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KENNAN INSTITUTE



Culture *Kultura*

Russian Influences on American Performing Arts and Sports

Seminars on Russia's Impact on American Culture

Culture matters, and Russian culture has enriched, deepened, and even transformed American culture in important ways. Who can think of the best of modern-day dance, or music, or theater, or film, without thinking of the enormous contributions of Balanchine, Rostropovich, Stanislavsky, or Eisenstein? Who can imagine the history of the arts in the West, or the development of international athletic competitions, without the innovative masterpieces and great athletes that came out of Russia and the Soviet Union?

On December 12, 2002, the Kennan Institute launched a year-long series of programs on Russian culture entitled *Culture/Kultura: Russian Influences on American Performing Arts and Sports*. The series, which featured performances and video presentations in addition to lectures by scholars and experts in the field, included five events that highlighted the Russian influence on American sport, dance, music, theater, and film.

The *Culture/Kultura* series painted a fascinating and complex picture of the many ways in which Russian and Soviet artists, athletes, performers, directors, and teachers have influenced cultural life in America and shaped the way that Americans look at the world. This publication reviews the events of the *Culture/Kultura* series. It contains a general overview of Russian influences on American culture, together with summaries and images from each of the five events in the series.

The *Culture/Kultura* series was funded by the George F. Kennan Fund and the Program for Research and Training on Eastern Europe and the Independent States of the Former Soviet Union (Title VIII). The seminars were organized by current and former members of the Kennan Institute staff, including: Muhitdin Ahunhodjaev, Lauren Crabtree, F. Joseph Dresen, Jennifer Giglio, Jodi Koehn-Pike, Edita Krunkaityte, Margaret Paxson, Nancy Popson, Claudia Roberts, Blair A. Ruble, Atiq Sarwari, Shelly Seaver, Erin Truth, and Nicholas Wheeler.

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Tuesday, February 18, 2003

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Performers: **David Gresham**, bass clarinetist, New York; **Tim Scott Mix**, vocalist, and student, Peabody Conservatory, Johns Hopkins University; **Medea Namoradze**, vocalist, and Associate Professor, Shenandoah Conservatory, Shenandoah University; **Vera Stern**, pianist and faculty, Peabody Conservatory, Johns Hopkins University; **Igor Yuzefovich**, violinist, and student, Peabody Conservatory, Johns Hopkins University.

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Monday, May 5, 2003

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Friday, October 10, 2003

Panelists: **Andrei Malaev-Babel**, Producing Artistic Director, Stanislavsky Theater Studio; **Sarah Kane**, Artistic Associate, Stanislavsky Theater Studio, and Vice-President, Michael Chekhov Association, New York; **Leslie Jacobson**, Chair and Professor of Theater, Department of Theater and Dance, George Washington University.

Performer: **Steve Wilhite**, actor, Stanislavsky Theater Studio.

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Friday, December 5, 2003

Naum Kleiman, Director, Moscow Cinema Museum; **Annette Michelson**, Professor of Cinema Studies, New York University.

One day in the middle years of the past century, top executives with Ringling Brothers Circus decided that the time had arrived to rejuvenate their animal acts. The idea emerged to have elephants dance a polka. Ringling Brothers accordingly hired a composer to write a new elephantine polka, and sought a dance instructor to choreograph this new act. The composer was Igor Stravinsky; the choreographer—George Balanchine.

The tale of how one of the twentieth century's leading composers, and perhaps the leading choreographer of all time, came to work with elephants in Florida reveals a great deal about American culture, as well as about what those in the arts—immigrant and native—have to do to earn a living in the United States. More importantly, Stravinsky, Balanchine, and their pachyderm polka demonstrate the myriad and unexpected ways in which Russians have shaped American performing arts.

Russian influence over how Americans think about the world turns out to be extensive and profound when approached through the lens of the performing arts and international sports. During the past year, in an attempt to demonstrate that Russia still “matters” to the U.S. a dozen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kennan Institute organized a series of events exploring Russian influences on American performing arts and sports. Participants in these seminars spoke of what is generally known and acknowledged (Russian figure skaters, ballet dancers, and symphony orchestra musicians are ubiquitous in contemporary American life) as well as much that has been long forgotten or scarcely acknowledged (Russian genius working with American circus elephants).

