

MY LIFE IN ART

Part Four — ROSSI AND SALVINI

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IN this concluding paper the Chief Stage Director of the Moscow Art Theatre recalls the impression made upon his youthful mind by the art of two famous Italian tragedians whose performances in Shakespearean plays had an important effect upon his own histrionic development. Especially vivid is his picture of Salvini making up his soul, as well as his body, before assuming the rôle of Othello, in which he was unique. The article was translated from the Russian by Mr. J. J. Robbins.

IN 1880 the famous tragedian Ernesto Rossi visited Moscow and played throughout Lent in the Great Theatre with his bad little troupe. In those days performances in Russian were forbidden during Lent, but performances in foreign languages were allowed. I subscribed to all the performances chiefly because there was nowhere else to go. But apparently my educator, Fate, did not send me there in vain. Every actor who was a contemporary of Rossi's was in duty bound not only to see him, but to study him. He was astounding in his plasticity and rhythm, notwithstanding the fact that he was far from handsome. He was not an actor of elemental temperament, like Salvini or Mochalov. Craftmanship demands a talent of its own and often rises to genius; Rossi was that genius.

I saw him first in the rôle of King Lear. I confess that my first impression on his appearance was not favorable. He paid almost no attention to the picture he made in a banal operatic costume, a badly glued beard, and an uninteresting makeup. During the first act the spectator simply grew accustomed to a foreign actor playing a part in an incomprehensible language. But gradually, as the great master unrolled before us the plan of the rôle and drew its spiritual and physical contours, it broadened and deepened before our eyes. Imperceptibly, unfalteringly, step by step, Rossi led us up to the culminating point of the rôle, but there, instead of giving us the last elemental blow of a mighty temperament which creates a miracle in the hearts and souls of men, he would, as if he were being merciful to himself as an actor, pass into simple pathos or use a bit of "hokum," knowing that we should not notice it, and with a sure instinct let us finish our-

selves what he began, and his impetus carried us to the heights without him.

In lyric passages, in love scenes, in poetic descriptions, Rossi was inimitable. He knew how to talk simply. This is very rare among actors. He had a fine voice, a wonderful ability to handle it, an unusually clear diction, a correctness of intonation, a plasticity that had reached such perfection that it became second nature with him. And his own nature lent itself to lyric emotions and experiences.

And all this despite the fact that his physical endowments were not of a high order. He was short, his moustaches were dyed, his hands were stumpy, his face wrinkled, but he had remarkable eyes, eyes that were a real mirror of the soul. And with these qualities, already an old man, Rossi interpreted Romeo. He could no longer play the part, but he drew its inner image to perfection. It was a courageous drawing, almost an impudent one. For instance, in the scene with the monk, Rossi rolled on the floor in despair, — an old man with a rotund abdomen! But it was not grotesque, for it was an expression of the inner image of the rôle, in keeping with the psychological thread.

Later on, Rossi came to see me play Othello. The famous actor sat through the performance from beginning to end, applauded as the ethics of our profession demanded, but did not come back stage. Instead he asked, as an older man of a younger, that I visit him. All of a tremble I went to the great actor, and found him an enchanting man, remarkably well bred, well read, and well educated. Of course, he had understood the point of our production, but he was not enthusiastic. He was against the colorful scenery for it took too much of the attention of the spectator away from the actors.

"All these playthings are necessary when there are no actors. A beautiful, wide costume may well cover a pitiful body within which there does not beat the heart of an artist. It is necessary for those without talent, but you do not need it," Rossi sweetened the bitter pill. "Iago is not an actor of your theatre," he continued. "*Desdemona e bella*, but it is too early to judge her, for she has evidently just begun her career on the boards. There remains you."

The great actor fell into a brown study.

“God gave you everything for the stage, for Othello, for the whole repertoire of Shakespeare. (My heart leaped up at his words.) The matter is in your hands. All you need is art. It will come, of course . . . ” Having spoken the real truth he began to embroider it with compliments.

“But where and how and from whom am I to learn that art?” I questioned.

