to enjoy its treasures. However, some people like Yuri Butusov and Dmitri Krymov, Russian theatre artists whose work is becoming more and more popular in the West, manage to dive into it right away and see a new phase of theatre theories brought up to a completely new level of “applied truth.”

This is what Krymov said about Butkevich and the book in a short interview with professor David Chambers.

Unfortunately, I did not know Mikhail Butkevich, but after reading his two books that came out not so long ago in Moscow, I really felt great respect towards the man; I was filled with tremendous interest in what he did. His work is the next step after Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Brecht ... This may sound childishly simple but it is how I define it. He turned all those sophisticated theories into a game. It is some kind of a new state of realism, a new type of existence of the person on stage. I think it gives the actor incredible capabilities, while the audience experiences a new level of truth of what happening on stage. Through the game one can express the serious or the funny, one can be a philosopher or a clown, or perhaps even everything all together. Therefore, the game is a great thing! He called his book *Towards a Theatre of Games*. So I am his absolute fan.¹

At the beginning, some people may feel that the book is not structurally coherent. That feeling is deceptive. The “incoherent structure” of the book is the key feature of the book. In fact, only after finishing the whole book does one realize how coherent it actually is. The last sentence of the book explains all and breaks everything open for the reader to start his or her own game. Butkevich employed this strategy deliberately. His style of narrative creates a cumulative effect for the reader–researcher opening new horizons in their own search for new forms of art, their ability to compose new tools. The book is written for practitioners, not theorists – not only in theatre but also in life as a whole.

For me as a translator, it is a challenge and an honour to preserve the unique style of Mikhail Butkevich and present it to an English speaking audience alongside my American and English colleagues who helped me to “englishize” this amazing work of art, game, and life by one of the most interesting modern Russian theatre makers and philosophers who lived an extraordinary life.

The fragments of the book that you will read in this article are tiny snippets of a 700-page volume followed by another 600-page volume. The challenge for the reader will be to imagine the elephant by its tail. I hope that the tail will be intriguing enough to make you want more.

A final note. I knew nothing about the concept of *Theatre of Games* in 2003. Then I met Butkevich's student and colleague Rosa Tolskaya who introduced me to the book and told me about the Theatre of Games as it was taught by Butkevich and practiced by Anatoly Vasiliev and his actors. I was in awe. It is radically different from what we are all used to, despite the fact that it stems from Stanislavski and applies to Michael Chekhov. I immediately wanted to present this exciting new approach to theatre-making to the English-speaking world. In 2005, together with my colleague Tolskaya, we presented workshops by practitioners of this method to students and professionals in the US. Now I hope that with this article the ripple effect will spread further and provoke more interest.

Maxim Krivosheyev, translator of *Towards a Theatre of Games*

Tragicomedy of genius

Mikhail Butkevich

(Article from the journal *Theatre Life* (Issue 5–6, 1995); a shorter version of this article is included in Butkevich's *Theatre of Games*, vol. 1.)

Just like only a stupid person can be explained everything with words, it is the same in our art – certain words and clear outline of a play are needed for the untalented. The talent will be told more with ellipsis or a silent pause where author's soul and feelings speak invisibly and more eloquently.

Konstantin Stanislavski

Konstatin Sergeevich Stanislavski is unarguably the most significant figure in the history of Russian theatre. Moreover, it must be emphasized – of the whole history of Russian theatre in its full swing. It includes not only the theatre of twentieth century, not only the theatre that was brought to Russia by Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, but also the ancient Theatre of Games, that for centuries had existed in Russia in performances of *skomorokhs*² and holy fools,³ in theatre amusements and feasts of our Tsars – from Oprichnina⁴ of Ivan the Terrible to debauchery of Peter the Great; from travesty costume games of Elizaveta Petrovna⁵ to the total change of clothes of the whole Russia organized by snub-nosed emperor Paul.

Stanislavski's genius has absorbed everything that existed in Russian acting before him and he determined everything that would be after him ...

Konstantin Sergeevich Alekseev was not a holy fool.⁶ He was a merchant's son. He experienced neither poverty nor waywardness, nor humiliating dependence on the powerful of this world. His own financial and social position and kindness of his father freed him from vulgar and tiresome worries about his daily bread and the roof over his head, allowing him to concentrate only on the high excitements of artistic life with its desirable freedom and fullness. He was very fortunate to have the happy life of a free artist. It was his sole responsibility to become a great artist. And he became *one*. He became Number 1, the pride and prowess of Russian theatre. This tall, grey-haired, black eye-browed giant walked proudly around the globe, leading the twentieth century theatre world by hand as *though it* was a child. Strict but kind, modest and kinglike, and always noble in everything. Nevertheless, there was something in him of the holy fool. First of all, his naiveté and state of bliss. How touchingly he believed in the sacredness of the art. How ardently he dreamt about the self-perfection of its gurus. How he used to exhaust himself with unbearable and unrestrainable work in the name of theatre. How he used to dole out his own punishment with reprimands and fines for any little sin committed to the theatre. And what a self-ostracizing,

almost Shahsey-Vahsey⁷ critique he used to emancipate in his arguments with Nemirovich-Danchenko, who was never tired of torturing him purposely and unintentionally.

Kostantin Sergeevich Alekseev was not a skomorokh either. He was a Russian gentleman and refined artist. He dedicated his entire life to theatre and was an uncompromising enemy of theatricality. He could not tolerate Punch-and-Judy shows nor could he endure mugging in acting. No matter where he was and who he was talking to, he would always declare his attachment to psychological theatre. He admitted the conditional character of stage performance, he allowed the grotesque on stage, and he appreciated vivid directing concepts, but always with necessary psychological content and common justification. Obsessed with realism, he created the fourth wall to save actors from the temptation of communicating with the audience directly. He admired delicate emotions on stage, noble simplicity, unpretentious heroism, touching nature, intelligence, and reserved lyricism ... But sometimes he would explode. It was like little devils playing jack-in-the-box: his cuckoo Gaev playing billiards or the funny monster Krutitsky, or the clumsy lover Rippafratta. Sometimes, it could go even farther than that: swashbuckling clystering Moliere would be storming around dumb Argan for the whole evening. At moments like these, one could see something of the skomorokh in the great artist – the cheerful celebratory mood and idea of acting as happiness itself. Near the last stage of his life, he actually once formulated his “super-super objective” to bring happiness to people!

On top of that: how, if not by his purely skomorokh's inclination toward changing dresses and faces, can you explain two facts of Konstantine Sergeevich's biography? Being naturally gifted and handsome, he has been always concerned with external characteristics of a role; he traded his nice and simple last name for a flashy pseudonym. It is bright, beautiful, and very theatrical. He put on the face of a player.

For four decades he reigned in theatre, but these 40 years were quite different from the 40 years of Ivan the Terrible. He was a great reformer of stage, but at first the introduction of his reforms had nothing in common with the violent changes in Peter the Great. Stanislavski was a kind ruler who indefatigably cared about his subjects. He was the first individual in Russian theatre history to create human backstage conditions for actors. He invested money in it (by the way his own money!). There were carpets on the floor, comfortable furniture, paintings, mirrors, and chandeliers. It was warm in the winter and it had bright electric light. Previously nothing even close to that existed. Though he was not the first to dream it, he was the first to implement the practice of respecting actors on both professional and social levels. In his lifetime, the prestige of the Moscow Art Theatre actors was unusually high. But there was something from tyrant and despot in him despite his kindness and humanism, especially in his directing personality: unmerciful, capricious precision, and rigidity. His famous “I don't believe!” exhausted actors to death, depriving them of the ability to be aware of what was around them. Actors would grow dull and stupid, yet he continued screaming, “I don't believe you! I don't believe you!”, forcing his tortured and befuddled performers to repeat the same phrase, gesture, intonation again and again, in an effort to get them to do “God knows what.” In response, his actors would be gossiping in far corners of theatre about his anecdotic weirdness. Though “God knows what” had its name, it was called perfection.

The twentieth-century theatre is indebted to Stanislavski for everything: its birth, development, theory, methodology, highest practical achievements, and the people. Direct and indirect influence of his genius determined and fortunately still determines the magnitude and artistic destiny of any remarkable person in contemporary theatre. It is difficult to list all

the actors because there were thousands of them (from Olga Knipper to Marilyn Monroe, and from Alexander Artem to Marlon Brando); therefore, let's list the directors: Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, Sulerzhitsky, Dulen, Klerman, Lee Strasberg, Dikiy, Bersenev, Anrei Popov, Mardzhanov, Zavadsky, Nikolai Petrov, Elia Kazan, Gorchakov, Knebel, Grotowsky, Anatoly Efros, and Anatoly Vasiliev ... He was the first to bring genuine things and feelings of our everyday life to the stage. He was the first to legalize the requirement and total meaning of an ensemble of actors in the theatre. It was he – also the first! – who introduced theatre studios in place of traditional schools and colleges. And it has been always like that. No matter what we come up with and invent for our beloved theatre, in the end we discover that 60, 70, or sometimes even 80 years ago it was all created and tested in some way or the other by the omnipresent Stanislavski. The century is coming to an end⁸ and we are still unable to break through the circle of theatrical problems marked by the generous and courageous hand of the great KS ...

With all of its external prosperity and noisy success, the life of the Russian stage genius was full of hidden tragedy. It can be especially noticed in the main thing of his life and the only thing during the last years of his life – his famous Stanislavski's method.

From the inside, the tragedy looked like this: With the work that is imposed on theatre by Geits ("bolshevik managing director" of the Moscow Art Theatre – note by M.B.) I have nothing to do and have nothing to write the system for. In the existing conditions of sloppy work, it is inapplicable, harmful and all my half a century work is ruined. The theatre became not the State Art Theatre but a State Sloppy Slapdash Work Theatre (from the notes for himself in the notebook #544, 1930).

The look from the outside was not better: the system was gradually turning into an official doctrine just as the reforms of Peter the Great did; it had a violent introduction and little by little it became the required good. But the good that is required for everybody and everywhere can stop being what it is meant to be and easily turn into evil.

