

The Soviet Actress

in the Literature of Perestroika

BY DIANE NEMEC IGNASHEV AND ANNA DOTLIBOVA

How will *perestroika* affect the status of women in Soviet Russian culture? Is it possible to restructure traditions that are centuries old? Is anyone even suggesting that those traditions need to be restructured? Have any alternatives been proposed? Theatre offers an exceptional medium through which to study the attitudes of society toward any number of issues, and the status of women is no exception. One method of analysis, certainly, is to examine the contents of the plays themselves. We propose, rather, to examine the relations in the professional community itself and how those attitudes and issues are related to the larger population — not only through plays but through the large body of journalistic literature that surrounds the Soviet theatre. In this paper we propose a brief overview of the status of the Soviet Russian actress as a cultural symbol.

Theatre in Russia has always held a special attraction for women, both as participants in performance and as viewers. Russian women were allowed to enter the theatrical profession almost immediately after the first professional Russian theatre company was founded in St. Petersburg in 1756. Theatre offered the first public venue for female participation in the “fine arts.” Women, especially members of the court, also appear to have been regular patrons of the theatre, and today, although there are yet no published data to support our observations, we estimate that on the average women theatre-goers outnumber males by a ratio of approximately six to one. For all their involvement in theatre as actors and viewers, however, women have begun to enter more central positions in the theatre’s institu-

tional hierarchy only very recently. Though their successes have been remarkable, writers such as Liudmila Petrushevskaia and Nina Sadur, or directors such as Tat’iana Doronina and Genrietta Ianovskaia, still comprise but a small minority within their fields.

Russian actresses, however, have experienced a wide range of creative possibilities and an even broader span of attendant social difficulties for several centuries. The actress, by definition of her trade, also occupies a unique position in the relation between real-life experience and cultural symbol. An actress is never herself. Nor is she entirely someone else, that is, the character she plays. We in the audience are never quite sure who she is, to which realm she belongs. Before tens, hundreds, and now with the advent of film, thousands of strangers, in the most public, anonymous circumstances she reveals the most intimate emotions. The strength of her performance would seem to rely, in large part, on the extent to which she exploits the tension between these two — public and private — realms.

The dichotomized, “publicly private,” existence of the actress has carried a special appeal for writers of fiction in Russia, no less than in the West. The Soviet Russian literary canon offers a wealth of works based entirely, or focused in large part, on the actress. And a central feature of her depiction is precisely the dichotomy of her simultaneous existence in two realms. For the most part, writers — both male and female — tend to view that dichotomy and the problems it raises in two ways. On the one hand, the actress may be identified entirely with her profession. Her public life is her private life. She not only assumes the name, the psychology, and the fate of her heroines, her whole life takes on the status of a per-



formance. Consider, for example, Annette, the heroine of Aleksandr Herzen's 1848 novel *Soroka-vorovka* (The Thieving Magpie), whose every utterance constitutes a quotation from her stage roles and whose performance (in this case, her life) ultimately earns her the actor's greatest reward, kudos from another actor, the male narrator. At the opposite extreme stands the actress whose public life, whose profession, is but a continuation of the drama that is her life off stage. She is the "natural" actress, who has no need to study or memorize lines, but "plays herself." Not infrequently, her best performance is her last: death (usually suicide) on stage. (See, for example, Ivan Turgenev's "Klara Milich" or Aleksandr Kuprin's "The Last Debut.")

Has *perestroika* brought any new postulations of the actress's position, any resolution of the dichotomized (usually tragic) existence offered by patriarchal Russian culture? Two popular women's journals, both written by and for Soviet women, run monthly features on women in the arts, most often about actresses. In both publications the depiction of actresses adheres to the larger aims and purposes of the respective publication.¹ *Sovetskaia zhenshchina* (Soviet Woman), which aims at the social activist and foreign reader, until very recently (mid-1988) projected an image of the actress as consummate professional, social leader, and official representative of State art. Not surprisingly, given the magazine's circulation in translation, its heroines are ballerinas and opera singers, followed by esteemed veterans of Moscow's and Leningrad's most established theatres — the Moscow Art theatre, the Maly.

