

LIFE-LONG BATTLE FOR STAGE FIGHTING

by Edward Rozinsky

They say some times "as many teachers as many schools" meaning that each teacher by force of his or her personality teaches differently. One can agree with this to a certain point, but in fact only a few teachers were able to develop a school, or a trend in the sense of a Method and Style of teaching. The author of this article was lucky to study and work for more than 10 years with one of those Masters. His name probably will not say anything even to specialists in the field. Having been a very famous and respectable person among theatre people in the Soviet Union, he remained unknown in the West until recently. He has never had a chance to teach abroad, but thanks to some of his late students from countries of Social Democracy at the end of the 70's his experience became known in Bulgaria, Checkoslovakia and a few other countries.

A Master like this in any other free country would become world famous and crowds of students from all over the world would rush to study with him especially students from America who just adore studying with European names and having taken 3-week courses write in their resumes "studied with so-and-so". Some students even have the audacity to teach "by so-and-so". My memory recollects many facts of not-so-far-away history, when pupils of the great Masters used to live in the same house with a teacher, eat at the same table and breath the same air. All this they did for many years. Naturally, they become ardent followers and faithful successors of their master's ideas.

Probably a similar sense of duty made me write this article about my Teacher. Ivan Edmundovitch Kokh was born in Petersburg, Russia. His father was a respectable architect. His buildings still adorn the streets of Leningrad. Like most of the children from middle class families at the time, Ivan received a good education. Being a student of Gymnasium young Kokh was fascinated by different kinds of sports. It was in fashion among the intelligentsia of that time in Russia. One of his passions was Fencing. During those years in Petersburg there still were a few French teachers, so Mr. Kokh received his fencing skills "first hand".

The Communist Revolution took everything Mr. Kokh Sr. owned and his son had to find a way to make a living. His fencing skills became useful. He began giving private fencing lessons to the few remaining noble families and intelligentsia who were forced to collaborate with the new regime.

Those were the years when Ivan's interest in theatre began. The 1920's in Russia was a time of breaking old traditions and because of this talented artists could experiment and bring new ideas to the Theatre. Thus, a whole group of talented directors, actors and playwrights started a new page of glorious history for the Russian Theatre. One of these outstanding phenomenon was the Moscow Art

Theatre lead by Konstantin Stanislavsky. There were also great Masters like Meierhold, Tairov, Evreinov, Vakhtangov and many others. Interesting theatre groups appeared also in Pietrograd (formerly Petersberg and, currently, Leningrad). One of them was the Pushkin Theatre (formerly royal Aleksandrinsky Theatre). So, for young Kokh there was much to see and learn there. And the theatre also needed his fencing skills. He began to train actors in the art of fencing, and tried to fit sport methods to the stage.

Getting more and more involved in theatre Ivan Kokh gradually started to teach not only fencing, but physical culture as well and when Leningrad theatre college was first established, he became one of its first teachers. World War II interrupted the lessons in college and Ivan Kokh was called to serve in the Army. His skills were useful there as well. During the war years he was teaching soldiers hand-to-hand combat. Some times he worked 15 or 16 hours a day with bayonet in hand. His fingers remained twisted, a constant reminder of that time.

After the war Mr. Kokh returned to Leningrad and began teaching a new subject, "Basic Stage Movement Skills". At that time Stage Fencing was a part of this subject. The other parts were Rhythmic, Coordination, Body development, Stage unarmed combat. At this time Mr. Kokh developed a theoretical comprehension of his experiences and the idea to write a text book for teachers and students presented itself. By this time (1955), following Mr. Kokh's precedent, school administrators started to introduce "Basic Stage Movement Skills" as a subject in other theatrical schools in Moscow and Leningrad. Shortly afterwards many other Universities became interested. The necessity of a textbook was obvious. Ivan Kokh took it very seriously by inspecting works of Konstantin Stanislavsky, Meierhold and contemporary psychologists and physiologists.

Konstantin Stanislavsky, whose name and works were becoming more and more popular in America, created his method with the hope that future generations would develop and supplement it. Regarding the actor's movement specifically Stanislavsky wrote of the necessity "to invent a special course of Stage Movement" which would include elements of gymnastics, acrobatics, fencing, juggling and rhythmic "specially adapted for the actor's profession". Mr. Kokh made this his life's goal.

In 1960 he wrote a comprehensive text entitled *Basic Stage Movement Skills*. However, the text was published only in 1970, 10 years later. (In Russia, non-propaganda publications must wait "in line" for many years to be published. Additionally, there is always a shortage of paper in Russia, which ironically has the richest supply of wood in the world.) After publication the *Basic Stage Movement Skills* became a popular reference book used by every stage director, actor and drama teacher in the Soviet Union. It provided specific material gathered diligently

over 40 years. In my opinion, two of the most interesting parts of the book are: *The unarmed combat* and *Peculiarities in Behavior and Etiquette of European and Russian society in XVI - XX centuries*.

"Stage Fencing" in the Russian Theatre schools is taught only on a senior level as the most difficult coordinational complex. The subject is also an invention of Mr. Kokh. The Method is very simple and safe. Based on human psychology the results are spectacular. There is another famous teacher of Stage Fencing and Combat in Moscow, Mr. Nemirovsky, but I personally find his method less interesting and he is less known in the country.

When I was leaving the Soviet Union in 1979, Mr. Kokh, then 76 years of age, was preparing to publish his new book, "Stage Fencing". I don't know if this book has been published as yet (it might take another ten years). Even after his knowledge and competence were nationally accepted Ivan Kokh had to spend a great deal of his energy to prove to Soviet bureaucrats the necessity of introducing his Method. Nevertheless, with unbounded energy he created a harmonious, scientifically-based method of physical training for actors and trained many followers. Later, his students brought his method to all the parts of the country and abroad. Today, "Stage Movement" and "Stage Fencing" are compulsory subjects at all Theatre schools in the Soviet Union.

Mr. Kokh was not only a teacher. He was also a choreographer of fights and movement styles for theatre and motion pictures. Many of these productions became classic and internationally known. The American audience is probably familiar with such movies as *Hamlet* (with Smoktunovsky in the leading role) and *King Lear*, the movement of which was directed by Mr. Kokh.

Stanislavsky has earned acclaim and respect both in Russia and in the Western world. He indisputably brought the most valuable contribution to the theatre in this century. However, Stanislavsky himself repeatedly proclaimed that his Method is not dogma; as any other creative system it must be developed. The current development of Stanislavsky's method is more widespread in his native Russia than in other countries. In my opinion, it is regrettable that these interesting ideas and works are moving so slowly from East to West. It is only by hearsay that American specialists know about Tovstonogov, Efremov, Knebel and other followers and developers of the Method. My teacher Ivan Kokh certainly is one of these developers. It is my experience first as a student, assistant, then as a teacher, that teaching Kokh's method produces excellent results and is waiting for its proper time to be introduced to American teachers, directors and drama students.

They say in Russia when someone talks about something known to everybody "You've discovered America!". Seems like this time Americans have to "discover Russia" ■