Most strikingly, Russian influence has reached deep into the American cultural landscape. Russian performers traveled widely throughout small-town America in the era before electronic media. Anton Rubenstein's extensive tour of one-night stands brought classical music to the American “sticks” for the first time—and defined piano performance for American ears in the process. Anna Pavlova's and Mikhail Mordkin's barnstorming ballet companies a generation later shocked many an American hamlet with their scant costumes and dramatic performances on vaudeville stages and in beer halls. Native-born American dancers eventually had to begin to Russify their names to find bookings in large swaths of the American Midwest and South. Petr Tchaikovsky wrote home excitedly during the 1890s that, in America, he had at last found his audience.

The list of American thespians trained in the “method” of Konstantin Stanislavsky (or, in an American distillation of translations of some of Stanislavsky's works) would account for many a star on Hollywood

Ringling Brothers
Circus Poster
(© Corbis)

Scene from *Spellbound*
with Michael Chekhov,
Ingrid Bergman, and
Gregory Peck
(© John Springer
Collection/Corbis)



Boulevard. American icons Clint Eastwood, Jack Nicholson, and Marilyn Monroe all cite émigré acting coach Michael Chekhov among their most valued influences. Chekhov, a nephew of writer Anton Chekhov, fled Moscow in 1928, making his way across Europe before settling in England. He came to the U.S. during World War II, arriving in Connecticut (where he trained Yul Brynner, another Russian émigré) and continuing on to Southern California. His American career included a 1954 Academy Award-nominated performance in Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound*.

Stanislavsky's and Chekhov's influences extend much further across the American stage than any mere list of their students and protégés might imply. The two men, who worked closely together for some three decades in Moscow, came to represent alternative visions of modern theater that have arguably shaped American drama performance for over a half-century. Stanislavsky's efforts to bring a character's inner life center stage transformed our concept of stage presentation, opening the door to a new type of drama that relied less on dialogue and more on non-verbal acting. Chekhov, meanwhile, developed acting exercises that motivate performers to this day.

Russian influences on American film, though heavily circumscribed by decades of Cold War, are not limited to the theatrical legacies of Balanchine, Stanislavsky, and Chekhov. Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein was famed for his editing techniques and use of montage sequences, an influence visible in such well-known scenes as the shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Francis Ford Coppola has stated that he found artistic inspiration in





Canadian goalie Ken Dryden and defenseman Rod Seiling, and Soviet defenseman Valery Vasiliev during the first Canada-Soviet series, Sept. 8, 1972 (AP Photo)

Dancer performing a grand jete (© Corbis)

Eisenstein's *October* and *Ivan the Terrible*. Today Russian influences can also be seen in the fields of animation and documentary films.

Russian performers reshaped American culture because the boundary between “high” and “popular” culture was less tightly drawn than in Europe. George Balanchine could choreograph for circus rings, Hollywood sound studios, and the Broadway stage even as he reinvented and reinvigorated classical dance. Adolph Bolm—who eventually helped to establish both the San Francisco Ballet Company and the Chicago Opera Ballet—drew fresh energy from American populist approaches to the arts, while Serge Koussevitzky found nothing unusual in cultivating American composers and conductors from the deep recesses of the American countryside.

Some Russians—such as Balanchine, Koussevitzky, and Chekhov—became towering cultural figures as they visibly redefined various American performing art forms. Hundreds of other Russians who ended up on American shores exerted the much subtler and quieter influence of the teacher. Millions of young Americans have, over the past century, learned how to dance, skate, play music, and act from Russian émigrés.

