

Book Review

***Becoming an Actor-Creator* by Nikolai Demidov** (edited by Andrei Malaev-Babel and Margarita Laskina, translated by Andrei Malaev-Babel with Alexander Rojavin and Sarah Lillibridge), London and New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. xv + 813, ISBN 978-1-138-77649-4

Nikolai Demidov is one of Russian theatre's most important figures, though he is all but unknown in the West. He had a background in scientific study (he trained as a doctor) but became one of Stanislavski's most valued collaborators and a co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre School. While at the School, teaching the 'system', Demidov observed that students training in its separate elements could not reliably recreate the natural spontaneity and creativity that he recognised, without exception, in the great theatre artists he admired. His understanding of the need to instil in the actor the freedom of the creative process from the very earliest stages of training prompted Demidov to propose a new training technique which, eventually, led him to take a different artistic path from Stanislavski and the disciples of the system. Demidov died in 1953, aged 68, after forty years as a theatre artist and teacher, leaving behind the completed manuscripts for three books about his work, as well as preparatory material for two more. The first was published in Russian in 1965, the remainder had to wait another forty years.

Margarita Laskina (assistant to Demidov) and Andrei Malaev-Babel have brought the five books together, presenting them in English for the first time, in one volume titled *Becoming an Actor-Creator*. The result of this daunting mission is a revelation. Demidov is brought to light as a master pedagogue, dedicated to the mission of unlocking the actor's facility to act with uninhibited creativity. The translation is loyal to its context (the reader never loses a sense of period and place) and yet the writing feels utterly vigorous and relevant. Each book has a different purpose and flavour, but the decision to unite them proves crucial, as each provides the framework for the next.

In the first book, *The Art of the Actor: its present and future*, Demidov explores the reasons behind the deterioration of theatre as an art and proposes a vision for its future. Tactfully, he establishes that Stanislavski's approach, pitched at creating roles for performance, is inevitably compromised by the eventual need to meet production deadlines. Demidov traces the beginnings of his own release from 'the spell' of Stanislavski, towards an exhortation to the actor to cultivate and protect the natural creative apparatus before it becomes encumbered with the need to attempt performance.

The second book, *Actor Types*, sees Demidov identify his four categories of actor (Emotional, Affective, Imitator and Rationalist) through an analysis of the qualities of their talents. He examines the strengths and shortcomings of each actor type as well as its director counterpart and, notably, recommends that each type should be taken on a different training path and given different guidance in rehearsal.

In *The Art of Living Onstage: from a theatre teacher's laboratory*, the third of the books, Demidov lays out his own methods of nurturing the actor's creativity as an underpinning of all subsequent training. It is the longest, most compelling, and most obviously practical of the five books, and in it Demidov provides specific 'études' towards the culture of onstage freedom, transformation and the use of what he calls 'green-lighting' as a means of affirming the natural gifts of the student. He illustrates his pedagogical methods with illuminating anecdotes and examples of conversations with his students. Demidov's revolutionary practice is founded on teaching that insists on affirming the students' confidence in their own creativity, and he delivers uncompromising advice to the acting teacher that seems as fresh and challenging today as it would have done at the time it was written.

The final two books, unfinished but skilfully collated by the editors from Demidov's archive with the aid of his outline plans, are inevitably less coherent, but contain crucial insights into the author's thinking and the progression of his ideas. These are not drily presented, and at times become the author's passionate dialogue with himself as he strives to articulate the means of moving beyond the foundations of actor training towards an elevated technique capable of creating work on the very highest artistic planes. *The Artist's Creative Process Onstage* (Book Four) and *Psycho-Technique of the Affective Actor* (Book Five) are of particular interest in their exploration of the relationship between the actor and the character and are accompanied by a detailed 'Glossary of Terms and Exercises' compiled and annotated by Malaev-Babel from Demidov's preliminary notes.

The gathering together of this material into one comprehensive volume, is a staggering achievement by its editors, and they provide an illuminating biography and extensive notes. Most exciting, however, is the freshness and relevance of Demidov's voice which leapfrogs sixty years of Western debate on the subject of acting. Key Western acting pedagogues (e.g. Adler, Marowitz, Meisner) who wrestled similarly with the limitations of the 'system' are, obviously, not mentioned in these pages, but it is hard not to think of them, as it is inconceivable that the debate in the West could have followed the same path if Demidov's work had already been widely available in English.

Becoming an Actor-Creator is not a book to dip in and out of, at least at the first reading, and the earlier sections need to be fully grasped before the later ones can be absorbed, but, despite its physical weight at over eight hundred pages, it is eminently readable; Demidov's tone is buoyant and approachable, his passion notwithstanding, and each page provides new nuggets of sage provocation. The book should excite actors and acting teachers the world over, as well as be of enormous interest to theatre historians and anyone with a wider interest in the development of creativity. It deserves to become the backbone of every actor's library, as it surely would have been already had it been published sixty years earlier. Interest in Nikolai Demidov is gradually gaining traction beyond Russia, and it is to be hoped that, with this publication, he will further increase his influence on mainstream Western actor training. Although Demidov allows, in his introduction to *The Art of Living Onstage*, that 'some beliefs that we consider unshakeable today, will no longer be relevant' (p.144), his arguments are still persuasive and his ideas astonishingly pertinent.

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