

## Stanislavsky's Second *Othello*: The Great Director's Last Revelations

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### ABSTRACT

*In March 1927, Konstantin Stanislavsky started to direct Othello at the Moscow Art Theatre. In 1929, Stanislavsky went abroad for treatment. While in Germany, he kept writing a detailed directorial plan, which he sent to Moscow through 1929 and 1930.*

*In the thirties, though Joseph Stalin personally recognized Stanislavsky as "a living legend", the latter lived under constant fear. Around 1930, he secretly informed his son, who lived abroad, that his cousin died of scurvy and heart failure in prison, and his cousin's mother had been sent to Siberia.*

*I believe that Stanislavsky's interpretation of Othello absorbed the turmoil of the socialist era. Thus, Othello's central leitmotif – the slander and accusation of innocents – was the topic of the day. Othello, a loner, outside the battlefield was a noble "outcast", like Stanislavsky himself. The discovery of Desdemona's unfaithfulness made Othello take upon himself a great duty: to return justice to the world and restore its harmony by killing her. According to Stanislavsky, in Othello's eyes she became the Devil, and her angelic face was one of the Devil's deceptions.*

*The idea of cleansing was the "toast" in the Soviet ideology of the time. The open political processes cleansed the society from the "enemies of the people". Stanislavsky himself, though his relatives were the victims of such "cleansing", dreamt about cleansing the Moscow Art Theatre. The total confusion of "bad and good" cleansing overwhelmed the public minds.*

*Stanislavsky's interpretation of Othello does not have an end: his work was suspended after he learned (two weeks after the fact) of the premiere of Othello at the Moscow Art Theatre on March 14, 1930. But there is a certain metaphorical significance to it. In 1930, with most of the evil of Stalinism still ahead, there was not even a hope to restore the harmonious world. (KEYWORDS: Stanislavsky, Othello, Stalinism, ideology, social cleansing).*

## RESUMEN

*En marzo de 1927, Constantín Stanislavsky empezó a dirigir Otelo en el teatro de Arte de Moscú. En 1929, Stanislavsky viajó al extranjero para recibir cuidados médicos. Estando en Alemania, se dedicó a redactar un detallado plan de acción, que envió a Moscú entre 1929 y 1930.*

*Durante los años treinta, aunque Joseph Stalin reconociera personalmente a Stanislavsky como "leyenda viva", éste vivió bajo una amenaza constante. En torno a 1930, informó en secreto a su hijo, que vivía en el exterior, de que su primo había muerto en prisión del escorbuto y de un paro cardíaco, y que la madre de su primo había sido enviada a Siberia.*

*(reo que la interpretación de Otelo de Stanislavsky refleja lo tumultuosa de la era socialista. Así, de este modo el tema principal de Otelo – la difamación y acusación de inocentes – fue el tema de moda. Fuera del campo de batalla Otelo, un ser solitario, es un noble "marginado", como el propio Stanislavsky. El descubrimiento de la infidelidad de Desdémona hace que Otelo se ocupe de un gran deber: devolver la justicia y restaurar la armonía perdida del mundo matándola. Be acuerdo con Stanislavsky, Desdémona se convierte a los ojos de Otelo en un ser diabólico, y su cara angelical en uno de los engaños del Diablo*

*La idea de una limpieza fue el punto culminante lo ideología soviética del momento. Los procesos políticos abiertos sirvieron para limpiar la sociedad de "los enemigos del pueblo". El mismo Stanislavsky, aunque sus parientes fueron las víctimas de tal "limpieza", soñaba con limpiar el Teatro de Arte de Moscú. La confusión total de limpieza "buena y mala" abrumaba la mente del pueblo.*

*La interpretación de Otelo por parte de Stanislavsky no tiene final: su obra fue suspendida después de que él supiera (dos semanas después del hecho) del estreno de Otelo en el Teatro de Arte de Moscú el 14 de marzo de 1930. Pero este hecho tiene cierta importancia metafórica. En 1930, con la mayor maldad del estalinismo todavía por delante, no había ni la esperanza de ver restaurada la armonía del mundo. (PALABRAS CLAVE: Stanislavsky, Othello, estalinismo, ideología, limpieza social).*

