

## THE STORY OF ONE THEATRICAL FLOP IN ZAGREB...

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Croatian critics agreed that the Kachalov Group's performance of Henning Berger's *The Flood*, shown in Zagreb between March 15 and 21 1921, was a failure. The press harshly criticized the performance and the play. The actors agreed with the press that *The Flood* was a failure and they found Nina Litovtseva, who directed the play, responsible for it. The article is focused on what is in this »failure« is still worthy of examination? The first point of interest lies in the fact that it was the first-ever MAT production that was directed by a female, who was known as Vasily Kachalov's wife, as a one-time successful provincial actress, and as a pedagogue who could rehearse with actors, helping them with their roles, but not recognized as competent to stage a play. When she started rehearsing, the actors not only refused to help her but were rather hostile and questioned her authority, although her concept of directing was close to that of Stanislavsky. In spite of criticism, Litovtseva did not give up directing. During the MAT tour to the US (1922-1924), she helped Stanislavsky as his assistant, but Stanislavsky never changed his opinion about women's inability to stage plays. He and Nemirovich-Danchenko were in agreement that women could help actors to prepare their roles but could not *assemble and stage* productions.

Key words: Nina Litovtseva; MHT; Kachalov Group; female director

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ilure. The press harshly criticized the performance and the play. Newspapers wrote that it was an unpleasant surprise and that such a mediocre performance was not expected of the Moscow Art Theatre group. Critics found the play pretentious, pseudo-philosophical, and soppy. How come, they asked, the MAT's group included this play in its repertoire? Furthermore, Slovenian and Serbian critics later wrote how unsuitable this play was for the style and artistic methods of the Art Theatre. Both critical reviews and audiences' indifference unpleasantly surprised the actors. (1) Why, they asked, other plays, like Knut Hamsun's *The Paws of Life*, and especially *At the Gates of Heaven* were also slammed in the papers, but yet were commercially successful, while the critiqued *The Flood* gathered fewer and fewer spectators? Finally, the actors agreed with the press that *The Flood* was a failure; nonetheless, they did not cancel it. They compared their show with another *Flood* directed by Evgeny Vakhtangov in Moscow in 1915. Vakhtangov's *Flood* was triumphally successful, so why not in Zagreb? Who's to blame? To the Kachalov Group it was clear: blame the female director, Nina Litovtseva, who directed the play. At that time, a female director was nothing but a contradiction in terms. According to Serafima Birman Vakhtangov, as well as other male actors and directors of the First Studio, found the idea of female directing laughable.

*Before the revolution, everyone doubted female interest in directing. Vakhtangov and Sushkevich witnessed my failure without much surprise. On the contrary, it was quite natural for them. I knew they were more experienced than me, more gifted, and yet their indifference to me hurt me. (2)*

In 1921, Nina Litovtseva was fifty, and was known firstly as the great Vasily Kachalov's wife, secondly – as a one-time successful provincial actress, and thirdly, as a pedagogue who could rehearse with actors, helping them with their roles. But to stage a play? The story in *The Flood* is about several people who found themselves buried in the bar by the heavy rain, believing it was the biblical flood and the end of the world. In front of mortal danger, they are becoming humanized, forgiving, and united; however, once they realize that nothing threatens their lives any longer, they instantly put on their old selfish selves. For any theatre historian, the fact that *The Flood* was a failure should not be doubted. So, what is in this »failure« that might still be worthy of further examination?

There are several points of interest, and the first one lies in the fact that it was the first-ever MAT production that was directed by a female, i.e., Nina Litovtseva. It was her exploration of the profession of theatre director itself. Additionally, this »flop« poses a question about the script: what could make an average play a very successful production at one time (referring to the 1915 MAT First Studio) and the same play fail just a few years later? Indeed, the 1915 *Flood* was staged during WWI, with everyone's emotions electrified with the sense of the end of the world's order. Vakhtangov expressionistic directing mixed forms, shapes, sounds, and lights; the strong ensemble of actors, trained by the Stanislavsky System, of which Vakhtangov was also one of the teachers, made the show one of the »hottest« of the season. Something else should not be forgotten when we talk about the 1915 *Flood*: Frazer, the bankrupt, was played by Mikhail Chekhov, whose acting genius alone gathered hundreds of spectators in the small Studio's space. For Nina Litovtseva, it was her directorial debut: never before was she given an opportunity to direct a play by herself.