The depth of change brought about in American life by Russian performers is perhaps most pronounced in sports. Soviet-era competition in Olympic sports in particular led to the wholesale reorganization of how we Americans organize our “amateur” competitions. Each year, the U.S. Track and Field Association must predict how many medals U.S. athletes will win in each event in order to receive funding from the U.S. Olympic Committee, in a management ploy taken directly from the Soviet Olympic Committee play book. The establishment of Title IX, which led to the formation of women's sports programs throughout American colleges and universities, was a

Congressional response to the victories of Soviet women in the Olympics as well as in other international competitions. Hockey—a game native to this continent—changed forever when poorly uniformed Russian players, who struggled to overcome bad equipment and lumpy ice, began using speed and pin-point passes to demolish their North American competition.

When considering Russian influence on American culture, it is important to remember that Russia, like the U.S., is and has long been a diverse, multi-cultural society. Among the group of great artistic figures whom Americans see as “Russians,” there are Ukrainians, Georgians and members of many other ethnic groups. Balanchine, Rubenstein and Mordkin were not ethnic Russians, nor are many of the great “Russian” conductors now leading American orchestras—such as Valery Gergiev and Yuri Temirkanov. The cultural achievements, high and low, of Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union are the consequence of a blending of confessions, ethnicities, linguistic groups, and cultures. When reflecting on the power of creative performances from those lands that once constituted the tsarist empire to recast American culture, one can as easily use adjectives such as “Jewish,” “Ukrainian,” and “Georgian.”

An examination of Russian influence on American performing arts and sports begins to suggest some of the very profound ways in which Russia “matters” to America. Any discussion on the depth of cultural interaction has long been either limited to a short list of luminous stars—Koussevitzky, Stravinsky, Baryshnikov—or largely ignored. More interestingly, some Russian innovators in the arts have become so closely identified with American culture that their ties to Russia are simply forgotten. George Balanchine, after all, was one of the first recipients of the Kennedy Center Honors for contributions to American arts. And who could be more “American” than Irving Berlin who, according to some standards, may be considered to be a “Russian” in the sense that he was a child of the Russian empire.

Our tour through Russian influences on American culture reminds us of Ambassador George F. Kennan’s wisdom and insight when, in speaking before a dinner honoring the twenty-fifth anniversary of our institute on October 4, 1999, he observed: “When it comes to the relationship between great peoples, that relationship is not finished, not complete when it only consists of the military relationship, the economic, and the political. There has to be, and particularly in the case of Russia, there has to be another supplementary dimension to these relations—and that is the dimension of the meeting of people in the work of the intellect, in the respect for scholarship and history, in the understanding of art and music and in all the intuitive feelings that go to unite us, even in the most difficult times, to many people in Russia.” ■

The “Soviet sport experience impacted the American sport experience in five specific ways,” remarked **Robert Edelman**, Professor of History, University of California–San Diego, at a Kennan Institute seminar held on **12 December 2002**. Edelman, joined by panelists **Craig Masback**, the current CEO of the U.S. Track and Field Association, and **Ken Dryden**, President of the Toronto Maple Leafs, began the discussion by noting the Russian contribution to western sport. Masback and Dryden provided insight about the Russian influence from an athlete’s perspective, both having participated in international competition against the U.S.S.R.

Edelman categorized the Soviet and Russian contribution to American sport into several areas: the introduction and development of women’s sports, the development of sports science, the professionalization and politicalization of sports, and finally, the use of the sport system as a “Potemkin village” facade to camouflage deeper economic and political problems. Edelman explained that the visibility of Soviet women’s participation in sports had two purposes, “the first was to demonstrate gender equality in the Soviet Union, and the second was to ‘win’ the Olympics, which required winning the most medals.” In order to meet the challenge posed by Soviets, opportunities for American women increased, including the establishment of Title IX, which led to the formation of women’s sports programs. Edelman argued that the Soviets had a profound influence on the development of sports science, in both the laboratory and at the coaching level. He characterized the success of Russian coaches as one of the greatest achievements of Soviet sports.

Edelman noted that “the introduction of the Soviet ‘state-professional’ athlete to the Olympics had a profound impact on the Olympic movement,” and has continued to evolve to the present. Edelman explained that Soviets viewed sports as an opportunity to show both foreign and domestic audiences the power and success of Soviet communism. According to Edelman, Americans were generally impressed by this version, perhaps more so than other international audiences who were more familiar with the Soviets’ ongoing struggles in international soccer. Edelman contended that the Soviets used their sport system as an idyllic “Potemkin village,” to mask the overall weaknesses of the Soviet system, especially those of the economy.