My teacher, one of the most insightful theatre critics. Pavel Markov noticed: "Stanislavsky was unable to see tragic conflicts in life, and that is why his productions have been so peaceful".<sup>1</sup> This essay strives to challenge this statement and to show Stanislavsky's understanding of tragedy, as it comes to us from his published explication of *Othello*, his letters, and other

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<sup>1</sup> Olga Radishcheva. *Stanislavskii and Nemirovich-Danchenko. Istoriia Teatralniih Otnoshenii. 1917-1938* [Stanislavsky and Nenirovich-Danchenko. History of Theatre Relations]. Moskva: Artist. Rezhisser, Teatr, 1999. p.370.

materials of the period related to this work.

In March 1927, Konstantin Stanislavsky became energetically involved in rehearsals of *Othello* at the Moscow Art Theatre: the project had been started in 1936 by one of the MAT young directors, Ilya Sydakov. Through 1938, Stanislavsky continued his work despite long intervals due to his deteriorating health and other professional responsibilities. In 1939, when he went abroad for treatment, Sydakov resumed the rehearsals. While in Germany, Stanislavsky kept writing a detailed directorial plan, which he sent to Moscow through 1929 and 1930.

*Othello* had always been a personal favorite of Stanislavsky's, and resonated throughout his career. During his artistic youth, Salvini's legendary Othello captured his imagination once and forever. Stanislavsky carried remembrances of this Othello throughout his life: Salvini seemed to embody his ideal, monumental theatrical creation. While editing "My life in Art" for Russian readers, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, the co-founder of the Art Theatre, advised Stanislavsky to shorten his description. Nemirovich helped Stanislavsky to finish his chapter with these words:

I am not sure whether Salvini understood his Othello the same way. I did ... but, to be more precise, I would like to play Othello exactly like that.<sup>2</sup>

Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko observed the obvious: the ideal Othello-Salvini was the product of Stanislavsky's imagination, as provoked by the Italian actor – a dream part in a dream play. But though Stanislavsky admired Salvini's Othello, he sought his own ways to interpret the play through his directorial approach. While establishing his own path in art, Stanislavsky needed to test his psychological and realistic concepts on Shakespeare. He aimed for the merger of two theatrical systems – the Elizabethan and his own; he wanted to see the text further empowered by his directorial intervention. As an amateur, he directed *Othello* and played the leading part at the Society for Art and Literature (1896). Dissatisfied with his first production, Stanislavsky kept returning in his thoughts to *Othello*, yearning for the second chance to stage the play.

Stanislavsky's first and second *Othellos* are separated by more than 30 years, the Socialist Revolution, the creation of his System, and the triumphant reception of the Moscow Art Theatre by the whole world. Working on the play in 1927-1930, Stanislavsky remained partially faithful to the first interpretation, his Othello "head over heels" in love, and the play itself woven with intimate overtones. Yet he hoped that the System and three decades of his theatrical experience would help him to resolve the major contradiction of his first production. In his early *Othello*, the two parts of the show did not merge into one and remained estranged from each other. The first part was a real success: the realities of Cyprus and Venice were masterfully

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<sup>2</sup> Stanislavsky, K.S. *Moia Zhizn v Iskusstve* [My Life in Art], in Stanislavsky, *Complete Works* 9 vols. Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1988. vol. 1, p.540.

