

## **PAWEL NIKDASKI (1910 - )**

### **THE EARLY YEARS**

Pawel Nikdaski was born in St. Petersburg in 1910, the son of an engineer. He had his first acting lessons from his mother when he was nine and showed such thespian precocity that he was encouraged to move to Moscow and enrol in the State Institute of Theatrical Art (GITIS), directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold, where he was taught Meyerhold's method of biomechanics. This he did in October 1922, at the age of 12. GITIS was an umbrella organisation taking in the State Institute of Music Drama as well as Meyerhold's Free Workshop and his official acting and directing students. Nikdaski wrote to his mother: "This is a place unique on the planet, where the science of theatre is studied and drama built. Exactly, mamma, I said *science* and not *art – built* and not *created*."

The still pre-adolescent Nikdaski made such an impression of Meyerhold that he personally petitioned Nikdaski's parents to allow him to continue his studies in biomechanics when he founded the Meyerhold Theatre that winter.

Nikdaski's first appearance in a Meyerhold production took place the following year in the production of Tretyakov's "Earth Rampant". The teenager had a non-speaking part and does not appear on the cast list published in the programme, which may have actually saved his skin later in the Stalin years for Meyerhold's production was dedicated to Leon Trotsky.

During those intensely formative years of his adolescence in Moscow, Nikdaski learned far more than biomechanics, he was in contact with some of Russia's most creative artists. In 1924 he attended a workshop by Stanivslaski and in 1928 he met and began a friendship with the young composer Shostakovich, who stayed in the Meyerhold household for three months, and formed a brief but deep relationship with the elderly painter Kandinsky. But perhaps the greatest influence on his life at that time, apart from Meyerhold, was Eisenstein.

Nikdaski appears in two of Eisenstein's early films: "Strike" and "Battleship Potemkin". As for Meyerhold's productions, we know that Nikdaski performed in Gogol's "The Government Inspector" (1926), Griboyedov's "Woe to Wit" (1928), and Mayakovsky's "The Bedbug" (1929) and "The Bathhouse" (1930).

But Nikdaski was already contemplating another form of artistic expression. Instead of acting in productions he decided that he wanted to inspire them. He wanted to become a playwright.

### **NIKDASKI AS PLAYWRIGHT**

The first step he made in this direction was as a collaborator on the libretto of the libretto of Shostakovich's opera version of Gogol's story "The Nose". The opera provided considerable hostility from the vociferous and increasingly powerful proponents of the cult of the Proletarian in music and the arts. A controversy that aroused what was a foretaste of difficulties to come.

Nikdaski's first play "The Era of Gold" was staged without success in Leningrad in October 1930. This was followed by "Revolution" (1931), "The Third Door" (1931), and "The Bolsheviks" (1933), productions of which we know nothing other than that they were written and performed at least once each.

In 1934 however, Nikdaski won acclaim for his "To Be a Bolshevik, That is the Question" a satirical look at capitalist society using Shakespeare's play as a metaphor, cleverly translated into the language of Soviet agitprop. It was first performed in

Leningrad and, shortly afterwards, under the new title of “Comrade Hamlet”, in Moscow. Its condemnation in Pravda in January 1936, apparently at the direct instigation of Stalin, was a significant and dangerous reverse, leading to the withdrawal from rehearsal that year of “Kronos the Cannibal”. But in the following year the pro-Stalinist piece “Georgia” was described in Pravda as a “Soviet Artist’s creative reply to justified criticism,” and thus he found himself forgiven, briefly.

In 1941, after Hitler’s invasion he tried to revive his “Kronos the Cannibal”, directing it himself with the Kronos figure bearing a Hitler moustache. But the likeness between Kronos and all dictators, including especially Stalin, was all too obvious. The play was immediately closed and banned and an order was given for Nikdaski’s detention.

Nothing is known about what happened during his arrest, but it seems he escaped prison for in the next reference we have of him places him in Stalingrad. This came from the Russian poet Semyon Lipkin, who fought at Stalingrad:

"A few months after the German army surrendered at Stalingrad Pawel told me that he was getting out. We had been drinking continually since the night before and he was very drunk (*P'yan v stel-ku*) and quite upset about something. He took his shoe off and began hammering the small wooden table in what was left of the dining room. He said that the commissar (*Khrushchev*) was a train station whore ("*Shluha vokzal'naja*") and that he would walk to Odessa and from there hitch a freighter to Turkey. Before passing out he said something about Australia, sheepfarming and that "no cocksucker (*husesos*) was going to tell him what to write in the outback". The next morning I awoke to find that Pawel had disappeared, taking only a stack of notebooks he had been carrying around since before the war, and my leather boots. The next time I saw him was in 1961 at the opening show of the avant garde at the Manezh Gallery. He presented me with a pair of utterly destroyed leather boots and said thank you."

## POST-WAR YEARS

Stricter cultural control enforced in the years following the end of the war led, in 1948, to a further explicit attack on Nikdaski who was branded as a formalist exhibiting anti-democratic tendencies. The official condemnation brought a temporary end to his theatrical career in the U.S.S.R., and yet at the same time inspiring a new direction for the actor-writer who began to study philosophy and he begins the clandestine composition of aphorisms.

Throughout his works - written some in Russian, some in English - the predominant feelings expressed by the author are pessimism, human alienation, absurdity, futility and decay. Nikdaski became deeply preoccupied with the concept of death and suffering, hence his attraction to the idea of suicide. In his conception, this is the main thing that could help one go on living.

One thing that reportedly had a huge influence on Nikdaski's thinking is a conversation with his mother, dated from 1945. She told him that she wouldn't have given birth to him had she known he was going to be so unhappy. This produced a great impact on his life and led him to the idea that life is futile and everything is without substance: “*You think intelligence is such a wonderful thing! So why have so many species NOT developed their brains?*”

## **NIKDASKI IN AUSTRALIA**

After he defected to Melbourne Australia in 1975, the 65 year old Nikdaski began writing in English, in order, he said, to emphasize his detachment from the past. The Cold War was still in progress and he received a handsome pension from the Australian government as a prize for his incorporation into the “free world”. But he also augmented his income at first by working as a translator and giving Russian classes and lectures in Russian Literature and theatres in universities. However, the need to write was present again and Nikdaski challenged himself by writing his next play completely in English, even though he worked hard to learn the language. The result was 'Elizabeth II – Queen of Australia'.

He led a solitary existence in Melbourne, earning a reputation for being absolutely miserable and cantankerous. It is said that the only person who can really put up with him is his actress friend, Greta “Garbo” Garcilaso, who, it has been said, pulled him out of a depression and put him “back” on the stage again. It has been largely through Ms. Garcilaso’s personal endeavours that Pawel Nikdaski has been able to have his plays discovered in the West. She herself has performed in more than a dozen Nikdaski monologues, including the famous production of “Ofelia Loves Hamlet” at the Athenée in Paris, and many believe that the majority of them were written especially for her.