“M-ma! . . . If there is no great master near you whom you can trust, I can recommend only one teacher,” answered the great artist.

“Who is he?” I demanded.

“Yourself,” he ended with the gesture he had made familiar in the rôle of Kean.

I was confused by the fact that in spite of all the cues I had given him he had said nothing to me about my interpretation of the part. But later, when I began to judge myself with less prejudice, I understood that Rossi could not have said anything else. Not only he, but I myself did not understand my interpretation of the rôle. It was merely a matter of getting through the performance without breaking down, of squeezing tragedy out of myself, of not being bad. A singer who is yelling at the top of his voice cannot produce delicate nuances; he is like a painter who smears a fence all one color. He is far removed from the artist who can without apparent effort convey to a crowd his interpretation of a rôle created by himself. It is not enough to be talented; one must with infinite patience learn how to direct the talents. It was this that Rossi had meant, and it was all he could have said.

TOMMASO SALVINI

I first saw Tommaso Salvini in the Imperial Great Theatre in *Othello*. Due to my absence of mind or to the insufficient attention I paid to the visit of the great genius, I was attracted more at the beginning of the performance by the actor who played Iago and thought him to be Salvini. “Yes, he has a good voice,” I told myself. “He has a good figure, the general Italian manner of play and declamation, but I see nothing extraordinary. The man who is playing Othello is no worse. He also has fine material in him, a wonderful voice, diction, manners, height.”

I treated coldly the ecstasy of the cognoscenti who were ready to faint at the first sentence uttered by Salvini. The great actor did not aim to attract all the attention of the audience to himself at the outset. If he had wanted to do so, he could have done it with one moment of genial silence, as he did in the Senate scene immediately after. The beginning of this scene revealed nothing new, except that I was able to examine the figure, costume, and makeup of Salvini. I cannot say that they were in any way remarkable. I did not like his costume, and I don't think he had made up at all; perhaps it was unnecessary to darken his skin. There were his large, pointed moustaches; his wig that looked too much like a wig; his figure, too large, too heavy, almost fat; great eastern daggers that dangled at his waist and made him look stouter than he was, especially when he donned a Moorish cloak and hood. All this was scarcely typical of the soldier Othello.

But . . .

Salvini approached the platform of the Doges, reflected a little while, and before we knew it, took the entire audience into his hands. It was as though he had simply stretched out his hand without looking into the public, grasped us all, and held us in his palm as though we were ants or flies. He closed his fist, and we were in his power, and we shall remain in it all our lives.

How am I to convey the strength of the impression Salvini made? He was like a sculptor, and his creations were like heroic statues. One part of his Othello he moulded in the monologue before the Senate. In other scenes and acts he moulded the other features. Put together they constituted a deathless monument of human passion. Othello was composed of infinite trust, hurt love, noble horror and wrath, and inhuman revenge. The most diffuse and elusive emotions were moulded into the bronze.

Having opened for a moment the gates of paradise in his monologue before the Senate, having showed for the duration of one second at his meeting with Desdemona what trustfulness and boyish love were possible for the courageous soldier who was no longer young, Salvini closed for a time the sublime gates of his art, closed them intentionally. He had made sure of our trust in him at one stroke, and like trained dogs that sit on their hind legs and watch the eyes of their trainer, we fell hungrily on those

places and words of the rôle which Salvini compelled us to notice and remember.

But at one moment he cracked his whip, that our attention might not weaken. That was in the scene on Cyprus where he made short work of Cassio and Montano. He glared at them so terribly with his tremendous eyes, lifting his scimitar, flashing it in the air, and lowering it with such oriental ease and swiftness, that we understood at once how dangerous it was to trifle with him.

