

# HOW WE PRODUCED "THE RUSSIANS" AT THE FRONT

By Nikolai Yanovsky

*The first English production, in association with C.E.M.A., of Konstantin Simonov's play, "The Russians," will open at the Playhouse, opposite Charing Cross underground station, on Thursday evening, June 10, at 6.30 p.m. It is being performed by the Old Vic Company, with Tyrone Guthrie as producer.*

**I**N the spring of 1942 I was invited to produce for the second front-line theatre, which was organised on the initiative of the All-Russian Theatre Society and a group of Vakhtangov Theatre actors.

This company, which included actors from various theatres, prepared a special repertoire for front-line performances: "An evening of Chekhov Vaudevilles," the comedy "All Good Things Come to an End," by the great Russian playwright of the mid-nineteenth century, Alexander Ostrovsky; Benjamin Kaverin's play, "The House on the Hill"; and Konstantin Simonov's "The Russians," which was performed by our theatre at the southern and Stalingrad fronts from December last year until April, 1943.

During this period the theatre covered a long road, together with the advancing Red Army: Leninsk, Kotelnikovo, Zaselsk, Novocherkassk, the Cossack village of Bolshe Kretenskaya, Rostov-on-Don.

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Working conditions during the tour were exceptionally difficult. In the short winter days we made long trips on trucks across unsheltered steppes, the icy wind gripping us with its chilly fingers. At night we halted in villages which had been partially destroyed by the retreating Germans, and where it was impossible even to find water. During their retreat the Germans demolished schools, clubs, urban and village theatres; so our performances were given in thatched barns or dugouts which the Red Army men themselves adapted to serve as theatres.

Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, the founder of the Moscow Art Theatre, who died recently, said: "You can build a magnificent theatre complete with stage, the finest equipment and lighting—but it still won't be a theatre. But if one single actor performs in one bare spot surrounded by a ring of spectators, that is a genuine theatre. The main thing in a theatre is—the actor. And where he meets with the audience—there you have the beginnings of a theatre." And throughout the whole trip we had repeated evidence of the wisdom of this.

When we saw our soldier audiences, so eagerly awaiting the Moscow actors, so raptly following every word and gesture, so attentive and solicitous towards the caste, we at once forgot all the difficulties and hardships, and played with unusual creative swing.

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In our work on Simonov's "The Russians" we were helped by the Red Army men and officers whom we met. Before staging the play I had already visited the Kalinin and central fronts. First-hand observation, conversations with the troops, acquaintanceship with men and officers who had been in action all confirmed what Tolstoy and other Russian writers have written about the peculiar way in which the heroism of the Russian people manifests itself.

The men of the Red Army do not give expression to their heroism in pompous words. Love for the Soviet motherland and hatred of the enemy live in the heart of the soldier. His actions speak louder than words. He is austere and courageous. He knows he is fighting for hearth and home and for those he loves, for the free and worthy life which he has won in 25 years of hard toil. That is why he has one single aim—to drive the enemy from his native soil and to smash Hitlerism.

When I had to start working on "The Russians," I set myself the aim of showing the men and officers of the Red Army their own selves in the persons of Simonov's characters. I tried to put into my work the results of all my observations of Red Army life and characters. And Simonov's play offered rich material for the portrayal of front-line characters.

Captain Safonov sends Valya behind the German lines on a very dangerous assignment, and Valya just goes off to carry out this order without striking any attitudes. Safonov loves Valya deeply, and in ordering her to go he is fully aware of the risk she is running. Later, when he is told that Valya is dead, Safonov suppresses his grief and compels himself to concentrate on working out tactical plans for the coming battle with the Germans.

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I think I have correctly divined the theme of this play. It is the natural heroism, free from any histrionic "uplift," which is inherent in the Russian people. The unfolding of this idea constitutes the creative task confronting the actors: the main thing here is that the actor shall retain "his own features," that he be his own self. He resorts to the minimum of make-up. What matters is live, vital truth, so that the words of the part are your own words.

Appreciating the seriousness of the job of showing front-line audiences portrayals of their own selves—the simple Russian people defending their native land—we could not merely "impersonate" the characters, but had to find within our own selves the essential traits of those characters, and reveal them convincingly in the situations proposed by the playwright.

When I saw audiences of Red Army men and officers holding back their tears, I felt really proud of our theatre and our actors. It is interesting to note that the audiences were most deeply stirred by those scenes where heroism is shown without any theatricality or affectation, but in an extremely simple and natural manner. This was the case in the finale of Scene II. ("Sleep my baby, sleep my precious"), in the conversation between Valya and Globa in the final scene, and in Safonov's struggle with his emotions when he is told that Valya is dead.

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My fears that a play about the front shown at the front would not "reach" the audience were unfounded. "The Russians" was followed with the closest attention, especially by units which had just returned from action. Many of the comments of our front-line audiences were concerned with the portrayal of the officers; most of the discussion centred round Safonov. Some declared: "The actor should be less effusive, more restrained in expressing his emotions." Others said: "No. If he were too restrained, it would make him seem wooden."

Our audiences reacted whole-heartedly to the play. When we had finished our performance at one Red Army unit, Ambulance Nurse Nina Makarova declared: "I want to be like Valya. I'll ask to be transferred to reconnaissance. . . ."

Some of the men retorted: "Some hope! Valya was a heroine!"

"If Valya could do it, why can't I?" Nina said.

Nina insisted, and the battalion commander agreed to her request. She penetrated behind the German lines, wiped out four Nazis and returned to her unit with valuable information about the location of enemy troops.

And in a letter addressed to our actors, one group of Red Army men and officers wrote:—

"Like the heroes of this play, we too love life. We want to live, like Safonov, to live and to fight on until not a single Nazi is left on our soil!"

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