created with vivid details, as if they lived their own life: Othello stood as a normal man, not like a hero on *koturnai*. Othello, as played by Stanislavsky, became almost ordinary, spontaneous, vulnerable, a *fin-de-siècle* man – the approach which obviously contrasted the “high tragic style” traditional for the 19<sup>th</sup> century interpretations, in Russia and elsewhere. But in the second part of the tragedy, where Othello was supposed to be heart broken, passionate, wild, Stanislavsky had failed as an actor and director. His psychological preparations led him nowhere: he was unable to portray a “real man” who could transform from childish, naïve lover into a crazed beast. Stanislavsky neither “remembered”, nor imagined the great destructive passion that overwhelmed Othello. He could not find such great tragic feelings in real life, and was unable to break the *conventional nature* of tragedy. Stanislavsky faced his own limitations in acting for neither could he “live” Othello's life on stage, nor convincingly play in presentational style. Stanislavsky realized that psychological reasoning did not always open the door to the core of the great tragedy. In *My Life in Art*, he confessed that he never reached the colossal image of Salvini's Othello, indeed. But he also blamed himself for the lack of theatre experience, which made it impossible at his young age (he was 33 at the time) to play Othello.

The first *Othello* defined a central problem that Stanislavsky would later confront throughout his life and *would not fully admit it*: his method vs. classic masterpieces. All his life he tried to prove (subconsciously, I assume) that his approach was not limited to contemporary plays (i.e. Chekhov's), but equally suited to the classical repertory as well. Viewing Shakespeare as the greatest realist in world drama, he deeply believed that he could unveil “real life” in his plays, and portray his characters as real people. He applied onto Shakespeare's plays the norms of characters' behavior appropriate for realistic psychological drama. At the same time, Stanislavsky sought to elicit a truly monumental tragic vitality from the plays. Could one achieve such a goal through psychological motivations? The second time that Stanislavsky worked on *Othello*, he believed his System and his experience would help the truly tragic to be born. He wrote:

It will come unconsciously. It must be a result of the actors' work, which is based on the rules of the System.<sup>3</sup>

The second time Stanislavsky worked on *Othello*, the play was rehearsed (and later the explication was written) in a different cultural and historical context, which indirectly influenced Stanislavsky's interpretation. During the first decade of post-revolutionary Russia, he struggled courageously, striving to preserve the theatre, the greatest accomplishment of his life. But the changes took place: he was not fully “in charge” of the theatre any more, and was criticized by the younger actors and workers, thirsty for power. In 1928, he wrote after MAT tour to St.

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<sup>3</sup> Olga Radishcheva, *Stanislavskii and Nemirovich-Danchenko* [History of Theatre Relations], p.263.

Petersburg:

Everything that happened last year, now has settled at the bottom of my heart like decaying acid, which eats away my life...<sup>4</sup>

Though the elite of the Communist Party and Joseph Stalin personally officially recognized Stanislavsky, "a living legend" lived under constant fear of arrest and punishment. Some of his closest relatives and friend were in prison, or banished. Thus, he nearly suffered a heart failure after his ideological blunder during the celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> MAT anniversary: he asked the audience to stand for a moment in honor of its deceased patron Savva Morozov, the capitalist who provided funds to construct the MAT building. Stanislavsky feared not for his life, but for his family, which would be destitute in case of his death. Stanislavsky was well aware of the destinies of "enemies of the people", merchants like him among them. Around 1930, he secretly informed his son, who was abroad for treatment, that his cousin died of scurvy and heart failure, and his cousin's mother had been sent to Siberia.<sup>5</sup>

I believe that *Othello*, one of the most beloved and "personal" plays for Stanislavsky, absorbed this turmoil in the ways he interpreted some of *Othello*'s themes. It was not a direct intrusion of political issues into the text but a subtle orchestration of them in his "written score" of *Othello*. Thus, *Othello*'s central leitmotif – the slander and accusation of innocents – was the topic of the day.

*Othello*, as played by a happy and young Stanislavsky, whose career was on the rise in 1896, had changed and aged. In 1928, Stanislavsky's mission was almost fulfilled, and he had a wealth of tragic experience in his memory bank. His health did not permit him to act, and Leonid Leonidov was cast as *Othello*: the only tragic actor of the Moscow Art Theatre was nearing sixty. Nevertheless, Stanislavsky recognized that Shakespeare justified *Othello* as a man of years. Then Stanislavsky added another characteristic from his personal experiences: his own professional and personal loneliness. (Stanislavsky's loneliness was thoroughly described in memoirs and theatre criticism of the time.) *Othello*, according to the directorial plan, was a stranger to everyone in Venice, and initially – to the ruling Senate. The Senate did not hide their sneering attitude towards him when the Moor spoke. ("There is a precipice between them!", wrote Stanislavsky.<sup>6</sup>)

