Anatoli Vassiliev

*in conversation with Maria Shevtsova*

# Studio Theatre, Laboratory Theatre

Anatoli Vassiliev must be ranked with the most prominent of the internationally acclaimed directors of the late twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first; and history will surely place him among the great director-researcher-pedagogues of the Russian and world theatre, starting with Stanislavsky and including Meyerhold and Vakhtangov. In this conversation, Vassiliev discusses the unique situation of theatre activity in Russia in the early decades of the twentieth century, where the studio, or laboratory, was integral to the very life of the theatre as a specific, collaborative, and ensemble practice and a comprehensive artistic institution. He situates the School of Dramatic Art, which he founded in 1987, in this context, extending the latter's reach to Maria Knebel and Andrey Popov, who were his teachers on the directing course at GITIS in Moscow (State Institute of Theatre Art, now known as the Russian Academy of Theatre Art). He graduated from GITIS in 1973. *Vassa Zheleznova*, referred to in this interview, was the acme of Vassiliev's explorations of psychological realism, after which he developed forms of what he calls 'play structures' (or 'ludic structures'). Actors working in these structures project externally in clearly articulated ways rather than go inwards, towards and within emotional states of being, as is typical of psychological-realist performance in the Russian tradition. Vassiliev's reversal of established performance modes led to his current preoccupation with 'verbal structures', which are underpinned by his understanding of words as ideas oriented to symbolic and metaphysical sense rather than to psycho-emotional interpretation. The spatial and luminary dimensions of play, together with movement, music, and song that is formal, operatic, rather than in any other kind of vein, defines such later works as *Mozart and Salieri* (2000) and *Onegin's Journey* (2003).They have won him great acclaim in Russia and abroad for their innovative approach outside the parameters not only of realism but also of a range of other familiar aesthetic configurations. Vassiliev has directed productions in various countries in Europe, and has also conducted prolonged research workshops as well as working demonstrations there. In this conversation, which took place in June 2009, Vassiliev refers to several underlying principles of his work and reflects upon the importance to him of Grotowski, his last mentor.[1]

**Maria Shevtsova** *What were the main reasons for your founding the School of Dramatic Art in Moscow in 1987?*

**Anatoli Vassiliev** Every event has a long history. . . . I wanted to give it a different name, but was talked out of it. I wanted to call it the Primary School of Dramatic Art. The idea was to begin from the beginning.

I came out of the professional Russian repertory theatre. I never had the *idée fixe* that I would organize something alternative to the standard theatre, to the Russian – at the time, Soviet – repertory theatre. I did not believe in an alternative set-up because this is not the West: we have a different structure and style of life. I am a man who has a Russian structure.

I started out in the margins, in university amateur theatre – not in dramatic theatre, but in student cabaret. Nevertheless, I studied dramatic theatre from the sidelines. I was on amateur youth theatre territory, and it was here that I staged my first independent work. Later, my co-workers and I tried to do something on the fringe, but it became clear to me that I had to go on the main, market platform and develop there. I always believed more in this than in an 'alternative' theatre. I think that I acted in accordance with some sort of Russian mentality, which, after all, is a hierarchical mentality, not a democratic one. It

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Interior of the School of Dramatic Art on Sretenka Street in Moscow. Photo courtesy of the School of Dramatic Art.



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cannot imagine a grand piano in the bushes: a grand piano can only be in a glade. And for this reason, I chose a territorial kind of path for myself: go in, turn around, blow up – in short, *do* from within the agony itself. And I did this, which is why I worked with the masters of the stage. All my first famous works were with such masters at the Moscow Art Theatre.

After I had developed in the routine, standard theatre, I was thrown out. I began to look for a theatre in the margins and found myself on the small stage of the Taganka, not in the centre, on its main stage, but in the bushes.[2] They were wonderful bushes – this was, after all, the Taganka. Together with my group, we went in 1981 with the *First Version of Vassa Zheleznova*.[3] Before rehearsals began for *Cerceau* (1985), I set my actors a condition, saying that I would not work with the tactics of the theatre of productions.[4] I did not use the word 'laboratory'. In Russian we have another word – 'studio'. We lived like a studio theatre, but we did not call ourselves a studio.

Several years of this collective life went by; and I worked in GITIS, had highest-level film courses, taught courses supervised by Anatoly Efros and ran my own independent courses. Then, when I came to western Europe, people kept asking me whether I had been working in research theatre for a long time. That was the first time I heard the phrase and learned that a 'research theatre' existed. I didn't know that I had been working in research theatre, but the Europeans explained it to me. I went in the direction fate showed me.