The ladder down which Othello descended in the sight of the spectators from the heights of bliss to the depths of destructive passion, Salvini indicated with such merciless logic and such irresistible persuasiveness that the spectator saw in detail every curve of the suffering soul of Othello and sympathized with him from the depths of the heart. In the end Othello seemed to enter as though burning lava had been poured into his heart. He grasped at anything and everything that might assuage his pain; he wept like a child on saying farewell to his army, to his battle steed, to his former life; he tried to express in words the burning pain of his spirit, which we, his audience had lived through with him. But nothing helped him. He sought respite for his pain in revenge, and threw himself in fury on the only living thing in his presence. He was upon Iago in one leap, pressing him to the ground, then leaped up, lifting his foot above Iago's head to crush it like a snake's, — and he remained in that pose, became confused, turned away, and without looking at Iago offered him a hand, lifted him, and fell himself on a couch, crying. At that moment the likeness of Salvini's Othello to a tiger was most evident. I saw now that even before, in the embraces of Desdemona and in the subtle feline manners of the speech before the Senate I had sensed in him the presence of a beast of prey. The oath of revenge was turned to a ceremony of knighthood in Salvini's Othello; one thought of him as a crusader vowing to save the world from the abuse of man's sanctity. In this scene Salvini was monumental.

I shall never be able to describe how Salvini stole toward the sleeping Desdemona in the last act, how he feared the folds of his own cloak, which dragged behind him, how he stood admiring the sleeping woman, dreading to approach his prey. There were

moments when the whole theatre rose like one man in the strain of attention. When Salvini crushed the throat of his beloved, when he threw himself at Iago and killed him with one sweep of his scimitar, I felt again the Bengal tiger in the man's suddenness, agility, energy. But when Othello learned of his fateful mistake, he suddenly became a lost boy who saw death for the first time. And after his speech before his suicide, there spoke and acted in him a soldier who had learned to face death all his life, unafraid of it in the last moment of his life.

How simple, clear, beautiful, and tremendous was everything that Salvini did! But why was it that when I saw Salvini I remembered Rossi and the great Russian actors I had seen? Why did I feel that all of them had something in common, something that I seemed to know very well, something I met only in actors of supreme talent? I tired myself with thinking, but I could not find the answer. . . .

Salvini took his art with phenomenal seriousness. On the day of a performance he was excited from early morning, ate very little, and after dinner retired into solitude. The performance would begin at eight o'clock, but Salvini was in the theatre three hours before the curtain was to rise. He went to his dressing room, removed his overcoat and began to wander about the stage. If anyone approached him he would talk a little, then leave his companion, sink into thought, stand in silence, and then lock himself in his dressing room. After a while he would issue forth in a dressing gown and after wandering about the stage and trying his voice on some phrase, or rehearsing a series of gestures, he would again retire to his dressing room, and proceed to make up. Having changed himself not only physically, but mentally, he would walk out on the stage again, his footstep lighter and younger than before. The stagehands were beginning to set up the scenery. Salvini tried to talk to them. Who knows, perhaps Salvini imagined then that he was among his soldiers who were putting up barricades and fortifications against an enemy. His strong figure, his military pose, his eyes, attentively fixed on some far-off object, seemed to add truth to this supposition. Again Salvini would retire into his dressing room and come out in a wig and the under robe of Othello, then with a girdle and scimitar, then with a turban on his head, and at last in the full costume of

Othello. And with each of his entrances it seemed that Salvini not only made up his face and dressed his body, but also prepared his soul in a like manner, gradually establishing a perfect balance of character. He crept into the skin and body of Othello with the aid of some important preparatory toilet of his own artistic soul and body.

Such preparatory work before every performance was necessary even after he had played the part of Othello many hundreds of times, after he had spent ten years in the preparation of that part alone. It was no exaggeration for him to confess in his reminiscences that it was only after the hundredth or two-hundredth performance that he understood what Othello was and how to play the part well.

Thinking of this genius I cannot help but draw a comparison with some of our home-grown stars and tragedians. They consider it beneath them to appear in the theatre on time. If they are stars the rest can wait for them; their glory consists in making the performance late. At five minutes to eight the home-grown star deigns to appear in the theatre. The rest cross themselves. They are glad,— the performance will take place after all. One, two, three, and the star is costumed, made up, and the sword of Hamlet is at his belt. HE knows his business. And everybody around him is in ecstasies. "This is a real artist! Look at him! He came last, but he is the first on the stage! Young actors, — here is an example to follow!"