Who was Nina Litovtseva? Nina Levestamm (3) who took the name of Litovtseva as her stage name (1871-1956), was the wife of the legendary MAT actor, Vasily Kachalov. She was born in Moscow and was related through her mother to the actors of the Imperial Maly Theatre. Although carrying the noble name Levestamm, she was, in fact, a love child of her widowed mother, who, because of her affair and pregnancy, was disowned by her late husband's family. In 1896, Litovtseva graduated from the Moscow Philharmonic School where she was one of the favorite female students of her teacher, the future co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. After school, Litovtseva was employed by the well-reputed provincial theatres, where she met another provincial actor, Vasily Kachalov, whom she married in 1900. Rumors of Kachalov's genius reached the MAT founders in 1899; in 1900, in desperate need of a leading actor, they hired him before seeing him performed. Nina Litovtseva, his wife, although once Nemirovich-Danchenko's favorite student, entered the Moscow Art Theatre as »a spousal hire,« the fact that wounded her pride forever. In 1907 Litovtseva, having realized that she'd never become the MAT leading actress, unlike her husband, left the theatre to star in Nezlobin's independent enterprise in Riga. In a few months, she became seriously ill, had sepsis, underwent numerous surgeries,

and, as a result, had a severe limp for the rest of her life. Unable to work as an actor, Litovtseva discovered her passion for pedagogical work and explored the possibilities of directing. She was first hired as a pedagogue at the studio of *Three Nicholas*, which was later transformed into the Second Moscow Art Theatre Studio. In 1916, together with Vakhtang Mchedelov, she co-directed Zinaida Gippius' play *The Green Ring* as a director-pedagogue,

Vasily Kachalov and Litovtseva were part of the MAT actors who went to tour Ukrainian cities in 1919 ; the group was cut from Soviet Russia by the White Army, and, instead of returning to Moscow, they continued touring Southern Russia, Georgia, and later Europe. To every theatre historian, they are known as the Kachalov Group. When half of the Kachalov Group came back to Soviet Russia in 1922, they emphasized that it was their *unintentional* emigration; however, three years of organized company tours could be hardly qualified as unintentional. During this tour, Nina Litovtseva gained her first directorial experience as a pedagogue and a great advisor on the revival of the founders' productions. All the productions that the Kachalov group toured in Europe, be it Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Gorky, Knut Hamsun, were carbon copies of the ones directed by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, even though simplified and adjusted to the parameters of stages where they were performed and a smaller group of actors. The scenery was limited, and often created out of regular furniture they could find in the area. Thus, for *The Flood*, they borrowed from the nearby cafes their round tables and chairs. To mask the lack of scenery, they often used black drapes: the focus was on actors anyway, not on the entire productions, which were masterfully directed by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko. During the tour, Nina Litovtseva became an irreplaceable member of the company: she knew many MAT productions by heart, with their complicated blockings, exits, entrances, and the score of pauses and silences. The actors, who usually committed to memory scenes in which they were involved themselves, lacked the overall view of MAT productions. Litovtseva remembered them very well because, while preparing herself to become an actress of MAT in 1901, she watched its entire repertoire with a notebook, from beginning to end. Having worked with everyone as a pedagogue during the tour, helping the company to replicate the founders' great shows, she thought she had gradually gained sufficient experience as a theatre director. Therefore, when no one in the company volunteered

to direct Henning Berger's *The Flood*, she decided that she could take the risk and direct it herself. She had no *mise-en-scenes* to follow: the Kachalov Group actors either did not see Vakhtangov's *Flood* or, if they did, they remembered it vaguely.

When Litovtseva started rehearsing, she discovered that the actors not only refused to help her but were rather hostile and questioned her authority. The change was drastic: the ones who behaved respectfully towards her while she was reviving the founders' productions, were sarcastic, diminishing, and did not hide their disbelief in her ability to direct. The rehearsals were often disrupted by actors, who doubted Litovtseva's artistic suggestions. Litovtseva stubbornly continued. She assumed that the detailed psychological work on the characters and the respectful observance of Berger's stage directions would allow her to create a good show. Litovtseva's concept was closer to that of Stanislavsky and Sulerzhitsky's who believed in the goodness of human nature, than to Vakhtangov's. For Evgeny Vakhtangov, mutual love, understanding, and forgiveness between the customers of the bar were temporary, and were caused by their fear of approaching death. Vakhtangov added to their climactic unity the salt of irony. Stanislavsky and Sulerzhitsky, on the contrary, believed in the goodness of human nature, and thus, against Vakhtangov's will, reworked many scenes accordingly. Vakhtangov left very bitter comments about their interference in his diary. («Sulerzhitsky and Stanislavsky ... rudely intervened, insensitively trampled on what was mine, ruled without asking me, cut and chopped with it an ax.») (4)

Nina Litovtseva, unlike Vakhtangov, tried to find biblical love and forgiveness in the characters, which the text of the play could not accommodate. She did not understand why the quantity of rehearsals (8 months) would not turn into a good performance. Litovtseva kept deepening psychological motivations of the characters' behavior, but her detailed explanations did not make the play more convincing. They toured *The Flood* in Zagreb, Ljubljana, Osijek, Belgrade, and everywhere it was harshly criticized. Hence, *The Flood* became the Kachalov Group's »international« flop. Vadim Shverubovich, Kachalov and Litovtseva's son, wrote in his memoirs:

*Mother ... suffered, blaming herself for this failure. ... her hope that the performance would gradually become better proved untrue: neither Zagreb,*

*nor Osijek (where we were in March), nor Belgrade (when we were there for the second time) liked the show. (5)*

Litovtseva tried to understand what was missing in her directing: she thought that, maybe, a sudden shock would help. Trying to empower the climactic scene of the final deluge, she kept increasing the backstage noises.