When the Taganka doors were closed to me, I founded the theatre that I called the Primary School of Dramatic Art. It was to be an ensemble of established master actors who would begin a new life in studio theatre – 'laboratory' theatre', or 'research theatre', or 'school theatre'. 'Primary' because, although they were all established actors, they had to start from the beginning. That was how it was founded.

*Did the actors accept this straight away?*

They could neither accept nor not accept. They were the group who had been with me all the time. Each new actor came into what was already there, after discussions and a verbal agreement.

*Did they know that there would not necessarily be a production at the end of it?*

This was already understood at the time we rehearsed *Cerceau*.

I have a morbid attitude towards the audience – I think I have a wound. I always expect danger from it. I am not afraid of it, but I am wary of it. An actress with whom I worked said before the premiere of *Vassa Zheleznova* with the first cast: 'Anatoli, I had a terrible dream last night. I come out on to the stage and say my first lines. The whole audience gets up and walks out.' I think she got it precisely. It always seems to me that the audience will get up and leave.

*But this has never happened?*

It *has*, it has. *The Grown-up Daughter of a Young Man* was a big hit in Moscow in 1979.[5] The managing director of the theatre decided to earn some additional money on the show about a year after its premiere. She chose the Theatre of Satire and sold all the tickets. Difficulties began right from the start. There were problems with the sets, the wires were burning, and the lights kept going out. This is a theatre for eight hundred people. One hundred stayed. I stood there, in the auditorium, and seven hundred people walked past me. The hundred who stayed left money on the stage and bowed to us.

*Coming back to an earlier point you made: how did you turn the theatre around? I'm sorry, this is, of course, a huge question.*

A big question can be turned around. I can't give a short answer to its 'how' but I will answer the 'why' of it quickly. I observed the principle of growth at the School of Dramatic Art. What is 'growth' and what does it mean, 'to grow' – 'growth' as a category, as some sort of movement, which comes directly from Stanislavsky? I didn't add anything of my



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Scenes from Vassiliev's production of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Photos courtesy of the School of Dramatic Art.



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Above and opposite: scenes from Vassiliev's version of Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri*. Photos courtesy of the School of Dramatic Art.

own to this. Since this principle was already there, I took it. The idea within the principle is not to get bogged down. How shall I put it? Nothing in the practice is ever to be stopped.

No law of the theatre can ever be taken as absolute. The theatre is embodied in a human being, but a human being, *as* a human being, never stops, is always in motion. Every generation of people changes. I have gone through several generations of actors during my lifetime in the theatre. In my first professional experience there were actors over seventy and I was thirty-one. Then there was another generation, and another. Everything that is given in the laws of the theatre goes through human beings.

When we say 'human beings', we also mean 'actors'. And when we say 'character' – this is also a human being. Everything that is in a character has to be accepted by the actor and returned to the stage. And this means that characters are renewed. They are never the same, but change continually with changing epochs . . . epochs, no! – within every ten years, twenty years. They are always new and come new into the dramaturgy.

You look at fire. It looks the same, but, in fact, it is always changing. So, when we speak of the laws of the theatre, we have to say that the reasons for the fire being fire are always the same, but the fire always changes. The theatre requires persistent attention to constant movement. It demands constant attention to theory and practice.

It is not enough to be a director or a pedagogue, although that in itself is a great deal. Being a person of the Russian school means being a researcher. Everything to be found in the legacy of the Russian school is there in order to make any great person coming out of it not only a director and a pedagogue, but



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also a theorist and a researcher. Someone had to do this deed, and I did. I became a lone person. There weren't all that many like me – I don't mean in terms of quality, but simply in terms of the full measure of the thing.

There should be at least one person engaged in studying the theory and the practice of the basic ideas of the Russian school. This is why, when I come to Russia, I want to bolt the doors and devote myself completely to the laboratory. When I go to Europe, I fulfil my responsibilities, in the best way I can, as a director who, in order to stage productions, uses the material he has already worked through. All this is in the genetics of the Russian school, which is fundamentally different from the European one.

The idea of studio work is in the very genetics of Russian theatre. I spoke of the category of growth. This is a paradigm found



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only in the Russian school. The European school does not recognize it, even disclaims it, because it wants quick results.

There is always a centre and a margin in European theatre, and that is why alternative theatre begins to interest people more than public theatre, more than theatre on the national stage. They start to divide things up, but I believe, to this day, that only the public stage can be – *must* be – a studio stage. I want to find myself having hostile relations with this abominable swarm of people called the audience. I don't think that I am there for them. They are there for *me*. This is so because an act of art is a kind of aesthetic and moral act of attack. I never thought otherwise and never will. The best place is an amphitheatre. *That* is the place where the deed of an artist must be directed.