But has anyone ever said to the home-grown star: "You managed to dress and make up in five minutes. Let us grant that that is marvellous. But did you manage to cleanse, dress, and make up your soul, — and if not, then why did you come to the theatre, and why do you play Hamlet? Is it not merely in order to display your graceful legs? Do you think we don't understand that there is no man in the world who can pass in five minutes from the sphere of restaurants and vulgar anecdotes into the empire of the super-conscious? This requires a gradual, logical approach. You can't rise from the cellar to the sixth floor in one step."

"Well, and what about Kean?" our home-grown star will answer. "Remember, he also arrives at the last moment, when all are waiting in excitement for his appearance."

"That is the theatrical Kean. How much evil he has caused by

his example! And was Kean really as he is drawn in the melodrama? If he was, then I don't doubt that he is nervous and shouts before the performance because he has had no time to prepare, because he is angry at himself for his own drunkenness on the day of the performance. Creative nature has its laws, which are the same for Kean and Salvini. Then believe in the example of the living Salvini and not of the dead Kean taken from the pages of a mediocre melodrama."

But no, the home-grown star will always copy Kean and not Salvini. He will always come to the theatre five minutes before the performance is due to begin, and not three hours before, as Salvini did? Why?

In order to prepare something in your soul for three hours it is necessary to have that something, and the home-grown star has nothing but his talents. He comes to the theatre with a costume in his suitcase, but without any spiritual baggage whatsoever. What can he do in his dressing room from five to eight? Smoke? Tell stories? That is done much better in the restaurants. . . .

Salvini always hit the bullseye with his comments. For instance, he played *King Lear* in the provinces with a well known actress. She possessed everything the stage required, — ability, figure, a beautiful face, a good voice, gestures, experience. But she did not possess something much more important than all that.

"How do you like her?" Salvini was asked.

"M-ma! . . . She lacks poetry," answered Salvini.

At another time during the rehearsal of the last act of *Otello* the rôle of Lodovico, who appears after the death of Desdemona, was in the hands of a provincial *raisonneur*, who read it apathetically in a thick, churchy bass. Salvini lost his patience and whispered to the stage director: "Tell him his cousin is dead!"

THE NEW DESPOTISM

A. WASHINGTON PEZET

FORMERLY nations found it necessary to depose a sovereign king for his inadequacy to guide the destinies of his subjects. Now we are questioning the ability of his successor, "the sovereign people," to take care of themselves. With the rapid advance of science, civilization has become an intricate and unwieldy machine that only experts and specialists can control. Are we going to let it run away with us and wreck us? This is the first of a series of three papers on the reconstruction of politics.

MOST thoughtful men are agreed that something is radically wrong with our civilization. Only twenty-odd years ago most of us viewed the future with fatuous confidence. Science was remaking the world. Today we look about us and see a civilization shaken to its foundations. The concert of Europe is a weird cacophony of hate and vengeance. In Western Europe, Britain is dangerously impoverished and faced with a desperate unemployment situation. Italy and Spain are snatched from anarchy only by the strong arms of dictators. Neutrals, like Holland, muddle along doing less than one-fifth of their pre-war business. France, feeling herself abandoned by her friends and obsessed with terror, walks on with the relentless detachment of a somnambulist, bearing the fate of Europe, helpless, in her arms as she treads her way toward a precipice. From the Rhine to the Pacific there is chaos, with here and there a meagre oasis of relative law and order. Central Europe is a land of starvation and misery. The Balkans, with their parochial nationalism and intolerable feuds, have expanded northward, eastward, and westward to include portions of Europe that formerly were highly civilized. The Near East is in a ferment; China is in the midst of an endless revolution; India and the Philippines are smouldering; and Japan is but slowly recovering from an unparalleled disaster. In Australia and the Americas are felt the violent repercussions of all this turmoil.

Nor are we, in the United States, lacking in ills of our own. Our churches are rent with schism and strife. A fanatical intolerance is the order of the day. Disrespect for law is a commonplace. Crime has reached the proportions of a social revolt. The mere business of living has become more intricate, more arduous, and more precarious than it was two decades ago. Even