Masback, a former member of the International Olympic Committee, discussed the Russian influence on Olympic sports. According to Masback, the Soviets shaped the Olympics in three primary areas: the use of sport as ideology; the creation of a systematic approach to identifying and developing talent; and finally, the use of drugs in sports. He explained that the old Soviet adage “a medal is a medal” and their use of the overall medal count to claim



superiority are now fundamental elements of the U.S. Olympic Committee guidelines for the development of U.S. sports today. Each year, the U.S. Track and Field Association must predict how many medals U.S. athletes will win in each event in order to receive funding from the U.S. Olympic Committee.

Masback concluded that, though the Soviet system was never as successful as it seemed, it has triumphed in a number of ways. He stated that the Soviet Union “succeeded in achieving its ideological aims through sports,” and an indication of influence is that “we have all adopted their practices now and are aspiring to do what they achieved decades ago.”

Dryden concluded the panel by discussing his experience as a direct participant in competitions against the Soviets. He explained that, while we now know more about the economic realities that confronted the Soviet system during the 1970s, during the Cold War “people lived what they imagined to be the realities and were hugely impacted by what they imagined the situation to be.” Dryden noted that the Russian professionalization of amateur sports, especially in sports such as hockey, had a profound impact. Dryden explained that amateur hockey was historically club versus club, town versus town, or country versus country, but that “when it got to be way of life versus way of life, then the stakes started to rise, and amateur sports became state-professional sports, with the biggest stage being the Olympics.”

Dryden discussed his experience as a goalie on the Canadian national hockey team during the 1972 “Summit Series” against the Soviet national team. He noted that perhaps the greatest Russian influence on professional sports was their ability to turn their weaknesses and limited resources into advantages. In the case of hockey, Russians could not afford to buy new sticks or have state-of-the-art skates. Therefore, they invented a new style of play, relying on quick passes and different skating techniques to compensate for their constraints. Dryden stated that the Russians were also instrumental in introducing off-season training, which increased the conditioning and skills of the players. These evolutionary changes surprised the Canadians and other members of the international hockey world in 1972, and soon became recognized as reasonable alternatives to the norm. ■

(left to right)
Robert Edelman
Craig Masback
Ken Dryden

Discussion “among cultures always promotes a loosening of the holds of stereotypes about the ‘other’ culture and helps to comprehend its history, as if from the inside,” remarked **Victor Yuzefovich** at a Kennan Institute seminar held on **18 February 2003**. Yuzefovich, joined by panelists **Anne Swartz** and **Leonid Hrabovsky**, discussed how music serves as an international language between cultures, particularly in the case of Russia and America.

Yuzefovich, a musicologist from Washington, D.C., outlined several of the ways in which American music has been influenced by other cultures, emphasizing that, “no influence on American music has deprived it of its striking essential originality.” According to Yuzefovich, the intermingling of different musical traditions “expanded the range of sounds the American ear was able to appreciate, making American music more eclectic than that of the European cultures, which tended to be ‘mono-national.’ This expansion allowed American musicians and composers to blend sounds and patterns from a number of different musical cultures, including Russian. Yuzefovich noted that the multi-ethnic nature of the musical folklore in Russia and the United States combined with the presence of a large number of Russian musicians in America “fostered the affinity that Americans felt toward Russian culture.”

According to Yuzefovich, the “Russian Invasion” of musicians began during the latter half of the 19th century. He explained that appearances by Anton Rubenstein in 1872, the Boston premier of Tchaikovsky’s First Piano Concerto in 1875, and Tchaikovsky’s subsequent recitals in New York, Washington, Philadelphia and Baltimore in 1891 were among the first interactions between American and Russian musical cultures. Yuzefovich noted that other composers such as Rachmaninoff, Nabokov and Schillinger all made America their “second homeland,” contributing to the Russian influence on American music.