*Mother tried to seek salvation in external effects, mainly in noises. In the Studio (in 1915, M.I.), for the image of a collapsing dam, they broke a piece of plywood with the simultaneous sound of the drum. In our production... a whole stack of firewood was hung on two ropes; at a signal, the ropes were cut, and the firewood with a terrible roar fell on the machines upholstered in plywood. Moreover, at the same moment, a volley of three guns was heard, theatrical thunder rumbled, and the Turkish drum ... was struck. With each performance, the power of the sound grew... In Belgrade, for example, a team of a machine-gun platoon with two built-in machine guns was called to our stage... The roar was unbearable, but ... it did not make any impression on the audience. (6)*

One might suggest that after this international failure Litovtseva gave up directing altogether. On the contrary. During the MAT tour to the US (1922-1924), Litovtseva helped Stanislavsky as his assistant, rehearsing the crowd scenes, and preparing young actors to replace the aging ones in MAT classical productions. Although thankful to Litovtseva for her work as his assistant, Stanislavsky never changed his opinion about women's inability to stage plays. On this subject, he and Nemirovich-Danchenko were in agreement: Nemirovich called a female director's *comrade* (товарищ режиссера), who could help prepare roles but could not *assemble and stage* productions. Olga Bokshanskaya, Nemirovich-Danchenko's secretary, quoted Stanislavsky in one of her reports during MAT tour in the US, »Telesheva and Litovtseva by no means could be considered anything else but the director-pedagogues working with actors; they cannot stage plays, and always must be paired with the directors (male director, M.I.) who can.« (7) However, Stanislavsky, upon returning to Moscow in 1924, gave Litovtseva a greater freedom in choosing her directorial projects, although all of them would be subject

to supervision, revision, and improvement by either founder. Among Litovtseva's directorial successes was A. Kugel's play based on D. Merezhkovsky's novel *Nikolai I and the Decembrists* in 1926. Litovtseva was appointed to join the team of directors to work on *The Armoured Train*. But although Stanislavsky supported her, MAT younger generation of directors did not. In April 1927, Litovtseva wrote a letter to the MAT Collegium of directors, which consisted, besides Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, of five people, all male (actors, directors, and one dramaturg and theatre critic, Pavel Markov). Her remarkable letter not only describes her humiliating position in the theatre but also shows her ability to fight for justice (the letter is not published and quoted from the MAT Museum's archives).

*I am writing to the Collegium because I am not allowed to attend the meetings... and to express my thoughts about my own directorial projects. In those rare cases, when I am invited ..., the questions related to my work are limited to a ridiculously short time, and I am not given a chance to say anything. But even if there were enough time..., it would not have mattered at all: I am always invited after my future productions have been cast (without consulting me). Although everyone (every member of the Collegium, M.I.) promised me to discuss the issue with the whole Collegium, the situation has remained the same. Therefore, I decided to write to you because I must be heard. (8)*

In response to her complaint, in 1928 the Moscow Art Theatre included three female members to serve in the Collegium of directors: Litovtseva, Telesheva, and Kotlubai. Indeed, on the surface, it was an occasion to celebrate. However, it proved to be a gesture of political correctness because eight years later, in 1935, during the meeting of the Moscow Art Theatre directors, Litovtseva raised the same concerns once again. Litovtseva's last individual attempt to direct took place in 1932: she chose Alexander Ostrovsky's play *Talents and Admirers*. After working for several months with actors and designer, Litovtseva showed Stanislavsky the first, third, and fourth acts of the play at his home. Stanislavsky thanked Litovtseva for her thorough work, and then... asked the actors to forget about her mise-en-scenes, revising the concept of the show and her interpretation of several characters. Stanislavsky kept rehearsing *Talents and Admirers* for 6 more months. In May 1933, he checked the scenery and changed it. He approved of the music

and personally examined every actor's makeup and the list of props. *Talents and Admirers* premiered in September 1933; it was criticized by Soviet critics for the directors and actors' inability to condemn the merchants' class. It was, however, popular with the audiences, and stayed in the theatre repertoire for 24 years.