*Othello* was different from the day he was born. Appreciated in wars, outside the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.242.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 275

<sup>6</sup> *Letopis Zhizni i Tvorchestva Stanislavskogo* [Chronology of Life and Creativity of Stanislavsky] Moskva: VTO, 1976, vol. 4, p.187.

battlefield he was a noble "outcast". When Desdemona ran away with the old Moor, the Venetians were appalled that a sweet white beauty got "spoiled rotten". Stanislavsky, his American impressions still fresh after the MAT tour to the States in 20-ties, compared their feelings about the Othello-Desdemona union with "Hoover's feelings if his daughter were to marry a nigger".<sup>7</sup> In order to illustrate his point, Stanislavsky invaded the whole household get annexed, as if intended to run after her and kill the dirty Moor upon the realization of Desdemona's flight.

Stanislavsky from the start de-emphasized the Othello-Iago conflict, then shifted emphasis to the conflict between Othello and the social world. By doing so, he created an "objective pre-disposition" for the further tragic action, which would not merely represent Othello's personal drama, but also express the permanent conflict between an outcast genius and down-to-earth cynical society. As we see, Stanislavsky romanticized Othello, and extended his tragedy. He did it on purpose:

I believe that Shakespeare must not be narrowed but always expanded.<sup>8</sup>

While Othello was a stranger to the Venetian world, Iago, the insider, was its best man, scaling the social ladder. This explains Iago's role as avenger of ills, imagined or real, and dispenser of communal justice. If not Iago, someone else sooner, or later, would have poisoned Othello's belief and destroyed his world. The petty *provocateur*, as Stanislavsky described him, society's own, would surely win while the idealistic and noble Othello was doomed from the start.

Stanislavsky emphasized all romantic aspects of Othello in the traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century understanding of romanticism. To show later how much Othello had to lose, Stanislavsky highlighted the incredible happiness of the Moor at the beginning. Many times, in various sources, Stanislavsky repeated that Othello was "à la Romeo". ("His honeymoon is a dream, the highest peak of love passion.")

Othello and Desdemona were real lovers: they touched, hugged, kissed, pressed each other hands, and gazed at each other constantly. Desdemona in Stanislavsky's interpretation was an energetic, decisive young woman (played by Alla Tarasova). After their first night, she asserted herself as a real mistress of the place, its governing lady. Their brief glimpse of paradise would counterpoint Othello's devastating disillusionment. To live in heaven first, wrote Stanislavsky, and then to be cast out – the wreckage of such happiness would transform naïve,

Stanislavsky K.S. *Rezhisserskii ekzempliar "Otello"* [Directorial Explication of "Othello"]. Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1994. p.142.

<sup>8</sup> Stanislavsky to Leonidov. Letters in *Complete Works*, vol. 9. pp.362-364.

<sup>9</sup> Letters in *Complete Works*, vol. 9, p.387.

open and self-satisfied Othello into a beast. The old age of the actor would complement the interpretation and carry its special meaning, too: the older Othello wagered his all on Desdemona, including his life.

Stanislavsky led his Othello to the final destination – the inurder – through all these stages. The murder, though, was yet to be explained in his explication:

Is it possible to part with the euphoria one lives in? Is it easy to realize WHAT one has lost? When someone has everything he lived with taken away, first he is nuinb, then he loses his balance, then he painfully starts to look for it ... The inore he sobs over his loss, the more he values it at the same time, comparing it with an empty future ...<sup>10</sup>

Stanislavsky did not stop on this obviously rather melodramatic explanation of Othello's feelings. The discovery of Desdemona's unfaithfulness made his Othello understand his new great duty: to restore the harmonious world by saving it from such a disgraceful, lying, monstrous slut. In Othello's eyes, as Stanislavsky saw it, she became the Devil, and her angelic face was one of the Devil's deceptions. From Othello's perspective,