The actress as "Soviet woman" emerges as a selfless disciplinarian, dedicated to her work and to work alone: "Iron-clad discipline, renunciation of many of life's simple pleasures, and work, work, work!"² "To give myself completely to my work! never stop!"³ She willingly devotes her life to the theatre. Her entire biography can be reduced to the categories of a professional *vita*: her first encounter with the theatre, training, teachers and mentors, stage roles, reviews, awards, and trips abroad. If one learns anything at all about her as a human being outside of her professional capacities, that information comes only by way of occasional identification with a stage role. (We ought to add

that this "special" role not infrequently turns out to be one which also "echoes the fate of many thousands of other Soviet people,"⁴ thereby negating any possible personal revelation). In short, if not directly related to their professional activities, the actress's personal life is off limits. Articles devoted to Vera Alentova and Elena Obraztsova, for example, mention the women's husbands only insofar as the men have collaborated with their wives on artistic projects.⁵ Children, if named, function as insightful critics and colleagues. The theatre is the actress's home where she has spent her best years, where she has found her greatest personal happiness: "speaking with my time and with my people in the language of all that is noble and true."⁶

Sovetskaia zhenshchina's actress reads like the heroine of a Socialist Realist novel. She traces her roots to early Stalinist literature, and vestiges of her depiction run throughout Soviet literature of the 1970-80s. The consummate professional, be she an actress or a cosmonaut, sets an admirable standard of women's achievement, but she has little in common with the everyday reality of working women. At least that would seem to be the position of *Sovetskaia zhenshchina's* "sister publication," *Rabotnitsa*.

Rabotnitsa (Woman Labourer), which aims at a domestic audience, largely working class, has always had a strong practical vein, publishing recipes, helpful hints, dress patterns. *Rabotnitsa's* pragmatism emerges as well in its handling of the actress as role model. Unlike *Sovetskaia zhenshchina*, *Rabotnitsa* features only the most popular theatre and film actresses.

One senses a different approach even in format. Instead of third-person narratives, *Rabotnitsa* prefers first-person interviews, usually conducted at the actress's home. The interviews begin with a personal remark about how attractive the actress is in real life, about her good taste in decorating the family apartment, the delicious smells coming from her kitchen. This introduction leads into a personalized review of the actress's professional resumé: her teachers and close personal relationships with them, the difficulties she had pursuing her profession at the outset, a few words about roles and plans for the future. Unlike the actresses at *Sovetskaia zhenshchina*, few interviewed by

Rabotnitsa expressed any identification with the heroines they played, more common were remarks such as "X isn't like me at all."

Rabotnitsa's excursion into the actress's private realm continues into a discussion of her life before and outside of the theatre: as a child with her parents, as an adult with her husband (all but one interviewee were married) and her children; her views on child raising, interior decorating, clothing, cosmetics, diet, and her secrets for maintaining a youthful appearance. North American readers accustomed to interviews with actresses and other performers in *Ladies Home Journal*, *Family Circle*, or *Cosmopolitan* (one could expand this generalization to "non-gendered" publications), may find these perfectly legitimate areas of inquiry, if somewhat outdated in their formulation. From the standpoint of Soviet journalism, the very idea of putting such personal questions to a public figure is outrageous.

More amazing are the answers to these questions. According to the actresses, their childhoods were perfectly mundane. Nothing extraordinary differentiates their home life from those of their contemporaries. As Irina Alferova recalls, "We had a very hard life. One room in a communal apartment in Novosibirsk. Money was always hard to come by. Daddy liked to drink. Of course, my mother had a very difficult time."⁷ Liudmila Zaitseva holds similar memories: "My mother raised us by herself, without my father. She taught me not by words, but through actions, through her attitude toward work."⁸ The majority met their husbands on or around the set or in school, and none of them regrets their choice. As they tell it, their husbands have served as artistic mentors and supporters, faithful friends and helpers at home, and unquestioned authorities. According to Lidiia Fedoseeva, who was married to actor, director, and writer Vasilii Shukshin, it was only thanks to her husband that she evolved as an actress: "Vasya was the first to see that I *could* act."⁹ Of course, Shukshin does not seem to have been willing to let his wife's career take precedence over her obligations at home: "Let his wife take off for two weeks of sun in the south with a strange man — no, he wasn't going to stand for that! Nothing, naturally, would change his mind, and another actress made the trip."¹⁰

Child raising receives particular attention in the *Rabotnitsa* interviews. Having children creates difficulties, but none, or so it seems, that would keep the actress from her profession. As recounted by Elena Solovei (known best for her lead role in Nikita Mikhalkov's *Slave of Love*), it was "rough" until the children got a bit older, but not impossible. "I tried to schedule filming for the summers so that I could take the children on location with me.... My whole family was with me, for example, on the set of *Slave of Love*."¹¹