With great pleasure, one system (social totalitarianism) was introducing the other (Stanislavski's system). They were related by their regulations.

This tragedy of Stanislavski was even broader than his actual earthly existence. It unleashed itself with evil abandon after his death, during the shameful realm of imitators. Stanislavski's system, emasculated to the point of plain mastery of the elements of the system, in combination with the most absurd theory of non-conflict, was leading theatre toward the dullness of plain life-imitation.

Originally intended by Stanislavski to save the theatre, it began to ruin it.

But it was not only the social machine that was working. His destiny was working too. It was intriguing pretending to be a "chance." By chance, mediocre and averagely talented people would gather around Konstantin Sergeevich, growing and sticking, swarming, admirably buzzing about their full dedication to the system, thereby completely blocking access to the master for talented and extraordinary people.

Often times, it was turning into a ridiculous nightmare because KSS liked expression of talent in the other person a lot. He was happiest when he encountered bright and creative individuals. Just recall some of his artistic activity when he met Meyerhold (Povarskaya Street Studio), Gordon Craig (*Hamlet*), Sulerzhitsky and Vakhtangov (First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre), and Michael Chekhov (second edition of Gogol's masterpiece *Inspector General*). But this happiness never stayed long with Konstantin Sergeevich. A jealous blockade masquerading as a combination of circumstances or Nemirovich-Danchenko,

coupled with his pupils' desire for independence, were killing or blanketing the "sweet life" of Konstantin Sergeevich. The nearest circle never recognizes the prophet it surrounds, absorbed in its own work: Meyerhold was sent away, Craig separated, Sulerzhitsky mistreated, and Chekhov, Vakhtangov and Popov left themselves. He was left alone again in the power of those who were nearby ...

All the great are doomed to be profaned. Stanislavski's teachings did not manage to avoid this. The modest greatness of the system became its trouble. As soon as the Master passed away, his numerous helpers and spongers changed gold pieces from the genius' treasury to copper coins to serve their popularizing needs.

Stanislavski was tragically unfortunate with those close to him. "Companions" bewitched Konstantin Sergeevich just like priests did Panikovsky.⁹ They would buzz in his ear that the most important thing in his life was to create a scientific method of creating an actor. They were convincing him that he was creating a science of theatre; that at that time science was more important than anything else. He believed them (a result of his naiveté) and started developing the system consistently and logically. He dug into the elements, sorting, classifying, and putting them on shelves. It was dangerous because dogmatism kept watch and pedantic doctrine awaited its turn.

Colossally difficult, gigantic and painstaking work is still ahead of us: to free the treasures left by Stanislavski from any husk – from popularizing vulgarity, inadequate interpretation, and, most important, from untalented "continuations" and "developments" that dried the living sprouts of genius sowing.

This task is neither audacious nor blasphemous. It has only natural and necessary process that reminds in some way restoration of ancient icons – to clean them from soot, numerous layers of following writings, clumsy corrections of narrow-minded ICON PAINTER (insulting form). And then we will be bowled over by the discovery – freshness and brightness of the colours, courage of compositional and rhythmical concepts, radiant shining of high spirit.

Miraculous phenomenon of cleaning Rublev's Trinity¹⁰ will be repeated.

Here we enter the tragedy inside the spiritual world of KSS. As the years passed, a serious belief in the mission of his system and his own missionary work strengthened. The tragedy of KSS was that he was gradually destroyed by his own seriousness. Becoming more and more serious, he finally took the scientific character of his system seriously. People from his circle were supporting this seriousness with all their power. Humour gave in to scientific boredom. (And what humour he had! Light, sparkling, full of fantasy colours, it came from comic roles of young Alekseev. It had its last hurrah in his directing masterpieces *Inspector General-21*, *Hot Heart*, and *Figaro's Wedding*.)

Seriousness and loss of humour are scary things, particularly in art. They can dry up any artist, even such a bright artist as Stanislavski. This colourlessness came so close that it succeeded in actively cultivating deification of genius. "Ritual admirations" were organized around him. He had self-proclaimed disciples and bodyguards to protect him from real theatre and real life.

Konstantin Sergeevich Alekseev was a modest man. Konstantin Sergeevich Stanislavski was a strange man. While the first one was embarrassed, delicately blushing, and grievously enduring the sequence of events, the other one believed it almost right away and graciously permitted others to worship him. He started spouting elementary things about the elements of the system as though they were revelations of universal significance. Thus unnoticeably for himself he turned into a sort of Celestial Father, a Mao Tse-Tung of Russian theatre.

You don't believe it? See for yourself. In the film archive, thank God, there is one small documentary, for a bit more than a minute, but even more audio sources. It is Stanislavski's class. Images of the film prove what I say here. Watch a couple of times so that you can overcome the shock after seeing something incredible – the moving and talking shadow of the great artist, that this is Him, it is truly Himself. When the ripples of your excitement have finally settled down, just listen to what he is saying and you can finally understand: it is absurd, pure nonsense. He is not even saying anything he is preaching, or to be more precise he is playing a rehearsed little scene called "Lesson of a Master" in front of the camera and it is done on the primitive, pre-system level. It is impossible to apply the word "fake" to Stanislavski. But something unnatural, pretentious, and garish is in this film. To put it mildly, it provokes irritation and a feeling of discomfort.

I refer to Mikhail Bulgakov who had a similar impression after Stanislavski's rehearsal: "I do not have any doubt that the theory was truly genius, but I fell into despair seeing how the theory was put into practice ..."

Gradually, he became a live exhibit in his own museum. Not everybody had a permission to see the precious exhibit.

My old friend and classmate Lyalya Maevskaya-Lyudvigova, former actress of the Moscow Art Theatre in the 1930s, used to tell me how lucky she was to greet Stanislavski on his 70th birthday. She, probably as the youngest and prettiest, was chosen to greet the founder as a representative of the young generation of Soviet theatre. The great man was sitting in the armchair receiving presents and accolades. It was then Lyalya's turn. She came up to him, gave him flowers, leaned in to babble memorized phrases to Stanislavski, while squinted at her and extended his white nacreous hand for a kiss. Shocked, Lyalya smooched the hand of genius: "Such a feeling, as if you are kissing an expensive bar of soap." Another time Lyalya told me of her first encounter with Stanislavski:

I had just passed the contest successfully (she dramatized the memory with the details) and was accepted to the Moscow Art Theatre. We were playing only in big group scenes. Different trifles. In *Tsar Fyodor*, I was lucky to get a wordless episode of a young woman with a parasol. I had a beautiful costume made of authentic old brocade, kokoshnik¹¹ with pearls, but the cutest thing in my costume was the big brocade parasol with fringe. It had a dark cherry wood stick and carved ivory handle. I was happy because I felt beautiful in the outfit. We were getting ready in the darkness when the lights would be turned on gradually. Once, I do not remember exactly when (the 3rd or the 4th performance), I felt lighthearted, and still in half-darkness, raising my parasol, I whispered to my partners pointing at myself: "I am the first parachute jumper of Russia." My partners cracked up and by that time it was almost full light. Laughing was prohibited, but they, poor things, could not help it. They were turning away, bending, bowing, trying to stifle their accumulating laughter. They did not manage. During intermission, everyone inquired as to what was going on. At the next performance when I raised my parasol, the whole group burst out laughing. They were choking with laughter, trying to suppress it, and I was standing in my corner with the most innocent look as if I were clueless. In general, laughter is infectious, but on stage it is even more so and the more serious the scene you play is, the more you want to laugh. It was a beautiful group scene, a masterpiece of Stanislavski directing, and I ruined it. Grisha Konsky¹² was shouting ominous words upon exiting the stage: "Take her away. Next time I will not put up with it!" And I was taken away. I was replaced by my best friend Nina Lebedeva. The next day Maria Lilina¹³ dryly told me that Stanislavski requested me to go to Leontievsky Street¹⁴ at 10 AM. I thought: "that's it." I will have to say good-bye to the Moscow Art. As I climbed the stairs, my knees were giving out, my hands were shaking like a pick-pocket novice, and then I was losing consciousness because of my fear. I was drawn to him. He stood and came to me, greeted me, looked at me, and reprimanded me with the

point of a finger. I could not help it; I burst into tears. He started consoling me: "Don't, don't my dear. Stop crying! Take a seat! Yes, don't be scared." I cried even harder. He waited and when I came back to my senses he asked me in furtively: "What did you actually tell them?" "I told them that I am the first parachute jumper of Russia." And here I thought my exile would begin. But he started laughing just like Grisha Konsky, louder and more exuberant. Then he called his wife: "Marusya,¹⁵ come here soon. [to me] I totally understand them. [to her] You know what she told them, this naughty girl?" And they started laughing together. But, you know what is the cutest thing in this story? When Nina Lebedeva appeared on stage instead of me and raised the parasol, they laughed harder than ever.

I have never seen Stanislavski. I was not lucky.

After all, I could not see him anyway: in 1938, in the summer when he died, I was only 12 years old and living in the remote Northern Caucasian middle of nowhere. I did not even know that Konstantin Sergeevich Stanislavski existed. In 1938, I lived through the repression of 1937 and had no time or interest in art.

In various oral and written memoirs, they often refer to KSS as a "big child." What does it mean? It means that the spirit of game has not yet died in the person. The tragedy of KSS is the game strangled by scientific scholasticism. The comedy of KSS is that one of the most powerful minds and wisest scientists behaved like a child.

Maria Knebel liked to talk about Stanislavski. Here is her favourite story:

During the last years of his life, many people used to come to Stanislavski when he did not attend theatre anymore. There were different people from all over the world, often times quite important. Once I was assigned to accompany one such delegation from Germany – I knew German. We arranged the appointment in advance and I brought the Germans to Leontievsky Street at the agreed hour. Somebody told us that Kostantin Sergeevich is waiting for us and I brought the foreigners to his study. We were surprised when we saw study empty. I was confused and did not know what to do in this delicate situation: to distract his guests or to look for Stanislavski. It was an awkward pause. And all of a sudden, in the silence, somewhere from underneath, we all heard a subtle rustle of paper. We bent down and saw the great director sitting under the table as though in an ambush, rummaging for papers in the trash. I wanted to say something but he stopped me by putting his finger to his lips. After spending a little more time beneath the table, Stanislavski crawled out, got up, apologized, and said hello. Then he was explaining:

For a few days I have been studying the behavior of a mouse. I am trying to understand it and become it. I pretty much mastered the psychology of the night mouse. Now I am facing a more difficult task. I am looking for the nature of daylight mouse. It is insanely difficult. But just as insanely interesting, isn't it?