Yuzefovich contended that Igor Stravinsky’s arrival to America in 1939 ushered in a time of unprecedented Russian influence on American music. He attributed Stravinsky’s success to a “predisposition of American music toward modernism.” Yuzefovich explained that because American music had not passed through the various cultural periods of the European Renaissance, American composers were not burdened “by the monopoly of the classical genres that were standard in Europe, and innovators were not forced to destroy centuries-old traditions.”

Hrabovsky, a composer now based in New York, discussed the relationship between 20th century Russian and American composers. He posited that

Franz Liszt's school in Weimar, Germany, which attracted Europe's finest young composers, is most likely where American composers first came in contact with their Russian counterparts. According to Hrabovsky, a "mutual influence" developed among these young composers, resulting in a composition style that lasted through the beginning of the 20th century.

Hrabovsky contended that, following the turn of the century, the German domination of music began to wane and Paris became "the capital of the art world." Igor Stravinsky, who was living in Paris at the time, became the central Russian influence on American music and its composers. According to Hrabovsky, Stravinsky's neoclassicist style of composition and his art of orchestration consisting of "an unlimited freshness of imagination, the invention of unusual instrumental combinations and orchestral sets," had a lasting influence on generations of composers.

Swartz, a Professor of Music, Baruch College, City University of New York, suggested that the story of the piano and the performance style of the piano virtuoso is a shared tradition between the two cultures. She posited that the reception of Russian composers and performers in the United States illustrates the Russian influence on American music. The history of the Russian virtuoso in America begins with Anton Rubinstein's arrival to the United States in 1872. According to Swartz, Rubinstein's tour, which consisted of 215 recitals in 239 days, was important because, "he brought the modern piano repertoire to small towns and regions where there would have been little opportunity for concerts of classical music." She contended that Rubinstein helped shaped American musical tastes in the late nineteenth century because "there was a grandeur, an intensely passionate, spontaneous quality in his playing that captivated American audiences."

Echoing Yuzefovich and Hrabovsky's remarks, Swartz stated that Tchaikovsky was warmly received in the United States, and "helped shape musical taste in America through advocacy of the modern Russian repertoire." She asserted that Sergei Rachmaninoff, Igor Stravinsky, and Josef Hofmann among others made significant contributions to American music composition and pedagogy.



(left to right)
George Liston Seay
Blair A. Ruble
Victor Yuzefovich

Swartz concluded by stating that discussions about the influence of culture are significant because “cultural communication awakens within the listener an awareness of the beauty in music and encourages a more profound understanding of the art of music and of the society that nurtures it.” She reiterated that “Russian composers and performers have created a lasting cultural legacy that has enriched Russia, America, and truly the international community.” ■

Following the panel discussion there were musical performances by David Gresham, bass clarinetist, New York, NY; Tim Scott Mix, vocalist, and student, Peabody Conservatory, Johns Hopkins University; Medea Namoradze, vocalist, and Associate Professor, Shenandoah Conservatory, Shenandoah University; Vera Stern, pianist and faculty, Peabody Conservatory, Johns Hopkins University; and Igor Yuzefovich, violinist, and student, Peabody Conservatory, Johns Hopkins University.

Erin Trouth

The “influence of Russian ballet in America is monumental,” stated **Suzanne Carbonneau**, Professor of Performance and Interdisciplinary Studies in the Arts, George Mason University, at the second seminar in the Culture/Kultura series, held at the Kennan Institute on **5 May 2003**. “It represents the western migration of the center of the balletic tradition from late 19th century Russia to its reinvention as an American art form in the 20th century.” Carbonneau, along with **Camille Hardy**, Principal Researcher, Popular Balanchine Project, New York, and Senior Critic, Dance Magazine, and **Suzanne Farrell**, Suzanne Farrell Ballet Company, The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, provided numerous examples of the influence that Russian dancers and choreographers have had not only on the development of ballet in the United States, but also on American performing arts in the 20th century.