The School of Dramatic Art was founded at the beginning of the big turning point in Russia: *perestroika* started in 1987. Instead of reconstructing myself on the outside in that year, I shut the windows and doors and began to reconstruct within myself. I did everything to counter the general rapture, and it was precisely during this time that I worked on aesthetic, philosophical, and religious issues with regard to the theatre. While the tanks were rolling past my window in 1991 [*the year of the collapse of the Soviet Union*], we were taking photographs of illustrations from *Krokodil* for our film *The Road to Chattanooga* (1992).[6] As it turned out, I suddenly found myself in the middle of social and political life, although I hadn't aspired to being there.

*It's interesting. Your work shows that you are deeply engaged in aesthetics, but you always understand social 'here-ness', if I may put it in this way. You understand perfectly that what you do happens in a particular time, in a particular language. You are not at all an abstract person.*

No, I'm not.

*No, you're not. Everything that you do is concrete and, even though you have strong spiritual aspirations, you live in concrete time.*

I could never follow the path that Grotowski took. It would be impossible for me. As I have already said . . . How can I put it? (*Long pause.*) I never crossed the boundary where laboratory theatre is performance. I'll explain. I never staged and never sought to stage any play by Chekhov, even though I know his plays well. For twenty-two years now, I have constantly worked on Chekhov's dramaturgy by means of *études*. I can rehearse Chekhov without opening the book. Yet I have never had the desire to stage a Chekhov play because Chekhov's characters – more accurately, the protagonists of the stories he tells – lived at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth. They remained as they were in his treatment of them. The theatrical means with which it might have been possible to resurrect these dead people as living ones on the stage were exhausted at the end of the 1970s.

The instruments were exhausted, as were the generations. Chekhov was never a realist, but the realistic components of his plays were always very strong; and somewhere around the end of the 1970s a theatre generation capable of presenting characters as *Chekhov's* characters, adequate to their author, no longer existed. The time had passed.

The method of *études* and improvisations, which I have a command of and which I have also devised and developed myself is, as it were, an applied method. This method is not public. It is a rehearsal method; it adapts to the creation of a role, but it was never public. It was not meant for the public. I developed a technique by which the *étude* method *could* become public. When I began to use this technique, I was certain – and am certain of it to this day – that the only reality of a Chekhov play is its presentation in live, spontaneous action. And this means that Chekhov's text dissolves in the performer's individual text; and the actions of Chekhov's characters dissolve in the individual act of each performer. I saw this happen many times in my work with actors, and even showed parts of performances, but I never had the chance to complete them. Fate did not allow me to do it. If I had been able to, I would have staged a Chekhov play.



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It always seemed to me that what I was doing was ornamentation of routine, standard theatre. I don't have the instrument. I don't need new sets. I don't need a differently tuned or differently said text. Nor do I need an unexpected turnabout – something paradoxical in the characters' relations with each other that Chekhov had not written. The dramatic structure is there, but the people for it are not.

It's like war. The war is on, but you can't get the people you need to fight it. I have to look for the instrument. I never crossed the boundary – never went where the laboratory becomes public, assumes the laws of public action. If I had crossed over this border, perhaps I would have moved forward.

*Would you like to have crossed it?*

I don't know. I don't think *études* constitute a laboratory.

*Because* études *prepare public theatre?*

Yes, because it is an applied technique. It is always applied to the dramatic structure [*dramaturgiya*].

*Although, as a method, the* études *can be used in a laboratory?*

Yes, yes, definitely. It can fully be in a laboratory. I have never crossed the boundary. There are many reasons, but the main reason is that I was always at the centre of standard theatre, never on the outskirts. No, never. Perhaps I may have wanted to, but the occasion did not arise. Of all my productions, only one, *The Iliad* (*1996, with subsequent versions*) develops differently.

*How did you meet Grotowski? Was it when you were performing in Italy?*

You know, the years all somehow merge. I feel I am a marathon runner, only I am different from the other participants: as soon as one marathon ends, I immediately start the next. For this reason, people, towns, villages, trees, are behind me. I am a technician who turned on a reel of film and forgot to switch it off: it keeps on rolling.

Still, I am able to tell you that we performed *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1987) at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan (1988) and later in Wroclaw (1990).[7] I think that the real artistic recognition we received for this production led to Grotowski.

*But Grotowski didn't see it, did he?*

No, but his assistants did. Carla Pollastrelli saw it, for example. I remember another event. We premiered Pirandello's *Tonight We Improvise* in a small Italian-style theatre in Fontanellato, a small town near Parma, in 1990. After this premiere, a group of actors and I went with Carla Pollastrelli to Pontedera.