Let's change the scale. From the mouse rummaging to cataclysms of times. In this scale, Stanislavski will reappear before us as a Great and Eternal Savior. How many times already after he passed away theatre found itself on the edge of existence going through steep crises of decaying and catastrophe that endangered theatre with annihilation, i.e. complete disappearance. And Stanislavski was always around just at the right time and in the right place being ready to help and save.

Today he is also with us.

Look around and you will see his solemn shadow somewhere nearby – he is standing modestly (but alert!) in the quiet corner and waiting for his time to come and hand out the panacea. In the noble and beautiful hands of the wizard of stage the panacea looks as a bouquet of fragrant flowers, as a gift, as a new revelation ...

What is his new revelation about? Of course, it is about the actor.

Today, when right in front of our eyes the director's authoritarian theatre has fallen into pieces and the dust of destruction is still hanging in the air, our mythical grey-haired

handsome man with the elegant bowtie on his neck becomes extremely essential. He is versatile and sharp-sighted. In the cloud of dust, he already can see a silhouette of a self-building “theatre of players,” that is now mostly the actor’s theatre. Maybe only the actor’s theatre.

I think that in our time the Stanislavski of 1890s and 1910s will come back into fashion. Stanislavski-experimenter who was looking for the vanishing soul of theatre in the many dark corners of numerous studios – the unspeakably subtle almost telepathic experiences of an actor related to concentration, improvisation, and beauty. However, I may be wrong ...

**denotes the translator’s note*

Notes

1. This interview took place in New York City on 2 June 2015.
2. Nomadic actors in Ancient Russia, Skomorokhs performed as singers, humorists, musicians and actors of small scenes, as well as tamers and acrobats. They were known since the eleventh century and became popular in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. They were eventually ostracized by religious and state authorities.*
3. In Russian, “yurodivy.”
4. Oprichnina was a system of extreme measures used by the Russian Tsar Ivan IV the Terrible in 1565–1572 for the internal policy to destroy the opposition of the Nobility and strengthen the Russian centralized state. The word itself – Oprichnina – stems from the old Russian word that means special. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, they called Oprichnina a special piece of property given to the members of the great counts’ dynasty. It included a territory of land with military troops and administration. A troop of bodyguards, just like in ancient Turkey, was recruited by Ivan the Terrible from the nobility and children of nobility.*
5. Elizabeth I, daughter of Peter the Great.
6. This definition makes sense in the context of what Butkevich was talking about previously in his book. In his retrospective of Russian history, he covered what different types of games predominated and where the modern actor’s nature stems from.*
7. This was the Shiites’ (Shiite religion) day of commemorating Hussein, the son of Caliph Ali who was killed on the 10th of Muharram (year 680 CE) at the Battle of Karbala. The anniversary of his death is called Ashurah; it is a day of mourning and religious observance for Shiites’ Muslims. Fanatics accompany the mourning ceremonies with self-torture. The saying “Shahsey-Vahsey” is rooted in the cries “Shah Hussein, vah, Hussein!” *
8. Mikhail Butkevich was writing this book throughout his life. He died in 1995; the book was published by his friends and students in 2002.*
9. Character of the famous Soviet/Russian satiric novel *Golden Bull Calf* by Ilf and Petrov.*
10. Andrei Rublev (ca. 1360–1430 Moscow) was an icon painter. During 1370–1390, he studied and worked in the team of Moscow icon painters. Before 1405, he took monastic vows and started living in the Anronnikov monastery in Moscow. In 1405 together with such painters and Pheophan Greek and Prohor from Gorodets, he painted the Annunciation Cathedral in Moscow’s Kremlin. In 1408, together with painter Danila the Black, he painted frescos and icons of the Assumption Cathedral in the town of Vladimir. Between 1422 and 1427 together with Danila the Black, he supervised building and painting of iconostas of the Trinity Cathedral at the Trinity-Sergeev Monastery. At the same time he created the Trinity – the icon that became a masterpiece of fine art of the fifteenth century. Andrei Rublev revived ancient laws of compositional proportion, rhythm, and harmony relying on his artistic intuition.*
11. Old Russian type of headgear for women.*
12. A Moscow Art Theatre actor.*
13. Stanislavski’s wife.*
14. Stanislavski’s home address in the centre of Moscow.*
15. Diminutive form of Maria in Russian.*

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Mikhail Butkevich: the bridge to the contemporary Russian Avant-Garde

Translated by Maxim Krivosheyev

To cite this article: Translated by Maxim Krivosheyev (2017): Mikhail Butkevich: the bridge to the contemporary Russian Avant-Garde, Stanislavski Studies, DOI: [10.1080/20567790.2017.1377428](https://doi.org/10.1080/20567790.2017.1377428)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20567790.2017.1377428>



Published online: 29 Sep 2017.



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Mikhail Butkevich: the bridge to the contemporary Russian Avant-Garde

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Part II: More Excerpts from Volume I of Butkevich's *Towards a Theatre of Games*

TOWARDS A THEATRE OF GAMES

By Mikhail Butkevich

Section 1

“Some other school” – that was the school of players.

For a long time, I wanted to find an all encompassing theatrical structure, which would be able to include and integrate in itself all numerous tendencies and manifestations of the modern stage. I was lucky I came across the concept of Theatre of Games. It is not a new concept. Having existed as long as theatre itself has existed, this concept manifests itself by shifting to the periphery of attention bringing itself into focus, then tucks itself away again and then finds itself floating in front of us. Now, the cycle brings it to our focus.

There are many indications that we are experiencing the thrust of this concept now. This century is deeply preoccupied by games. People entertain themselves and even sometimes dare to risk their lives in the name of the game. Researchers in the silence of their offices develop scientific theories for games. Certain theories stress the usefulness of games (by playing, a male can win the attention of a female; by playing, a child learns work and life; the game is also a social valve that releases extra tension of the masses, etc.). Other theories study the uselessness of games. It is unbelievable all that theoreticians have hypothesized about the game! They state that it is a combination of conforming behaviour with a tendency of nonconformist thinking. It is a school of social ambiguity: it teaches pretension and manipulates truth. Creating strict rules for the players, it provokes a desire in them to go around these rules, giving the player a path to the full power of chance and luck. The game develops in him a drive and will for victory; it is both a mystery and a show-off. The game is breathtaking, competitive, challenging, scary and joyful, improvisational and prudent, ecstatic and sensible. The interest in games has been constantly growing since the middle of the twentieth century when the practicality of game theory started to be applied. Everybody started playing: engineers, mathematicians, sociologists, literature historians, pedagogues,

speculators and politicians. The game started multiplying with an extreme speed and power. Administrative and business games appeared. Military games have become dangerously frequent. A game method of teaching foreign languages was spreading almost in secret. There were games in Palaces of Marriage¹ and in clubs for those “who are over thirty.” Even doctors engaged in games; using games in mental hospitals, they started treating their gloomiest patients so that life itself appears in danger of turning into a joke. Let’s all join in unison singing the chorus of that famous opera: “What’s our life? It’s a game! We need to live playfully...”²

The only place into which the game could not penetrate was theatre.

The paradox of the century is that actors are not interested in applying games to their business.

(A *side note*) I do not know, my dear reader, whether or not you like paradoxes. Maybe now you do not, but by the end of reading this book you will. Of course, in the process of reading and writing this book, we will naturally get to know each other better – you will learn more about me, I will understand something about you – then we will find out if you are a pro paradox or an enemy of it. But offering you a paradoxical fact right off the bat, I hope for your loyalty even if you think that a paradoxical way of telling things is pretentious and not serious.

Fact: In the theatre and theatre schools, the places one would assume fit for play, games don’t appear readily to actors and directors! They are even afraid of games there. For them, any model of game training is suspect. This is a paradox that expresses the epidemic effect of the game.

The game represents theatre’s independence, and yet it willingly decided to deprive itself of it.

Why? – Because seriousness prevailed and the idea of allegiance to the government reigned. What was emphasized was the ideology of theatre, its pedagogical role, its social function, historical dates, pleasing the higher-ups and fulfilling the plan. They never had time for anything else. For the other things – for the playful and cheerful spirit of theatre – they did not have enough energy. Imagination and expression, the essences of theatre were taken away from the actor’s “toolbox,” then formalized and farmed out to artistic directors who were loaded with responsibility and power. The costs of bureaucratic functioning were added to the costs of the directing phase of theatre evolution. The despotism of directing trained us to appreciate a show only if it is “tightly riveted” in a precise pattern (just like in a uniform!). It is hard for us to imagine a different theatre, Theatre Proteus, alive theatre, theatre that is being conceived and changing in front of the audience’s eyes, right here, “today, now.”

This forced seriousness has been killing theatre, producing coldness in its soul. It’s been depriving theatre of joy and courage that are so needed today; it’s been turning theatre into theatre of the dead.

Theatre needs seriousness, but of a different kind – organic, not forced, non-imposing. The key argument to fight the imposed seriousness of today’s theatre is the seriousness of the game itself (no matter what form).

The seriousness of the game is self-sufficient.

One must merely start to “play.” One has to subject himself to the instinct of the game, which is as ancient as humanity itself, as powerful as the natural continuation of human kind. Of course, an actor is *homo sapience* just like everybody else. Yet he is also on a different plane in the realm of *homo ludens* (man the player).³

Dramatic text is innately ambiguous. In the theatrical sense, there is a superficial, false and banal meaning to it yet, from another angle, one can see the internal and substantial meaning of it. Let's analyse the layers of meaning of the word "play."