If Desdemona is such, she must be destroyed.<sup>11</sup>

Othello recruited himself to repaint the world and restore its harmony. He turned mad, and Stanislavsky wanted Leonidov to portray him mad. Upon the discovery of his new cleansing mission, he was painfully relieved, and almost happy:

Joy overwhelms him because his torture is over. He is happy that the snake is caught and won't escape the punishment. He is happy that, despite all his pain, but the devil within her, has been brought to light ... It is better like that for Othello. It is better like that for the human hood itself.<sup>12</sup>

The idea of cleansing was the "toast" in the Soviet ideology of the time. The open political processes cleansed the Communist Party from the "enemies". Stanislavsky himself, whose relatives were the victims of such cleansings, dreamt about cleansing the Moscow Art Theatre. Meyerhold, another great director of the time, who would become another victim of

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.388

<sup>11</sup> *Stanislavsky Produces Othello*. London: Geoffrey Bles Ltd., 1948, p.244

<sup>12</sup> *Letopis Zhizni i Tvorchestva Stanislavskogo* [Chronology...], p.199.

cleansing in 1939, wanted to cleanse the Soviet theatre from the Stanislavsky System. The left groups wanted to cleanse the Soviet Theatre from the Moscow Art Theatre. The total confusion of "bad and good" cleansing overwhelmed the public minds. Who were these Demons with the angelic face, who were the helpful "Iagos", provoking crowds to mistrust everyone, ready to accuse innocents of imaginary crimes and betrayals? That was the tragedy of the time when "fair was foul, and foul was fair", when the "happy future of the happy Soviet people" of the "happiest country in the world (lyrics from the most popular song of the time) was being built on the bones of millions of its victims. This pressure coming from the outside that Stanislavsky felt, was supposed to fill the production in a certain way: the invisible crowd of rebels behind the walls produced stormy threatening noises. Life on Cyprus was not quiet, and was supposed to give the increasing strain of masses, ready to riot. Growing pressure from outside created the atmosphere of the time itself, blinding and powerful, as if "the future" of the story.<sup>13</sup>

Just like Shakespeare in *King Lear*, Stanislavsky made Nature herself echo the characters' passions: thunder and lightning empowered Othello's entrances and exits like warning signs. Iago's dreadful laughter (Satan's laughter<sup>14</sup>) was designed to give the spectators chills. The "couleur locale" of the production was the important visual part of the production that Stanislavsky envisioned. Alexandre Golovin and Stanislavsky worked on the exotic oriental stage design. They planned to demonstrate a keen combination of Turkish, Persian, Italian, and Arabic styles in a smooth sequence of scenes placed on a revolving stage.<sup>15</sup> Stanislavsky, while trying to be more realistic, actually romanticized the acting style, which does not appear realistic at all from his directorial explication.

Stand there, wipe your tears, which heavily roll down your cheeks, hold yourself from crying out and whisper the way people speak of the most important and sacred things.<sup>16</sup>

Stanislavsky strove to expand and enlarge Shakespeare.

He approached the text of *Othello* in the same manner he traditionally dealt with scripts: he treated it as a system of codes, which expressed far less than what was hidden beneath. He wanted to decipher the codes and fill the script with real life.

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<sup>13</sup> Stanislavsky, *Lectures. Complete Works, vol. 9, p.363.*

<sup>14</sup> *Rezhisserskii ekzempliar "Othello"* [Directorial Explication of *Othello*], p.221

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.388.

<sup>16</sup> Stanislavsky, *Lectures. Complete Works, vol. 9, p.389.*



In order to understand Shakespeare's intention, one must dig and grasp for them from underneath *the dead letters*, and thus restore his thoughts, his vision, imagery, his feelings, all subtexts concealed under the written text."

Realist to the core, Stanislavsky aggrandized real life on stage. But that was still a made-up reality, a product of his imagination.

Stanislavsky always lost if he directed the play as it was, because the play in this case constricted him.<sup>18</sup>

Gradually Stanislavsky would grow disappointed with the script itself. Shakespeare was no exception: Stanislavsky tenderly reproached the Elizabethan author for having failed to describe this or that at the desired length, he reportedly stated that he wanted to "blow up" the play.