*Talents and Admirers* became Litovtseva's last attempt to direct individually. Respected as a director-pedagogue, a person with a good memory to help the theatre restore its classical productions, Litovtseva contributed as assistant director to the MAT's most well-known shows of the 30s and 40s, such as Tolstoi's *Resurrection* and *Anna Karenina*, *The Three Sisters*, and *Uncle Vanya*. But, unlike other female directors who were not allowed to direct independently at the Art Theatre, but successfully directed elsewhere, Litovtseva chose not to direct in other theatres and narrowed her activity to MAT exclusively, thus completely accepting its rules, with all their hardship and occasional rewards.

In conclusions: I would take women at least twenty-five years to learn the art of directing, which involved, besides pedagogical work with actors, the development of spatial vision, construction of mise-en-scenes, and incorporation of sound and light into their directorial score. Litovtseva is remembered as one of MAT's successful directors-pedagogues, to whom many actors were thankful for their artistic successes, and the first woman who dared to try directing, however imperfect her artistic achievements were.

#### NOTES:

1. <https://libking.ru/books/theatre/422259-95-vadim-shverubovich-o-lyudyah-o-teatre-i-o-sebe.html#book> pg. 92-93
2. [file:///C:/Users/ignatieva.1/Downloads/put\\_aktrisy.pdf](file:///C:/Users/ignatieva.1/Downloads/put_aktrisy.pdf), pg. 124
3. Maria Ignatieva, *Kachalov's wife*. <https://screenstage.ru/?p=17859>
4. Vakhtangov's diary, December 31, 1915. <http://teatr-lib.ru/Library/Vahtangov/Vahtang/>
5. <https://libking.ru/books/theatre/422259-95-vadim-shverubovich-o-lyudyah-o-teatre-i-o-sebe.html#book> 93
6. *Ibid.*, 93
7. Olga Bokshanskaya, *Pisma Nemirovichu-Danchenko* (Letters to Nemirovich-Danchenko) in two volumes, The Moscow Art Theatre Publishing house, 2005, II, 375

8. The Museum of the Moscow Art Theatre. Музей МХАТ. Ф. 44 (Н.Н.Литовцева).  
Ед. хр. (opus) 11463.

## POVIJEST JEDNOGA KAZALIŠNOG NEUSPJEHA U ZAGREBU...

### *Sažetak*

Hrvatski kazališni kritičari suglasni su u tom da je *Poplava* Henninga Bergera, koju je Kačalovljeva grupa izvodila u Zagrebu od 15. do 21. ožujka 1921. bila neuspjeh. Prigovori su se odnosili podjednako na izbor dramskoga teksta, koji je ocijenjen trivijalnim, i na razinu izvedbe, koja nije ispunila očekivanja kritike. Uspoređujući svoje uprizorenje *Poplave*, koje je dobivalo loše kritike i u ostalim gradovima u kojima je grupa gostovala (Osijek, Ljubljana, Beograd), s moskovskom režijom Evgenija Vahtangova iz 1915., koja je imala uspjeha, glumci su krivnju za neuspjeh svalili na redateljicu Ninu Litovcevu, koja je bila poznata prije svega kao žena Vasilija Kačalova, potom uspješna glumica u pokrajini i, napokon, vrsna pedagoginja koja je vodila pokuse s glumcima. Tijekom turneje Kačalovljeve grupe, dijela MHT-a koje su ratna zbivanja 1919. odvojile od matičnoga kazališta, i u kojoj nije bilo redatelja, Litovceva je obnavljala predstave koje su u Moskvi postavili Stanislavski, Suleržicki i Nemirovič-Dančenko, a 1921. kao prvu samostalnu režiju postavila je *Poplavu*, uz veliki otpor ansambla, koji je prihvaćao stajalište Stzanislavskoga i Nemirovič-dančenka da žene mogu biti asistentice režije i voditi glumačke pokuse, ali nisu u stanju samostalno režirati. Nakon spajanja razdvojenih dijelova MHT-a, tijekom velike turneje po SAD-u te povratka u Moskvu, Stanislavski je Litovcevu angažirao kao svoju asistenticu na nizu predstava, dao joj veću slobodu u izboru tekstova koje će uvježbavati, ali je nadzirao njezin rad te redovito odbacivao njezina redateljska rješenja i u predstavu unosio vlastita. U članku se citira i jedan dosad neobjavljeni dopis Nine Litovceve kazališnoj upravi koji svjedoči o rodnoj diskriminaciji u MHT-u i u drugoj polovici 1920-ih godina. Posljednja njezina režija bili su *Talenti i obožavatelji* Ostrovskoga, u koju je Stanislavski također unio znatne promjene. Unatoč otporu suvremenika, intervencijama u predstave koje je režirala i negativnim kritikama koje su dobivale predstave u režiji žene, Nina Litovceva važna je u povijesti MHT-a u ruskog kazališta kao prva žena koja je ostvarila nekoliko samostalnih režija u kazalištu.

Ključne riječi: Nina Litovceva; MHT; Kačalovljeva grupa; redateljica