- A trivial meaning – "**to play a role**," to perform a role – here everything is clear and there is minimal amount of explanation of the game here.
- A less trivial meaning – "to be played by the role" (as in to have the toy take control of you), i.e. twist it and turn it on all sides, even break "the toy," disassemble and reassemble it, changing its shape and finally reconsidering it as a different object. This at first appears unclear, but with time the meaning of the game unfolds.
- And a totally non-trivial meaning – "to play with the role" (to play with it as you would with your partner in chess). Everything seems here unclear from the beginning. Risk, victory and defeat are the factors. This is the total game realm.

The Theatre of Games throws away the first trivial interpretation and deals only with the last two meanings.

This is the way we played it in *King Lear* – we played with all components in our production: with the text, the role, the set, the equipment, our partners and the audience....

3. Signs of the Game. [Numbers 1 and 2 are in the full volume, not included here - ed.]

General observations of game activity in the average individual

Since it's clear now what a significant place in the life and work of a director is occupied by game-playing, we need to understand our term.

What, exactly, is this Game?

Don your thick glasses and snuggle up to a pile of dictionaries. Let's be scientists about it for a minute.

There are many definitions of *game*, but none of them will work for us due to their extreme abstraction and non-organic nature. They are broad and terse. Attempts at *game*'s conventional definition have petrified it into the corpse of the true *game*, or, in the best-case scenario, into a mausoleum-ready plaster cast of a bad idea: the bright colours of life are fading, the flesh of the *game* is shrinking, the pulse of the *game* – the drive – is getting faint.

First, a definition of *game* limits its freedom, and when one insistently attempts to corner it, he/she hunts it to death.

The entity we call the game is as multifaceted as life itself, so the task of squeezing it into one compact formula turns out to be an extremely difficult and complicated business. Of course, if you have the sort of mind that can be satisfied with the definition of "life" as the ebbing and flowing of endoplasmic bodies, then we have no problem. Then, we could get away with defining the game as a useless activity, which has a purpose only in itself.

I too have tried to come up with a universally encompassing formula of *game*. For two and a half years, I lived as an alchemist looking for the philosophical stone, but with no result. But finally I had a productive thought: perhaps we don't need all these definitions! After all, game-playing is familiar to everyone who has ever been a child; maybe, we would be better off spending time and effort on simply describing the distinguishing characteristics of game, selecting those key characteristics that make a game a game.

What is said should be done! At the risk of sounding like an old school empiricist, I have chosen the tried-and-true descriptive method of studying *game*. Instead of formulating and

defining the subject of study from the inside, I will try to select six fundamental characteristics of the subject and describe it from its exterior.

The first characteristic of the game is Drive, i.e. the necessary enjoyment that all participants in the game experience. This feeling is similar to waking up after a goodnight's sleep, the satisfaction of a good meal or a contenting love. The "drive" is rooted in the very depth of human nature. Namely, *Homo Ludens*⁴ owes his existence to it. The game can't go on without this feeling: Without the motor of the "drive," players will simply leave the game. "I feel bored," a little girl whines, before throwing aside her doll. "What the hell do I need this game for?" says a young football player, spitting on the ground. "I will see these bastards in their coffins," an old hockey fan grumbles as he throws his beer bottle in the trash.

The second characteristic is Competition, i.e. an opportunity to test each other's strength and dexterity, skills and talent, inventiveness and foresight. And, of course, the indispensable urge to win. (A game in which the rivals give in is as useless as a game with no incentive). There are three factors that clearly indicate the possibility of real game-playing: a division into two teams, a challenge and high stakes. The division must be balanced and intriguing; the challenge must be irresistible; and the stakes must be as mouth-watering as possible.

The energy of rivalry is great and powerful. As it grows, it acquires the characteristics of an element. Of course, a game can threaten to morph into open confrontation with unpredictable consequences – simply speaking, it can turn into a vulgar fight. A game turning into a fight is a common, even typical situation. Primitive conflict destroys the game. First, it is interrupted; then, it is stopped. Wishing to save their creation from self-destruction, players start to induct a certain list of prohibitions and permissions to the rules of their game. The mechanism is specific to each particular game. As the rules evolve through the centuries, the game acquires a structure.

The presence of Structure is the third characteristic of any game. A system of strict rules that regulate and define the competition cements the game's identity. The rulebook becomes the game's core, prolonging its presence in the world. There are some solid attributes that clearly support the structural nature of games: a chess board, a set of chess figures, a field divided in two parts with a net (as in volleyball and tennis); the soccer field bounded by netted gates and penalty spots. A pack of cards. A chalk drawing on the asphalt. A doll's house. The Bosch-like transparent ball with people inside it, created with a spinning rope, turned by two people who you can see through your window. And so on and so forth. But these are external structures, so to speak. There must also be internal ramifications: the impossibility of leaving the game before it is over; the ensemble of the team and the hierarchy of its players; the quantum behaviour of the game; the queue toolbox full of moves and preparation of tactical blocks. It may seem that in its historical development the game was becoming more and more formalized, ossifying and losing a degree of freedom. But it is not quite so. Here is the great paradox of *game*: the stricter and more numerous the rules, the more improvisational freedom it allows participants *inside* the rules. Structure gives the gift of freedom to a player.

The fourth characteristic of the game is Risk. The element of risk gives an incomparable poignancy to the game. Flipping a coin you are never sure what will turn out – heads or tails. Fortune can abandon a famous team of champions to total defeat at the hands of amateurs. When your daughter goes to play with her gorgeous new doll that you just brought her from Warsaw, she has no guarantee of success among her friends. It's possible that her friend's uncle brought *his* niece a doll from London. Your doll can only close its eyes whereas

your friend's doll can shake its golden curls and murmur "Mommy." That's it. Your game is irretrievably spoiled. Chance always plays alongside you. Look closer: it is chance that is waiting for you over the corner of the next game time. Risk and chance constantly renew the game. They make a game dynamic, unexpected ... anything but simple.

The fifth characteristic of the game is its Principal Escapism. These three "runaways" and three "exits" characterize any game.

- (a) Exit from real time to "timeless reality" (game time). Hour-and-a-half soccer games, Christmas nights, weeks of Olympic Games – all these times, rounds, sets and periods are excluded from the historical flow of time and are given to the game only.
- (b) Exit into its own space: occupying a bigger or a smaller part of space in order to make it an autonomous space of a future game (game space). Round Dances, ovals of stadiums, squares of boxing rings, rectangular shapes of tennis courts, croquet fields, playgrounds and sand boxes – all these are examples of spaces occupied by *games* and fenced off from the rest of the universe.
- (c) Exclusion from social framework (from social relations, from social classes, from the hierarchy), liberation (temporarily) from social obligations and creation of a new team with its own social autonomous relationships. The game becomes a total air-vent (no mother, no father, no mentor, no everyday subordination, no chiefs, no limits, no slavery). But if the chiefs (parents) are accepted to the game, they are always humiliated and subjugated. Notice how very important relation of the game is highlighted: games are a moderate carnival. It disguised to be a commonness, "underground" carnival. And another important addition: it is a special escape. It is not just an exit; it is an exit-entrance. It is not just a retreat; it is a retreat approach, a child while playing a game, *sort of* leaves, fencing himself off from the world of adults but also *sort of* comes to it closer, imitating the rejected adult world in his game. Likewise, the participants of the adult game leave the surrounding environment for a certain period of time. They leave everyday limitations and dive into even more extreme systems of the game.

What lures them here? Just the same old democracy of the game: the game's freedom, the game's equality, the game's fraternity.

Getting down to **the sixth characteristic of the game**, to the last one on the list, and as usually said, far from being the least important one, I am hesitating and feeling doubtful. I have doubts for my ability to describe this characteristic. Moreover, I have doubts that it's possible to describe it at all. However, I shall make a note here, it is the most precise and simple out of all the characteristics of the game. The reason for my hesitations was the temptation not to describe the sixth characteristic at all. Just to throw it away and that's it. After all, nobody knows how many of them I have calculated. There were six. There will be five. One more or less – let's not be too petty. The procedure is not complicated: just to make a little correction – change "six" to "five." But I cannot do this. First of all, I don't just have a list of characteristics here. Excuse *me* for saying it, there is a whole system being developed here to describe the game with the most precision possible. If you remove just one of the listed-above characteristics, the game will become defective, turn out crippled.

Rhetorical question: Can one offer a mother such a cruel choice: which organ of her child she may sacrifice – the eyes or ears? Legs or hands? Or the tongue? Therefore, I will have to undertake a hopeless attempt to formulate this intangible characteristic in words.

Many intangible and hardly explainable things can be discovered in the complex element of the game if you look at it closely. They are sort of there but at the same time they are sort of not. It does not matter how hard you will try to detect and precisely define them. You will never succeed. But your confidence in their existence gets only stronger during the process of unsuccessful attempts.

One of such intangibilities is the thing that allows you to differentiate a good game from a bad game, i.e. a real, exciting, provocative and captivating one from a fake, cold, unexciting and appalling one, to differentiate a game from a non-game.

It appears that a usual, ordinary game is happening. All rules are being followed. Familiar players in familiar uniforms are running around the familiar field, creating one familiar combination after another. Girls are boringly putting their old dolls on the usual places. All is familiar to the point of soreness in your mouth. But all of a sudden something invisible comes into reality and we can immediately predict that it will be one heck of a game. No, it will not be, it already is. Both players and the audience feel that – the magic starts. The soccer goalkeeper begins to catch goals that were impossible to catch. The hockey forward throws incredible goals. The happy audience gets to the point of unified sublimities. Girls' dolls invisibly and happily turn into real babies. A chair becomes a plain, and the dusty bushes of the boulevard turn into the thicket of African jungles.

And again, I have to make a note. Here, we are not trying to evaluate a finished game. We are not analysing it based on its results. I am talking about a completely different thing. I am talking about the sensation of the game as it is felt by its participants while the game is unfolding – as if from inside. It is not post factum. It is a self-evaluation of the game.