All three panelists agreed that the culmination of Russian influence on American dance came through the work of George Balanchine, who is judged to be one of the greatest choreographers of all time. But Balanchine was not the first Russian dancer in America. Carbonneau noted that before Balanchine, “millions of Americans, in towns all across the country, had already seen Russian dancers...and the phenomenon of Russian ballet had been firmly entrenched in the American consciousness.” Dancers and choreographers such as Anna Pavlova, Mikhail Mordkin, Lydia Lopokova, and Adolph Bolm created a sensation both in the world of classical dance and on the popular stage with their performances on the concert circuit, on Vaudeville, on Broadway, and in films. By the 1920s, according to Carbonneau, ballet training became essential for any actor on the musical stage, and many of the teachers were Russians: “Before they did anything else, the Russian arrivals almost inevitably cast about for teaching opportunities.”

According to Carbonneau, many Americans so closely associated ballet with Russia in the 1910s and 1920s that non-Russian ballet dancers in the U.S. “were forced to adopt Russian names.” However, she emphasized that “Russian ballet” in the U.S. adopted local cultural styles. Before Balanchine, the greatest innovator in this area was Bolm, who “envisioned the establishment of a uniquely American art dance, one that would contain reference to Russian ballet, but which would also be responsive to the speed, energy, daring and raucousness that he saw as intrinsic to the American character.” Carbonneau added that other choreographers were also influenced by the jazz music and tap dancing that typically played alongside ballet on Broadway and the Vaudeville circuits.

After his arrival in the U.S. in 1933, Balanchine “opened a new threshold for American classicism” with ballets such as *Serenade*, according to Hardy.



Camille Hardy

Although best known today for his art dances, Balanchine was also very successful in the world of popular entertainment. Hardy argued that he “used Broadway and Hollywood to expose ballet to a diverse popular audience that he won over completely.”

Hardy described the numerous Broadway productions that Balanchine choreographed and showed clips from several of his films. She argued that his productions were popular because of their imaginative and passionate dancing—combining ballet, tap, and even square dancing—and because of his use of American themes and presentation of “tough street people, with whom his audience could relate directly.” Balanchine’s choreography had an enduring impact on Broadway and in Hollywood. According to Hardy, “By directing the dance sequences in his films, [Balanchine] joined Busby Berkeley and Fred Astaire as pioneers in developing the relationship between camera and dancer, and left a model for subsequent movie musicals.” His use of ballet to portray a dream scene in the 1936 hit *On Your Toes* was so popular that dream ballets became almost obligatory in musicals for the next several decades.

Farrell, a longtime student of Balanchine and principal dancer in his New York City Ballet, concluded the seminar with her recollections of Balanchine. In Farrell’s view, his greatest strengths—both as a choreographer and as a person—were his understanding of human emotions and his love of people. Balanchine’s great humanity allowed him “to direct [his ballets] to every single person in the audience—not necessarily a knowledgeable audience, but to every human being, to tap into their feelings.” Farrell described Balanchine’s ballets as full of insights on life, saying, “you can’t come away from seeing a Balanchine ballet and not be changed for the better.” She believes that the uni-

versality and depth of feeling in his ballets have allowed them to retain their popularity to this day.

Farrell also described Balanchine as a masterful choreographer, able to integrate classical ballet into Broadway shows, and his Russian roots into his American experiences. She asserted that despite his adoption of characteristically American styles and mannerisms, Balanchine “didn’t stop being Russian when he became American.” Farrell also surmised that the trauma of the Russian Revolution deeply affected Balanchine’s choreography, and that “he became the choreographer that he did because he was grateful to the ballet form for giving him a life outside of Russia.” She emphasized that the man who was so influential in American dance “was always harkening back to his Russian heritage.” ■



Suzanne Carbonneau

Suzanne Farrell

Russian Influence on American Theater

F. Joseph Dresen

The “Russian actors and teachers of the late 19th and early 20th century had an immense effect on the acting traditions of the United States,” stated **Leslie Jacobson**, Professor and Chair, Department of Theater at the George Washington University at a Kennan Institute seminar on **10 October 2003**. Jacobson, joined by **Andrei Malaev-Babel**, Producing Artistic Director, Stanislavsky Theater Studio and **Sarah Kane**, Artistic Associate, Stanislavsky Theater Studio, recounted how the teachings of Konstantin Stanislavsky and Michael Chekhov influenced generations of American stage and film actors.