*What language did you speak with Grotowski?*

Russian. Grotowski had spent some time in Russia. Some of the actors spoke Polish – so Polish and Russian.

*Did you, when you met, feel you had an affinity with each other?*

In those years, I always chose someone from among the masters as a *mentor*, but not for the sake of imitation, or worship, or out of any special kind of respect. I chose my masters as mentors, even if they were not aware of it. In the Eastern school, a mentor is called a master. In the Russian tradition, the idea comes from the monastic tradition: the person who puts you on your path. I didn't have a mentor in the year I met Grotowski, and I was really hungry for one. I immediately understood that the person standing before me was a person I could choose as my teacher, except that I took him as my mentor. He was my mentor-master and I was his pupil – not a pupil who learns from his mentor by copying him, but one who walks along the same path with him, side by side. This is how it was with me: Popov and Knebel, Yefremov, Efros, Lyubimov[8] – all were living mentors, each of whom I had chosen, each putting me on my path in his or



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her own way. And then nobody was left. I became a mentor for others.

An artist cannot live without a mentor. Nobody can, till the day they die. So I chose Grotowski. It was completely obvious to me that these mentor–pupil relations were the only relations possible between us.

*Is he your last mentor?*

Yes, the last.

*Did he understand this?*

Yes, I think so.[9]

*Translated from the Russian and edited by Maria Shevtsova*

## Notes and References

1. The appropriate transliteration of Anatoli Vassiliev's name into English would be 'Anatoly Vasilyev', which I normally use. However, I have here adopted the transliteration, through French, by which he is more commonly known in English-speaking contexts.

2. The Taganka was founded by Yury Lyubimov in 1964 and enjoyed an immense reputation as a bold, innovative theatre, one also unafraid of the political strictures of the Soviet regime.

3. The play, by Maxim Gorky, was first staged by Vassiliev at the Stanislavsky Drama Theatre in 1978.

4. By Viktor Slavkin, premiered at the Taganka.

5. By Viktor Slavkin, premiered at the Stanislavsky Drama Theatre.

6. *Krokodil* (*Crocodile*), a satirical magazine founded in 1922, was given considerable licence to lampoon political figures and events. Its popularity was such that, although it closed down after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it resumed publication in 2005 in the format and even on the paper of its Soviet years.

7. The production inaugurated the School of Dramatic Art. It was performed in the working space of Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre at what was then known as the Grotowski Centre, now the Grotowski Institute.

8. Anatoly Efros taught at GITIS and directed at the Malaya Bronnaya theatre. Oleg Yefremov was the foremost director of the Moscow Art Theatre. Vassiliev's professional directing debut was with him.

9. Vassiliev's is a tragic trajectory. The School of Dramatic Art, when founded in 1987, was housed in a building in Povarskaya Street in central Moscow, which Vassiliev arranged with exquisite simplicity according to the needs of his work, for laboratory work as well as for performances with spectators. In 2001, he opened a second complex of spaces on Sretenka Street, which he had designed together with his collaborator, the architect Igor Popov. This magnificent, purpose-conceived structure, with three theatres spatially constructed differently from each other, evokes Russian orthodox churches and Renaissance palaces in one, its extraordinary fullness of light giving it a luminous, transparent quality totally adequate to the luminous practice developed in it.

At the beginning of 2005, Vassiliev began what became a fight for the life of his theatre in the full sense of this word, and so also, of course, for these buildings, which were contracted with the Moscow City Council. The circumstances are rather complex, but it would be accurate to say that what came into question in this crisis was Vassiliev's concentration on laboratory work. The authorities asserted that he should stage more productions for public viewing (commercial interests here also playing their part), and government officials were not his sole antagonists on this and related issues. After taking a year's 'sabbatical', Vassiliev finally sent in his resignation on 23 July 2006.

Initially the battle was over Sretenka, but Povarskaya was subsequently taken over and the apartments where the actors lived were sold, leaving the downstairs playing spaces for other types of work today, most not connected to Vassiliev at all. Sretenka is still called the School of Dramatic Art, but it now has an administrative director appointed by the Mayor's office and a theatre director, Igor Yatsko, who was Vassiliev's pupil and former leading actor. Several productions by Vassiliev are still performed at the School by actors whom he had developed.

It is important also to note here that Vassiliev was able to undertake laboratory work from 2004 to 2008 at ENSATT in Lyon (Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts et Techniques du Théâtre), where he was the Artistic Director of the Department of Directing, establishing the first course in directing of its kind in France. The post was created especially for him. The 'Atelier Vassiliev' presented three different shows over six days at the Avignon Festival in 2008.



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