It is quite easy to evaluate a game when it is over. The finished game is unchangeable. It can be described as many times as you want. It is subject to analysis with no resistance. It is ready for classification, comparison and opposition. But I don't want to describe a butterfly by poking it with the needle and putting it under the glass of a pretty box. I want to understand it while it is flying in its capriciousness over the warm thicket of green nettle.

It is much more complicated.

We have the initial question again. What makes a game real? Maybe it's true and there is some mystical spirit of the game, the presence of which vivifies the game and the absence of which makes it die. Apparently, there is something like this. Something that invisibly appears and is easily destroyed. Something that is fragile and ephemeral – mood of the game? Atmosphere of the game? If so, then what is this atmosphere? Is it the soul of the game? And why does it appear or not appear?

I used to think that the searched characteristic is somehow connected to these strange and scientifically inappropriate words – fragility, ephemerality, intangibility – because despite the commonly accepted prejudice, the game can be rough, colourful and cruel only externally. Inside, it is truly gentle and defenceless. It is built on the principle of a turtle: externally, it is hard, with a rough shell but inside, it is tender and vulnerable flesh. I like this metaphor very much: “the tender flesh of the game.” Though “tender” will not do as a characteristic. They will immediately object me: what about pulling the rope game? Or fight wall-to-wall? Or the famous bicycle?⁵ Then, I started looking for an explanation a little more different but in the same neighbourhood. I tried to continue the sequence of “ephemeral,” “fragile,” “big empty stadium,” and “the old abandoned carrousel in the pre-winter park.” Finally, of course! It is the uniqueness of the game.

Here it goes. The notorious spirit of the game has dawned upon me. The main thing has been found; the rest will be a matter of technique. Indeed, the uniqueness of the game gives the game its invincible charm, ignites foolish enthusiasm and lifts it up to the highest degree of human existence. But it is not the game itself that does it. It is a sudden and instant comprehension of its uniqueness by all the participants of the game. How couldn't I capture it right away? It was right on the surface – the game cannot be repeated. Would you want to do your crossword again, after you just have done it? Of course, you wouldn't. That's absurd. Do you want to serve dinner to your dolls after they just had it? And you would do it without any changes in nuances of serving and details of menu: the first course – the same chicken noodles soup with chopped grass and the water from the nearest paddle; the second course – the same acorns with meshed ashberry; the third course – milk shake made of toothpaste? You don't want to? Why? You mean you'd better cook new meal while your dolls are asleep and then serve them dinner? What about you, guys, can you repeat your domino game? "Yes, we can but there is no reason why. We will play a new one." Imagine you ask two soccer teams to play the game that just has ended one more time, with the same attacks, with the same goals, with the same score. They will tell you that it is simply impossible.

Thus, the game is unique, ephemeral. It was and it ended. That's it! That's it! It is impossible to restore it. However, one can have another argument. The soccer game exists for decades and is played every day. The chess game is still around and happy being repeated for thousands of years. Here, we have come to the main idea. Now you will see how close and how related the game is to human nature. It is constructed exactly the same way as people themselves. The thing is that we use the word "game" with two particular meanings. The game as a particular meeting of players and the game as a type, a genre, what else? Game types can be soccer games, puzzles, card games. But each game is unique and cannot be duplicated, just like a person. However, the game is a constant. It is easily repeated and self-reproduced. Therefore, it can exist very long almost eternally just like the humanity as a whole, like mankind in general. I will leave, die, and exit the game, but my place will be taken by another person, he/she will be replaced with another one and so on and so forth infinitely because humanity cannot die. Girls will play with their dolls a thousand years in the future. Boys will also play their war games, but they will never be able to play it the way we did.

So, now I can peacefully and happily offer you a succinct formulation of the sixth characteristic of game: **singularity**. Now I am sure you will completely agree with me about the importance of this characteristic.

The most curious thing is that today, by trying to formulate characteristics of the game, suddenly I noticed with great surprise, that all these qualities of the game are inherent qualities of the theatre. This discovery was like a gift. Just like a white little spot on a pink fingernail of a child. Forgive my sentimentality expressed in foolish sentiments – you are right.

No, when the sacramental words about the structural identity of the theatre and the game are uttered out loud, we will start to pay attention to some other not so primary but more secondary qualities that can be particularly well identified through the prism of theatre. Most frequently, they can be found in so-called role games (I am a doctor, you are a patient. Take off your cloth, I will examine you).

First of all, it is a naïve theatrical bragging, a subconscious desire of the player to draw the audience's attention to him/herself. It is an irresistible desire to show off. "Mommy, why aren't you looking at me riding on the horse!" – a little boy indignantly says. An adult soccer player is *shamelessly pulling the blanket to his side* sometimes even better than any actor. They apply a common term to both of them saying, "it is a stardom disease." Secondly, there is special *costuming* of the game. The most favourite thing that a little girl does is to put on her mother's favourite dress and let it drag all over the floor as she tramples through the house in her mother's high heels. And what about soccer players, hockey players, tennis players, bow shooters and boxers – all of them are dressed like actors before they appear to the public. Is it safety and comfort? Yes. Then why are their dresses so colourful and gorgeous? Thirdly, there is *disguising of the game*. The game has been carrying a mask through all centuries and countries: from bright and ancient faces of African ritual games to Maslenitsa⁶ ugly muzzles made of bast, to pre-Second World War round masks of Southern Russian boys, made from split halves of watermelons or pumpkins, to today's kindergarten masks of monkeys, roosters and doctors. The plastic mask of a hockey goalkeeper protects the face of the player. It reminds one so much of the white mask of death from the Mexican carnival. This is where the science is silent. Here, we touch a mystery, a true ancient, ancestor line. The blood ties of the game and theatre.

6. Circumstances of a forthcoming game. Traditions.

We can't say that the game approach to the play analysis appeared from nowhere. It has its traditions. I am going to tell you about them. However, I will talk not in the context of the whole of theatre history but only in the context of my own life: how I came to the game methodology of play analysis, what I relied on and what I stemmed from, what I rejected and what I could not reject and did not want to fully get rid of. Without the context of these highly subjective traditions, many things, quite a lot from what you are going to read in this book, will not be completely clear to you.

First, I need to say a few words about the play analysis without the game – so to speak the play analysis in its proper sense.

For 12 years starting with my first production staged in 1942 when I was 15 and till my entering a theatre institute, I used to "work on a play" steering by guess and by God. Having read many different teach-yourself books, manuals and digests for an amateur director, which were quite common for that time, methodologically I was pretty eclectic and blind. I was a puppy of empirical analysis. Very tightly glued together, like the edges of dumplings, interwoven centuries kept pictures of the world and truth of art hidden from me. But from time to time, a good nose, which is a guide for a blind talent, was unmistakably dragging me to the mother's blessed udder. In 1939, for the first time I read *My Life in Art*; in 1941 – *Actors Prepared*; and a bit later in 1942, I read books by KSS's⁷ pupils and followers – *Talks about Directing* by Nikolai Gorchakov and *13 Lessons of Drama* by Nikolai Petrov. Without opening my eyes and breathlessly murmuring, I was sucking milk of the great teachings – "scenes and objectives," "simple and magic given circumstances," "communication," "action," "adjustment," "through-line" and "super objective." Play after play, I broke them down into pieces, then I grinded them into even smaller pieces and made up a certain title for each piece like "a storm in a glass of water," "the last bet," "as you sow, so shall you reap." Hundreds and thousands of objectives I formulated for each character, without noticing in this race a truthful formulation. How much I simplified and mechanized one human life after another. Then a new wave of my enthusiasm with Stanislavski, whom I tried to copy in everything,

came about. In the middle of the war in the Tashkent public library,⁸ I ran into a director's copy of *The Seagull* and I started to insert blank sheets of paper into plays. On those blank sheets of paper, I indefatigably drew plans and routes of the characters' moves. With my tender quill, I fixed fluid graphics of an appearing blocking. Registers of pieces and objectives became variegated with sequences of frames: he sits on the sofa, she stands near him; two people hunched over something on the far end of a garden bench; there are three people standing one on top of the other on stepladder. If not directly connected to the synthesis yet, the play analysis at least started moving to it: small bridges began to emerge between different stages of the director's work. Still like a blind puppy, yip-yip, I was slowly moving forward through trials and errors on every step. After reading the next KS's book, I immediately tested its material staging my next show. A big milestone on this path was his directing plan of *Othello*. I, a lucky man, got the book with this treasury of directing during the first years after the war – it was either in 1946 or 1947 when I was still in the army. By that time, I began to guess what a huge role a good play analysis could play in the director's work. Myself, for more than just a year I was very enthusiastic about long-hour table rehearsals but here an outstanding analysis in its full power opened up itself in front of my eyes: the life of Renaissance Italy was reconstructed, or better to say, it was reconstructed with the totality that was unimaginable for me before: Renaissance people, customs and rituals of Renaissance, even little things and common trifles of Renaissance. But mostly, it was a Renaissance way of life. KSS was pulling them from non-existence and made them answer his eager questions. In this unmerciful interrogation, every phrase, every word combination, every single word of a character were analysed. Then the cunning explorer clicked on a "lie detector" not believing the characters' words anymore. He moved words apart, sneaked into cracks and slits and rummaged in psychophysiology of the interrogated: Why did they stutter on that word? Why did they stumble particularly on that spot? Is their pulse beating evenly? Did they blush or get pale of reserved anger? All that was done in the name of one goal – to imagine how each tragedy could happen in real life.

By piling up these rapturous epithets, I am trying to give you my impression from studying Stanislavski's work on the Shakespeare play. In the following years, from time to time, I returned to the director's plan of *Othello*. Of course, I saw my own misperceptions from rapturous impressions to the great director's limitations caused by the theatre technology of the twentieth century, plus the complexity and elusive meaning of the phrase "truth onstage." But later, a small nuance became quite distinctive for me: it is not "how would it happen in life?", but "how would it happen in life in my way?" ("In my way" in this case does not relate to me but relates to Stanislavski.) Also later I noticed that Stanislavski did attempt to analyse *Othello* as a fragment of life. Unfortunately, it was not quite consistent – an admixture of theatre impressions and theatre technology was quite strong in his directing analysis. However, our perception of a possible proximity between art and life changes so impetuously, a possible distance between them shortens so fast. A concrete understanding of authenticity on stage gets tougher and tougher ... that's why let's not make our judgements and let's return to criteria of the past years that are moving away from us.