Starting in the late 19th century, the style of playwriting began to change, according to Jacobson. In plays by Shakespeare and other classical playwrights, she noted, “you did not have to wonder what a character was thinking or feeling—all you had to do was hear the dialogue.” Playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, and others influenced by them began to write plays with both text and subtext, where things that were not said were often just as important as the actor’s lines. “A new kind of actor and acting style needed to develop to serve these plays,” said Jacobson.

During this era, according to Maleev-Babel, Stanislavsky began developing a different kind of theater in rebellion against the “clichéd acting” of the 19th century, where every emotion had certain gestures and expressions associated with it, and staging was generic and interchangeable between productions. The acting style he developed emphasized the psychological internal life of the character, and forced the actor to “truly create a role.”

Maleev-Babel noted that Stanislavsky evolved over time, and the evolution of his teachings outside Russia was driven by when and which of his books were translated, by the acting coaches who studied under him and emigrated to the United States, and by what elements of his work were “marketable” and suitable for a teaching system that students could buy. Stanislavsky’s tremendous influence in the United States also stemmed from contacts with the Federal Theater Project set up under the WPA, and with the Group Theater Company based in New York, founded by Cheryl Crawford, Harold Clurman, and Lee Strasberg. Strasberg and other prominent American artists traveled to Moscow to see Stanislavsky’s work in the Moscow Art Theater first-hand and to speak with him.

The generation of actors, directors, and producers who gained prominence in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s came out of programs like the Group Theater Company, stated Jacobson. Lee Strasberg went on to break from the Group Theater Company to form his own school, which placed greater emphasis on personal experience and improvisation. What they were all teaching was the “Stanislavsky System,” which was also known as “method

acting.” Initially developed for the stage, the system would prove to be especially effective in films, where non-textual communication was even more important.

Sarah Kane spoke about the importance of Michael Chekhov, nephew of the writer Anton Chekhov and a famous Russian actor who went on to influence many actors in America. A stu-

dent and colleague of Stanislavsky for thirty years, Michael Chekhov was forced to emigrate from Soviet Russia in 1928 when his productions became politically unacceptable. After performing and teaching for ten years in Europe, Chekhov relocated to the United States at the outbreak of WWII. He worked with actors in Connecticut and Hollywood, among them Yul Brynner (who was also born in Russia), Gregory Peck, Jack Palance, Marilyn Monroe, Anthony Quinn, Clint Eastwood, and Gary Cooper. Kane related an anecdote about Gary Cooper working on a movie set early in his career. He was struggling with a particular scene—requiring take after take—when the director called for a break. Cooper worked on a Michael Chekhov acting exercise for five minutes, then returned to nail the scene in the next take. According to Kane, Cooper went on to win the lead in *High Noon* based on his performance in that early movie. In addition to teaching, Chekhov also appeared in a number of American films. He received an Academy Award nomination for his role in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Spellbound* in 1954.

During the seminar, the panelists showed three scenes to showcase American actors using the Stanislavsky method: Karl Malden in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Montgomery Clift in *A Place in the Sun*, and James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*. The Stanislavsky method remains in use by actors today, such as Jack Nicholson and Al Pacino. “A lot of the teachings of great Russians early in the 20th century helped make that style of acting possible here in America in the later 20th century and even into the 21st century,” concluded Jacobson. ■



(left to right)
Andrei Maleev-Babel
Sarah Kane
Steve Willhite
Leslie Jacobson

After the presentations, Steve Willhite, an actor from the Stanislavsky Theater Studio, performed “The Grand Inquisitor” scene from the Stanislavsky Theater Studio production of The Brothers Karamazov.