The actresses' daily existence, as recounted in *Rabotnitsa*, also seems to differ little from that of the "average" woman. They do their own housework, love to talk about cooking and to collect recipes (Fedoseeva even provides her recipe for cabbage soup). They eat average food and try to maintain an average appearance. When asked about her preferences in clothing, Irina Alferova reported that she, "like all women, like[s] to dress well. But I prefer restraint. Whenever I buy something new, one of my friends is bound to say, 'So, you got another gray dress with buttons down the front?' I buy what's in the stores, and selection there, as you well know is not great, but one can't waste one's life looking for dresses and boots. In short, I don't like it when people try to stand apart by dressing extravagantly."¹²

Readers of the "new" (post-1985) *Rabotnitsa* and *Sovetskaia zhenshchina* are offered two variations on a single portrait: the actress not on the stage, not in "character," but herself a "heroine," outstanding citizen and model housekeeper, respectively; superior role model in either the public or the private sphere with the reader left to assume that behaviour in one automatically transfers to the other.

What has happened to all those suicidal, fallen women who live their lives out of suitcases in seedy hotels, who in pursuit of their "art," have sacrificed stable relationships, children, and comfortable homelives? Where are the devastated, abused Annettes, the lonely Nina Zarechnaias and Arkadinas (Chekhov's *Seagull*), the demonic Klaras? If the gap between career and personal life can be spanned as effortlessly as Soviet women's magazines would lead us to believe, is the division of women's lives into public and private thereby legitimated?

Recently, women writers have begun to question this division of female existence

through a re-examination of the dichotomized symbol of the actress in Russian culture: Viktoriia Tokareva in *Ne sotvori...* (Thou Shalt Not Create...) and Liudmila Petrushevskaiia in *Kvartira Kolombiny* (Columbine's Apartment). By way of juxtaposing two Russian males' encounters and attitudes towards an Italian film actress, Tokareva proposes that neither the idealized view of the woman as professional, as the image on the screen and that alone, nor the more down-to-earth approach to her as potential mother or wife without a career in the public sector, satisfies the viewer or does justice to the complex individual behind both images. In essence, Tokareva rejects any imaging of the actress, the woman, or the human being. Petrushevskaiia, by allowing her actress (Columbine) to assume both male and female stage and social roles, comes close to destroying the symbol of the actress by denying her femininity. In different ways both challenge the division of the actress's life into separate spheres, yet neither proposes an alternative.

Examined through the prism of their depictions of the actress, neither the popular press nor the artistic avant garde has yet to offer any proposals for restructuring the fundamental ways in which women's lives are regarded and, ultimately, valued. And yet, the very fact that the popular press has begun to experiment with different approaches within the old framework and that writers like Tokareva and Petrushevskaiia are free to criticize that framework offers hope for change.

¹For an expanded introduction to these and other Soviet women's magazines, see Molly McAndrew, "Soviet Women's Magazines," *Soviet Sisterhood*, ed. Barbara Holland (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 78-115.

²R. Sheiko, "Bravo, Katia!" *Sovetskaia zhenshchina* 2 (1989): 41.

³L. Udovichenko, "Byvaiut li prostye sud'by?" *Sovetskaia zhenshchina* 4 (1986): 27.

⁴L. Smirnova, "Kazhdoi otdana chastitsa serdtsa," *Sovetskaia zhenshchina* 5 (1986): 37.

⁵N. Polynina, "Vera Alentova: 'Moia li

eto rol'?" *Sovetskaia zhenshchina* 6 (1987): 28-29; R. Sheiko, "Elena Obratsova. Dar i sud'ba," *Sovetskaia zhenshchina* 7 (1987): 9.

⁶A. Stepanova, "Drugogo schast'ia ne khochu," *Sovetskaia zhenshchina* 7 (1986): 13.

⁷I. Alferova, "Variatsii na lichnuiu temu," *Rabotnitsa* 3 (1989): 27.

⁸L. Zaitseva, [Untitled Interview] *Rabotnitsa* 5 (1986): 16.

⁹L. Shukshina, "Shukshina v roli... Shukshinoi," *Rabotnitsa* 10 (1988): 23.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹¹E. Solovei, [untitled interview], *Rabotnitsa* 8 (1987): 26.

¹²I. Alferova, 27.

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Anna M. Dotlibova received her training at the State Institute of Theatrical Art (GITIS) in Moscow. Her areas of specialization are theatre and alternative cultures. Diane Nemeč Ignashev received her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and is currently Associate Professor of Russian at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. Her specialization is contemporary Russian literature.

Dotlibova and Nemeč Ignashev are collaborating on an historical study of Russian actresses.