So, I took KSS's work on *Othello* as the deepest, the most detailed, and extensive play analysis in relation to action line (characters and actors) in a common life situation. I was especially impressed with the following specific detail of the analysis – Stanislavski did the analysis mainly in the moments of "between-the-text-of-the-play," in the gaps between the scenes, acts and episodes, in the pauses between two appearances of a character on stage,

between the lines – in accidental and planned pauses. A special attention to the stage existence of characters distinguished an exploring aspiration of the teacher-director. He aimed to turn a dotted line of a character's acts into a single, continuous and uninterrupted line of the role's life. The past of Rodrigo, the past of Yago, the social situation on Cyprus on the day of Othello's arrival – all that seemed to me the masterpieces of the director's analytical thinking. I had a premonition: I was about to see the light. But my eyes opened for real only when after entering the theatre institute I fell into Popov's and Knebel's clutches. Those "clutches" were like hands of God – right hand and left hand. Stanislavski's hands being personified by my teachers carefully and tenderly held me and by raising me higher and higher finally brought me to the sacred secrets of the system. Sometimes, just like it should be, one hand did not know what the other hand did. But both of them together perfectly supplemented each other. From Knebel I learnt the letter of the doctrine and through Popov I joined its spirit. Coming from KSS through Knebel, not only the way of life became accessible to me in an analysed play. Coming from the same KSS through Alexei Dmitrievich⁹, not only its image became visible to me. From Maria Osipovna Knebel, from the first hand, I learnt about the last findings of Stanislavski. They were fresh information, never published anywhere at that time. They were intimate like a family legend and, therefore, they were particularly magnetic and alluring. It turned out that Stanislavski's artistic ageing was not quiet at all, though it was solemn fading away. It was a riot. Another bold riot. And another self-willed rejection. Konstatine Sergeevich rebelled against himself. He decisively rejected the method of play analysis with actors that he had invented and developed himself.¹⁰

The table period was thrown away. They would go on stage right away and they would try to figure out a play along with the action on stage. Instead of having "scenes and objectives," they started talking about events and behaviour liners. All this for me, a provincial and amateur director, was new and unexpected: a new shock, but also a new source – a non-standardized school of the capital city. I accepted it unconditionally. Now all I had on my tongue were events, a powerful authority of the given circumstances and, the main thing – *etude*, *etude*, *etude* and *etude* again. I was crazy about *etudes*, propagandizing and putting them everywhere I could. Before I used to think that an *etude* is just an element of the actor's training, a means of teaching young actors and only at the very early stage of their study. Now I began to think: here it is – *panacea*! – the *etude* will revive and save theatre. Before my eyes, the *etude* was becoming a method. At that time Knebel was full of enthusiasm about everything in relation to *etudes*. We became guinea pigs of her enthusiasm. Any scene of a play would become a reason for an *etude*: you read a scene – do an *etude*; you read it again – you do an *etude* again. It would go like that until everything in that scene became absolutely clear for performers. When the time of preparing diploma shows arrived, Maria Osipovna decided to run a whole play with us in *etudes*. The results of this idea were quite impressive – the *etude* run-through of the play was remarkable for its unprecedented vitality and vivaciousness. The greatest teacher of the twentieth century, George Pólya, once said: "A method is a tool that you can use twice." In our group we used *etudes* for play analysis not only twice, or two by 2 times, but two by 20 and two by 30 times; therefore, our *etude* fuss about a play was legitimately called an *etude* method of rehearsing. A bit later, M.O. Knebel chose a better sounding and a more scientific name for it. It became a Method of Action Analysis [henceforth "MAA," the methodology of textual analysis that relies upon "etudes" – dedicated scene and character improvisations]. I became the most dedicated follower of MAA (for 17 years – from 1960

to 1977 – I did not analyse any play without etudes and I did not direct any show without them.) Preparing myself for a new rehearsal with actors, first of all I analysed a play from the point of view of the action analysis: how many etudes does it have – 30, 60 and 158? How many events does each etude have? What are the given circumstances in a future etude? Which of them are the most important and the most conflicting ones? What does actor X have to get in the etude and what does actor Y have to accomplish? I even came up with a beautiful formula: what does an actor have to know in order to start an etude? – Events. Given Circumstances. And his Objective (what is he trying to get)? I required answers for these three questions from a play while doing my directing analysis. It was precision. It was profession. From an adherent of MAA, I turned into a master of MAA, and I thought that it would stay forever. I became famous as an etude director. It was a suspicious and ambiguous fame: he is either a skilful teacher, or a skilful charlatan – for 12–13 days, he can launch a show, less than two weeks from the first play reading until the opening. They treated my work as if it was telepathy or UFO, and I just grinned to myself and with self-confidence I was the modesty itself – oh, please! Oh, stop it! – because I precisely knew that the whole thing is not about me; the point was in the properly applied MAA. I taught my actors (or my students) to do etudes for a while and only then I would read a play with them out loud and then would say: “Go!” They were so well trained in improvisation that neither play could create a problem for them. From Aristophanes to Leo Tolstoy and from Chikamatsu Monzaemon to Ilf and Petrov. Event-objective-given-circumstances, and go! One-two, one-two-three, – Onward! I came to believe in MAA just like poor Arthur believed in cardinal Montanelli.¹¹ It was probably my longest methodological love but even this was not enough for my whole life. Approximately at the end of the 1970s, a crisis of the etude method began and not only for me, it spread all over our theatre. Even before this crisis, Efros¹² was the first one who stopped doing etudes; the others just followed him. However, there were not so many “other ones” who had been truly enthused by the etude method of rehearsing. They would say it was difficult; it had a lot of unnecessary trouble; besides, the form of a show would suffer from those etudes. Generally speaking, they found a reason. The sun of the live theatre began to set. The night of a “new,” stagnant theatre was impending and it is still too long before dawn. I personally started to avoid etude rehearsals because the etude, in the way it was formed by that time, did give birth to the live theatre but it was just a common realistic theatre. However, I was still only interested in the etude’s improvisational foundation. The dawn of the Theatre of Games was glimmering for me. But I could not completely reject MAA – a lot of things and for a long time were connected with it for me.

In the game of the forthcoming analysis, you will see a lot of rudiments of the action analysis. Moreover, quite often, the technology and terminology that meant to be for the etude method will take a significant place in this game. Self-consolation prompts me to make a good analogy: just like formulas and theories of Newton enter the strange modern physics, in the same way the last achievement of Stanislavski will enter an odd and sort of lawless world of the theatre game as a special case.

After all, MAA is the highest achievement of theatre methodology and theory at the present stage.

So here, I have managed to describe with a certain degree of detail those traditional sources and foundations, which will inevitably influence my delivery of practical material in this book.

Now, I would also like to say a few words about traditionally understood goals that I pursue in this text.

Here, I make an effort to describe and formulate different ways of the director's *penetration* in the *play's meaning*, different ways of discovering and revealing this meaning. I also assumed a task of merging these ways into a single complete system of the director's tools for analysing a play.

A more delicate and difficult task is to *deliver* (and not just describe) the specifics of the director's work on analysing a play, its originality and to expose scientific wholeness of this process without lowering and schematizing its artistic and creative peculiarities.

Neither can I avoid methodological issues. One of them is crystallization of the method of *preparing a director for the play action analysis with actors*.

And the last one of our tasks is to develop an analytical method that would help to connect loyalty to the author with the unique contribution of the theatre currently staging this author.

I already spoke about the content of the information that allows actors to do "free" improvisations during etudes on the theme of a play. Now, I have a few words about a specific form of this information. After all, the point of the play analysis with actors is to make the things described in the play understandable, familiar, *actors' own*, for this mindless tribe. Very clear and familiar. Therefore, the point is to *master* the play's material – its events, collisions, circumstances and an internal logic of acts. It is a key issue in the director's analysis.

While preparing to do a play today and trying to play it truthfully, involuntarily, we look for today's motives of the characters' behaviour. These are the specifics of theatre as an art form that *exists, namely today and only today*.

Following this, we have another feature of our analysis – it is sort of "homelikeness," terminological "simplicity," on the one hand, and almost "kitchen-like" concretization in today's psychology, on the other hand. Here, "contemporarization" (the term that has a slightly irritating quality) is naturally organic.

Notes

1. In Soviet Russia since religious upbringing was not encouraged, married couples registered in Palaces of Marriages. After the ceremony, the newly wedded would go to Lenin's Tomb or some other sacred Soviet place to "check in," like a type of blessing.*
2. Herman from the Chaikovsky's opera *The Queen of Spades* (the translator's note).
3. "A man plays only when he is a man in the full sense of the word. And he can be a man only when he plays." – Friedrich Schiller.
4. *Homo Ludens* – *Latin*, Man the Player.
5. Here, I refer not to the bicycle that is used for driving. Here, I am talking about the game that we liked to play in a Soviet pioneer camp. We would roll up small pieces of paper, then we would carefully insert them between the toes of someone fast asleep and then we would light the pieces on fire. The victim, without knowing what was happening, would start moving his feet as if he were pedalling a bicycle. Later I found out that this game was liked not only by pioneers. It was very popular in the army among soldiers and in the barracks in prison – though all those are a sort of camps as well.
6. The Northern Russian Carnival.
7. Konstantine Sergeevich Stanislavski.
8. Tashkent is a big city in Uzbekistan (former Southern Soviet Republic).*
9. Alexei Popov was a leading Soviet theatre director who managed the Soviet Army Theatre between 1935 and 1960.*

10. It goes without saying that KS changed not only the method of play analysis. He changed many other things in working with an actor, which were way more important but since here I talk, namely about the play analysis I limited it only to that (Butkevich).
11. The characters of the famous novel *The Gadfly* by E. L. Voynich.
12. Anatoly Efros is a famous Russian director of the mid-twentieth century. See more in the James Thomas translation of Efros's books.*

**denotes the translator's note*

Mikhail Butkevich: the bridge to the contemporary Russian Avant-Garde

David Chambers Edited by & Krivosheyev Maxim Translations by

To cite this article: David Chambers Edited by & Krivosheyev Maxim Translations by (2017): Mikhail Butkevich: the bridge to the contemporary Russian Avant-Garde, Stanislavski Studies, DOI: [10.1080/20567790.2017.1377427](https://doi.org/10.1080/20567790.2017.1377427)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20567790.2017.1377427>



Published online: 04 Oct 2017.