Let us take the nature of Othello's emotional condition. He was unbelievably happy with Desdemona. [...] This highest peak of passion somehow had not been sufficiently conveyed (by actors) why he played Othello. Neither did the author pay enough attention to it.<sup>19</sup>

Real people, as Stanislavsky saw them, had their real biographies. The details of their wellbeing were created by Stanislavsky for Shakespeare never had in mind to provide directors with realistic details of the characters' lives.

Stanislavsky's interpretation of *Othello* does not have an end: his work was suspended after he learned (two weeks after the fact) of the premiere of *Othello* at the Moscow Art Theatre on March 14, 1930. It was a great disappointment and insult for Stanislavsky to have realized that his directorial explication had not been followed that he spent months of writing his explication in vain. Ilya Sudakov, who finished the production under the supervision of Ivan Moskvín, was not the only one to blame: the concept of "planned productions", as in factories, had already been introduced into the theatres. Stanislavsky, when he was finally informed about the final artistic compromises and the great hurry, with which the show was completed, wanted

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<sup>17</sup> "Stanislavsky Works on *Othello*", in Stanislavsky, *Stat'i. Rech'i. Besedi. Pisma* [Essays, Speeches, Conversations, Letters.], Moskva, Iskusstvo, 1954, p.571. (My emphasis.)

<sup>18</sup> Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, *Istoriia Teatralnih Otnoshenii* [History of Theatre Relations], p.370.

<sup>19</sup> "Stanislavsky Works on *Othello*", pp.607-608

to withdraw his name from the poster. "Don't disgrace me," he wrote to his secretary.<sup>20</sup>

Lronid Leonidov (Othello) had been unstable for years, suffering acute attacks of agoraphobia, thus making it impossible to predict his performances. The role of Iago, played by Vladimir Sinitsin, became one of the eye-openers of the production. The actor, despite Stanislavsky's views of Iago as a petty *provocateur*,<sup>21</sup> created a romantic image of an irresistibly charming and bitter master of destruction. Iago's drama was in his loneliness: he once believed in life, too, but was deceived and disappointed.<sup>22</sup> Sinitsin portrayed Iago as *romantic* figure: the actor intuitively followed Stanislavsky's ideas.

Stanislavsky's first *Othello* survived five performances in 1896. The second *Othello* became a "cursed" production: after it ran for just ten times, Vladimir Sinitsin (Iago) fell to his death from a fourth floor window. He was thirty-seven years old. *Othello* was not included in the next season though Stanislavsky was back to Moscow in November 1930. Stanislavsky did not insist on renewing the production.

The end of the play, with Othello's world restored and cleansed, had not been included in the explication due to the early premiere of the play (as it is described above). But there is a certain unintentional metaphorical significance to it. In 1930, with most of the evil of the Stalinist era of great repression still ahead, there was not even a hope to restore the harmonious world in which Stanislavsky resided before the Socialist revolution. Stanislavsky still hoped for the best. He was stoical and romantically abstract:

We shall see on stage the rebirth of the world soul, inner struggle with the past ... and the new life coining, still unrecognized and misunderstood. This struggle will be for the sake of equality, freedom and spiritual culture, and the eradication of war ...<sup>23</sup>

Stanislavsky's final interpretation of *Othello* was published in 1945, and it speaks for itself. It powerfully appeals to the readers/researchers imagination. And perhaps even more so, because it had never been staged.

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<sup>20</sup> Stanislavsky, Letters. *Complete Works*, vol. 9, p.423

<sup>21</sup> *Rezhisserskii Ekzempliar "Othello"* [Directorial Explication of *Othello*], p.147

<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Sinitsin to Stanislavsky. *Letopis Zhizni i Tvorchestva Stanislavskogo* [Chronology of Life and Creativity of Stanislavsky], pp.191-192.

<sup>23</sup> Stanislavsky, Letters. *Complete Works*, vol. 9, p.375.