

Tikrit University
College of Education for Humanities
English Department



Higher Studies/ M.A./ English Literature

Drama

The Establishment of the Moscow Art Theatre

Compiled By:

Assist. Prof. Marwa Sami Hussein

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The founding of the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) in 1898 represents one of the most decisive institutional and aesthetic transformations in modern theatre history. While its global reputation has rested largely upon the later theoretical writings of Konstantin Stanislavsky—particularly *An Actor's Work on Himself*—the historical significance of the theatre lies primarily in its formative years before the Russian Revolution. Part I of Nick Worrall's *The Moscow Art Theatre* reconstructs these origins in detail, demonstrating that the revolutionary force of the institution derived not from abstract acting theory but from concrete institutional innovation, ensemble discipline, and a redefinition of theatrical production itself. The establishment of the Moscow Art Theatre must therefore be understood as a convergence of social change, entrepreneurial capitalism, artistic reform, and administrative rigor within late nineteenth-century Moscow.

Historical Background

The emergence of the Moscow Art Theatre occurred during a period of profound transformation in Russian society. Following the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, Moscow underwent rapid industrialization and became the center of a growing merchant and entrepreneurial class. This social transformation parallels, in some respects, the development of Elizabethan London: a commercial center in which new economic forces supported theatrical

innovation. The rise of capitalist enterprise in Moscow produced industrial magnates who were willing to fund cultural institutions. The theatre became a site where entrepreneurial energy intersected with aesthetic ambition. The Moscow Art Theatre would ultimately depend upon this alliance between artistic reformers and financially empowered patrons.

The Society of Art and Literature

Stanislavsky invested personal funds and energy in cultivating disciplined rehearsal methods. He introduced careful table work, analytical reading of texts, and attention to psychological motivation. His insistence that actors speak naturally, observe truthful pauses, and avoid theatrical cliché signaled a rejection of conventional declamation. Even at this early stage, Stanislavsky emphasized moral complexity in characterization, famously asserting that when portraying a villain, the actor must search for the good within him.

Stanislavsky learned to draft promptbooks, manage budgets, recruit personnel, and supervise production details. These experiences would prove indispensable in the establishment of a permanent professional theatre. Simultaneously, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko—critic, playwright, and pedagogue, who came from a literary and teaching background—was developing complementary ideas about ensemble acting and literary repertoire. When the two men met in 1897 for their legendary eighteen-hour conversation, they discovered shared dissatisfaction with existing theatrical practice and a shared vision of reform.

Public Accessibility and Artistic Integrity

The Moscow Art Theatre was conceived as both “public” and “accessible.” Its founders sought to create a theatre that would be artistically serious yet socially inclusive. Affordable ticket prices and a commitment to literary quality were central principles. The partnership between Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko combined complementary strengths. Stanislavsky brought administrative discipline, directorial innovation, and organizational energy. Nemirovich contributed dramaturgical expertise, literary connections, and pedagogical authority. Their collaboration institutionalized the ensemble as the core of theatrical production. The company rejected the star system in favor of collective responsibility. Actors received fixed salaries rather than relying on performance-based prestige. Rehearsals were extended and exhaustive. Productions were conceived as unified artistic wholes rather than vehicles for individual display.

Institutional Innovation and Historical Significance

The establishment of the Moscow Art Theatre represented more than the creation of a successful company; it redefined theatrical production. The director became the interpretive center of performance. The ensemble replaced the star system. Rehearsal evolved into a site of collective investigation rather than mechanical preparation. Scenic design moved toward historical and psychological coherence. Although Stanislavsky’s later theoretical writings would shape twentieth-century acting pedagogy, Worrall demonstrates that the most transformative

innovations occurred during the theatre's formative years. The institutional model—rather than the codified “system”—was the true engine of modern theatrical practice.

Source:

Sznodi, Peter. (1987). *Theory of the modern drama*. Suhrkamp Verlag.