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PART III

TOWARDS A THEATRE OF GAMES

By Mikhail Butkevich

8. Rules of the forthcoming game

Our game is called “play analysis.” On the game field of this book, there are two players and game fans. One of the players is myself as a director who analyses the play, the other player is the author of the analysed play. You, dear readers, will play an honorary and pleasant role of the audience.

Keeping in mind that the strong resemblance of theatre and game has been declared and demonstrated by me many times, I can easily and without any additional explanations reorganize our roles in theatrical terms. Before your eyes, dear audience, on a brightly lit stage you will see a scenic dialogue of the Director and the Author. It will be serious and funny, dramatic and epic, lyrical and comic, tragic and, pardon my expression, publicistic. Any game, as we all know, always starts from learning its rules. It is absolutely necessary so that all participants of the game could judge its course and follow it with full attention. Moreover, without knowing its rules, you will never truly enjoy the game.

It just occurred to me to offer you the rules of our game as 10 short and simple requirements called, just for the sake of scientific significance, *axioms of analysis*:

- (1) *Axiom of ideology*: when analysing a play, it is a must to find the hottest issue of today in every particle of it.
- (2) *Axiom of competition*: when analysing a play, it is a must to find struggle, collision, and conflict.
- (3) *Axiom of background*: it is a must to consider any event with the background of given circumstances of a play, of given circumstances of the author, and of given circumstances of our whole life.
- (4) *Axiom of respecting the author*: when analysing a play, the director must take the author's place, i.e. be able to look at the play with the author's eyes.

- (5) *Axiom of structure*: it is a must always and everywhere to look for composite parts, their relative positions and patterns of their interrelations.
- (6) *Axiom of trinity*: it is a must always and everywhere to look for beginning, climax, and ending because any phenomenon in this world develops according to this scheme – beginning-climax-recession-ending. Naturally, the same must be looked for in any play.
- (7) *Axiom of wholeness*: it is a must to consider action in a play as physical and psychological, external and internal, artificial and genuine at the same time.
- (8) *Axiom of roughness and simplicity*: an action, behaviour during the play analysis can be formulated primitively – rough and simple.
- (9) *Axiom of subtlety and complexity*: analysis of the characters' inner world should be done subtly, precisely, and complicatedly – an internal action must be determined delicately and as multilayered. Note: both previous axioms are connected with each other but one of them would always prevail in different moments of a play.
- (10) *Axiom of obligation*: when analysing a play, it is a must to try to find new things always and everywhere, look at everything from a new and unusual point of view.

So what is the point of all these axioms of analysis? – you might ask. There is nothing new and extraordinary in them.

Yes indeed they are just axioms, i.e. truths that do not require proofs. They are obvious, almost it-goes-without-saying-things. But just like any other axioms, they have quite curious qualities: they cannot be proved, and they cannot be objected either. One can argue with them, but one can't help agreeing with them either. They can be rejected but it is dangerous not to take them into account.

Yes, they are quite simple, almost primitive. Although it is them that will help us prove and explain our most complicated artistic and philosophical structures that inevitably appear during the exploration of a great play. Of course, they have a single meaning, which is almost inappropriate; however, their obvious single meaning will not allow us to talk at length; we will get straight to finding common points and agreeing about different interpretations and ideas in our hot discussions. Moreover, when the time of another torturous stop-crisis comes or, in other words, we get stuck in our analysis, these simple game rules will help us discover and correct our mistakes and miscalculations that might have seemed fatal.

You are horrified. It seems to you that this is a dead end, finita, total failure. Don't worry. Calm down. Carefully read the axioms again; check if you applied them all. Which ones did you arrogantly ignore? You will immediately realize where a weak link is. Don't be lazy; correct your mistake according to the requirements of my axiomatics, and you will be fine. I can't promise genius results, but I guarantee good ones. The thing is that the proposed axioms work as a complex. For many years, I was looking for them, selecting them, and sorting them out. They are not just 10 accidental rules. It is a single and quite complete system. Pardon me, a *little system* that better or worse allows you to work professionally.

It can be done differently. You can follow orders without discussing. Is it worth discussing why and what for the chess knight makes moves in this particular way? Perhaps it is better just to move the knight? What is the point to find a reason why they hit the ball only with their feet in soccer? It would be more correct to catch the ball and push it to the enemy's gates according to the traditional rule. The rules of the game are not supposed to be discussed and thought over. The rules of the game must be precisely followed and that's that.

Here I prepared a surprise for you, an unexpected turn of the topic. Get ready. Take a breath. Now I will surprise you and make you happy!

If in a game following the rules is mandatory, if normally breaking the rules stops and even terminates the game, in theatre it may well work differently. It is *breaking-the-rules* that often becomes a climax of the meaning of a show, a rehearsal, and by the way, of the director's play analysis. In art, quite often we create the rules of the game and then we break them. If we want – we create them, if we want – we break them.

However, this is a privilege of individuality – and talent.

12. Warm-up

First Scene Analysis

So we start!

This scene is extremely simple. There are only 13 lines of text, only 3 characters, and no significant events at first sight. Playwriting never knew such succinctness, neither before nor after Shakespeare, nor even in Shakespeare himself, nor in all other theatre writers until Vampilov.¹ The witches flew in, talked, and flew away. They did it just like rats in Gogol's *Inspector General* – they came, sniffed the air, and left.

Here is the first bump on the simplicity of it. The thing is that the rats of the wisest Nikolai Vasilievich² appeared in the beginning of his play not for nothing. They were a presage, a prediction, and a cause. They were the very thing that an inexplicable mental black-out of the whole city started with. As we all well know, later it caused some weird events.

Therefore, let's not rush in our discussion about the event with the witches. Let's explore it, dig in it, and analyse one great line after another. We may find some little trifles in them. In order to do that, we will need to reread the text of the scene very carefully. Let's get down to it.

ACT I³

SCENE I. A desert place.

Thunder and lightning. Enter three Witches

First Witch

When shall we three meet again

In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

Second Witch

When the hurlyburly's done,

When the battle's lost and won.

Third Witch

That will be ere the set of sun.

First Witch

Where the place?

Second Witch

Upon the heath.

Third Witch

There to meet with Macbeth.

First Witch

I come, Graymalkin!

Second Witch

Paddock calls.

Third Witch

Anon.

ALL

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:

Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Exeunt

If we take just one definition of an event (an event is nothing but a turning point in the course of stage action, which changes behaviour of all who are present) from numerous and often subjectively spontaneous definitions, we will see right away where exactly the analysed scene *breaks*. The turning point we are looking for is located somewhere near the word “Anon!” Twice the author has marked this important place – firstly with brevity and secondly with volume of this line.⁴ Believe me it is the only line in the scene that consists of just one word. And only this word is marked with an exclamation mark. *Before this word*, the text of the scene goes like a disorderly and feverish exchange of opinions, something like a stormy dialogue – maybe even an argument; *after this word*, it is completely opposite – the witches speak all together this time like a choir (with “All”, Shakespeare emphasizes their collective desire). Before the “event”, it is a hotchpotch of short lines, questions and answers, doubts and arguments. It is inconsistent and disintegrated. After the “event”, they are a fully agreed and united. Before it – it is a polyphony, after it – it is a unison.

Some of you might think that this analysis is a bit formal. This is not exactly right because the form and the meaning in the great masterpiece are inseparable. They may not even differ.

Some of you might consider it also strange that talking about the event I operate only with one word. Yes “anon” is just a word. Well first of all, who does not know how only one word that is said out loud and publicly may become a turning point of somebody’s life, or a family, or a whole nation. The verb “to love” is just a word too but it inevitably turns into the greatest event for young lovers. A commander’s order is also just a word, so is a diplomat’s slip of the tongue, forgiveness of an offender is only a word too. But at the same time, they are significant events. Secondly, I never even tried to present the word “anon” as an event. With its help, I only tried to mark a location of the event in a mass of the analysed scene.

In order to define an event in the context of common life and the story-line, it is necessary to ask the author and yourself a simple question: what happened here? What happened at this moment? Let’s get back to our precious word. Right before “anon”, they announce about a strange “Paddock call”, and even earlier they mention Graymalkin. What is it? This is the event we are looking for. Some primitive animals give witches special signs.⁵

According to superstitions of that distant time, witches could transform into different domestic animals, among other creatures. They had a whole staff of their demon-helpers who disguised as their pets. The demons not only helped them but also checked on them reporting to the Devil, their main boss. In English, it sounds even more vivid in terms of

modern terminology: “little demons putting on appearance of a cat or a frog would *assist* witches and *control* them.”⁶

Getting together for their briefing, the witches, I would assume, appointed their assigned agents to be on certain checkpoints. And these weariless and vigilant agents signalled about a change in the scene.

The event was ripe enough for an *alarm signal*.

Having defined a climax event of the scene, we can easily mark two neighbouring events – one event that the scene starts with and the other one it ends with.

Now the event trinity is clear: the witches’ appearance – an alarm signal – the witches’ disappearance.

The only thing is left is to make the last question more precise. Who is the object of special care of our fair ladies? Whom are they looking after? Or, as they like to say nowadays, whom are they pasturing? Whom are they spying after?

Let’s seek a bit further. Right before Graymalkin mewing, Macbeth’s precious name floats up in the *golden mean spot* of the scene.