Early Soviet cinema “led the world, and laid much of the groundwork for the practice and theory of film for the 20th century,” according to **Annette Michelson**, Professor of Cinema Studies at New York University. At a **5 December 2003** lecture, Michelson and **Naum Kleiman**, Director of the Moscow Cinema Museum, discussed the ways in which Soviet and Russian film have interacted with the American film industry. This event was the final installment in four-part series that examined the influences of Russian artists and styles on American performing arts, and the discussion of film touched on many of the same topics that were discussed at the three previous events. For example, Kleiman pointed out that Russian émigrés such as choreographer George Balanchine and actor Michael Chekhov, in addition to their influential roles in the world of dance and theater, were very active in Hollywood.

Although American film has absorbed Russian cultural influences indirectly through music, theater and dance, Kleiman and Michelson noted that it is somewhat difficult to speak of a direct influence of Russian film on American film. According to Kleiman, filmmakers in the U.S. have had very limited exposure to films made in Russia and the Soviet Union. Michelson further cautioned that it could be misleading to describe one artistic style as influencing another. “Rather than A influencing B, we might find that A and B are very often part of something larger than both of them,” she said.

However, Kleiman maintained that it is both possible and productive to talk about a Russian influence on American film if one understands that influence can be a very subtle phenomenon. “When we speak about influence, we must understand that we’re not talking about the search for elements that have been ‘lifted’ from somebody else and passed off as your own,” he noted. Instead, he argued that we should look at every film as a “complex chemical formula” containing elements drawn from many different sources—often including Soviet and Russian cinema.

Michelson spoke about the influence of Sergei Eisenstein—one of the Soviet Union’s best known and most innovative directors, famed for his editing techniques and use of montage sequences. Eisenstein never made a film in the U.S.; Michelson noted that Paramount Pictures invited him to Hollywood in 1935, but the film company never accepted any of his movie projects. Nevertheless, she argued that Eisenstein’s use of montage influenced American film, and is visible in such well-known scenes as the shower sequence in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. Hitchcock and other American directors re-interpreted montage usage. According to Michelson, “In the hands of those Americans who admired Eisenstein’s work, [montage] became a kind of tried-and-true

conventional, visual, rhetorical device for indicating the passage of time, or the passage from one country to another.”

Kleiman stated that many American filmmakers in the 1920s and 30s had seen and admired Eisenstein’s films. He noted that in the 1970s, Francis Ford Coppola had told him that he found artistic inspiration in *October* and *Ivan the Terrible*. Both Kleiman and Michelson felt that Eisenstein’s influence was even more noticeable in movies made outside of Hollywood. Michelson argued that montage was an important intellectual and artistic device in independent films produced after WWII, such as those by Maya Deren. Kleiman also noted the influence of other Russian artists, such as émigré actress and producer Alla Nazimova. In his opinion, Nazimova’s film *Salome* clearly reflected traditions of Russian literature, theater and set design. This movie, along with other movies featuring Russian actors and directors, was seen by American filmmakers and influenced their future work in many subtle ways.

Having examined the history of complex and subtle interactions between Russian and American film, Kleiman spoke briefly about possible future influences. He argued that in addition to great directors of the past, such as Eisenstein and Boris Barnet, Russia has innovative directors today. According to Kleiman, the greatest strengths of the Russian film industry today are in animation and documentary films. In addition, there is a new generation of filmmakers outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg who are creating movies that, while simple and low budget, are very deep and powerful.

Kleiman noted that many people in the U.S. and throughout the world tend to view Hollywood as the center around which the film industries of every other country revolve and from which they draw influence. However, he believes that it is more accurate to think of cinema as a broader artistic whole that encompasses different types of commercial and independent films produced in different countries. He also argued that openness to the influences of international cinema, including Russian, “will be a great help to American movies, including to Hollywood. Because outside of this model, I am afraid cinematography will be doomed to go down to the level of a teenager and then even to the level of a toddler.” ■



Naum Kleiman

Annette Michelson

Dialogue Programs on Russian Culture

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#405 “American Dance and the Russian Invasion”

Guest: **Suzanne Carbonneau**, Professor of
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George Mason University.

#413 “Stanislavsky: Man and Method Part I”

Guests: **Andrei Malaev Babel** and **Sarah Kane**, the
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