Note that this is the first name said out loud in the play.

It is the main name. Name of the hero.

The three witches are fussing about meeting with him. They set the checkpoints for him. Paddock toad and mewing whore Mary are probably signalling about his approach.

This is how behind the external mark of the event we can gradually discover deeper thoughts until we finally get to its very core.

It is just like peeling a cabbage – peeling one pale green leaf after another, layer after layer, we undress the cabbage until we finally get to its sweet core cabbage-stump.⁷

Talking about the spherical multi-layer structure of a scene event, we can use a different image considering an event like the famous Russian Matryoshka doll containing a whole bunch of its sisters inside. In this – full and empty shells; there is the Last Joy, a small one, but it is neither full nor empty.

People with scars and bruises of classical education can also compare the event with Alkiviad’s Silens.⁸ This comparison will be much more concrete.

Now about the conflict. The object of claims of these three characters is Macbeth who is now far away from the stage; therefore, discussing a direct conflict between him and the witches is only possible if we do it figuratively and quite approximately, saying that the conflict can only be implied and if we do talk about a struggle then we can only talk about extra-sensory interaction. But we are not interested in such a conflict. Actors need a vivid conflict, quite real happening “today, here, and now”. We will have to look for it in a sweet and happy group of the witches and in order to do that, we will need to analyse their characters in detail.

Let’s read the scene one more time.⁹

ACT I

SCENE I. A desert place.

Thunder and lightning. Enter three Witches

First Witch

When shall we three meet again

IWhen the battle's lost and won.

Third Witch

That will be ere the set of sun.

First Witch

Where the place?

Second Witch

Upon the heath.

Third Witch

There to meet with Macbeth.

First Witch

I come, Graymalkin!

Second Witch

Paddock calls.

Third Witch

Anon.

ALL

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:

Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Exeunt

What maximum available information can we collect about our clients from such incomplete initial data if we compare it with a modern play? How different is one witch from another? (Here we make a pause to reread the play.)

At least at first glance, they are numbered differently.

What do these numbers tell us? Let's assume the simplest thing maybe the most primitive explanation of it: these are their ranks, classes, and sorts.

Then the first witch is the main one and with the highest rank. She is from a privileged class. Russians and Englishmen would call her a "chief."

In contrast to her, the third witch would be the last: the third sort, the lowest rank, nothing.

In regard to the second one, we would say that in this Table of Ranks she could occupy the middle, intermediate, and ambiguous position: higher than the third one but lower than the first one. Being compared with the third one, she could be good for something, but if she is compared with the first one, she is good for nothing.

Let's condense our thought: the first witch is a boss, the second one is her associate, whereas the third one is a go-for.

And even shorter: a troop commander, an officer, and a private.

It is something, isn't it? It can be played. Moreover one wants to play it.

(The author¹⁰ shows thumbs up).

But let's not rush. Let's read it again and check if our relationship concept can comply with the Shakespearian text.

The chief witch takes floor the first. It works. The commander comes and will announce some important instructions. What is next? (The author looks at Shakespeare's text.) For some reason, our boss starts with questions to her subordinates. It looks like she is asking for advice from her pawns. It does not quite work. Something is not complying. Where is the common administratively commanding style?...

(A new pause. The confused author cautiously skews at the reader. The pause is getting long and the reader is about to reach out to the Shakespeare book. At this moment, the author jumps and happily slaps on the reader's shoulder. There is another way to do it: the author could jump and slap on his own forehead).

Wait, this incomppliance is significant. We should have guessed right away. This is a boss of a new formation. She just got her position. She is still adjusting. She tries to play democracy like: what do you think, dear friends? Any ideas or opinions? Great! Though we will move forward. Let's take this sharp given circumstance. The first witch is literally a new chief, just assigned to this place from a different region. She is not quite competent but she has connections on the upper level. She is an upstart, so to speak. Wonderful!

(A pause of self-glorification.)

"Upstart", "parvenu" – it is a special behaviour. Look, it is a "seed" of the role ... Let's check it one more time, compare it with its antipode – the third witch (the author and the reader lean over the Shakespeare book touching their heads. Then, we hear a hot and very fast whisper). Let's see, let's see. You know, it looks like the third witch is not extremely talkative. She values her words like gold. In comparison with her, the first witch leaves an impression of a chatter-box with plenty of rhetoric questions. Look, who has the shortest line? – It is the third witch; who has the longest one? – the first witch. Ye-e-e. Let's test their lines using a different parameter. Most of the first witch's lines (three out of four) are questioning. The third one does not have any questions. All her lines are sharply affirmative with an obvious intention to be once and for all. The third witch is kind of answering the not quite confident questions of the first one and her answers are like verdicts. "There you go."

(Both the author and the reader are exhausted and settle back in their armchairs staring in the space above each other's heads. Then the author gets a cigarette and lights it up.)

Maybe we have chosen a wrong system of coordinates?

Maybe here it is not ranking of our ladies but their professional achievements? Maybe the ladies' numbers tell us about their professional rating? You know, it is like the "sixth rate turner" – in other words, a worker of a very high qualification and broad experience. Then the main one is not the first one – it is the third one, because her rate is higher. The first rate is the lowest one. It is not even applied for graduates of a professional college. We check: the arguments of the third witch are precise and deprived of any emotions; her words are breathing with knowledge and wisdom. They sound like prophecies. "The battle will end as it must, I guarantee it", she says. Immediately, we imagine a wise old woman, an old sweat who went through fire and water – she knows all intricacies of white and black magic. It can be a role seed too.

In this system, the first witch turns into a green newcomer; she just makes her first steps. She is unconfident and afraid of making a mistake – a sailor boy, a jellybean, a cherry.

What about the second witch? She still stays in her intermediate mindless position. She was a go-for. She drudged enough. She got her next rate the hard way and now knows "what is what" very well. In this version, she is doomed to hate the first witch, makes fun of her, and tries to cling to the third one. She also wants to be in the elite of the Devil's "seniors". She knows their game rules – cringe before the senior and trample on the new. Torture them, order them about as if they are slaves but watch out and don't miscalculate. It is a worn-out philosophy and a worn-out life.

It is great decoding of the witches' numbers ... Just great! But now I feel kind of pity for the first scheme. I mean the one of all these ranks and administrative hierarchy. I really don't want to leave it like that ...

(The author lights up his cigarette again and walks around the room. Comes to the window, noisily sighs. Then he startles and swiftly turns around screaming to the reader.)

What if we don't leave it?! What if we don't make a choice? What if we keep both systems? Combine them! (He rushes about the room.) Both versions of their relations are motivated in the text (he falls down in the armchair). So let's do it this way: witch 1 – a new broom, a new chief, that was assigned here to the vacant position upon her master's recommendation, say, a distant relative, who before lived a miserable life in one of the remote branches of the company, an ignorant newcomer who lowered the boom on the local officers marked with numbers 2 and 3. Everybody thought that witch 3 deserved this position. She was the most natural candidate for this vacancy. She had no doubts she would get it and finally would be the first. Her merits and business skills spoke for that.

Ok? Ok.

Now every time when the witches meet, every time they talk, an infinite dissatisfaction with their current position and a constant irritation towards each other will always be poking out through all their words. The first witch will always be mad about her own shaky position, which will be underlined by indulging and scornful glances of the third one. The career-unlucky second witch, in contrast, will have to stay reserved all the time and everywhere – to the point of stress – so as not to lose it and give away what she really thinks about her. She simply can't because the first one is her boss ... Besides the first one has a strong support from above ... So now in parallel with their everyday business conference, their routine of official responsibilities, they will be knitting a sticky web of mutual spying. An unstoppable fire of furious expectations to see others' failure will be glowing in the eyes and souls. They will use any slip of their partner to twist their head off like a chicken.

Overlapping one with the other, both ranking systems ("1-2-3-" and "3-2-1") create an inexhaustible resource of contradictory interests. They both become a perpetuum mobile of conflict, a constantly self-enriching resource of internal dynamics of the three characters.

(Completely being carried away and forgetting his notorious modesty, the author leans over to the reader and whispers in his/her ear: "you shall agree, I really got have a knack of for analysing plays. Their relations have become really extreme! Their characters became so vivid! All consequences became so extremely unpredictable! What a powerful contrast it will be for the event transition going from the mumbling quarrel of the witches to their ritual unity in casting spell: 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair!' And how interesting the whole thing turns out for the actors!" After giving this a bit slightly too obvious confession, the author blushed and switched to a dead serious manner.)

So the scene is analysed. We found hidden springs in it that push it forward and we intensified its dramatization. We also revealed tiny nuances and details of it. We have found the information we need in places where, from the first glance, it was impossible to find it. The warm-up is over.

Notes

1. A famous Russian playwright from Siberia lived in the 1970s in Soviet Russia.*
2. Butkevich means Gogol.*

3. Butkevich gives this scene in English without Russian translation.*
4. It would be more precise to talk about threefold marking rather than two. The author emphasized this line not only by means of brevity and volume; he also uses a bright colour of style. The word “Anon” has a very strong archaic and grandiloquent meaning for Englishmen (Butkevich’s note). Butkevich learnt English by himself. He could not speak it; he could only read. When he read, he would pronounce every single letter.*
5. One of English interpreters of *Macbeth* while studying theatre traditions of Shakespeare’s time made quite a convincing assumption. In the first scene with the witches, one could hear meowing, croaking, and hooting from off stage that were made by actors who were free in this scene. As you can tell, the sound technology back then was pretty sophisticated already (Butkevich).
6. This quote is supposed to be from an English writer that Butkevich mentions. Unfortunately, he did not mention his name so that we could find an exact quote.*
7. By the way, this stump can be quite bitter (Butkevich).
8. Butkevich refers to Plato’s dialogues. In one of them, Socrates is compared with Silen, a forest spirit that looks ugly but is very sophisticated and wise. It takes effort to learn about his wisdom.*
9. Here Butkevich gives a literal translation of the scene in Russian to decode each meaning for Russian readers.*
10. Author – Butkevich.*

* denotes the translator’s note.