

The Deep Influence of Russian Theater

By [John Freedman](#)

April 25, 2010

The  Moscow Times

Ask any Western theater artist what Russian wrote the most influential book about the making of theater and I would guess that 85 percent would say it was Konstantin Stanislavsky, whose "An Actor Prepares" was published in the 1920s. The remaining 15 percent might name Mikhail Chekhov, whose "On the Technique of Acting" is another of the elite Bibles of theater books.

What you probably would not expect to hear mentioned would be Georgy Tovstonogov's "The Profession of the Stage Director."

But this book is precisely what Robert Falls will tell you affected him more than any other.

"I had trouble understanding what Stanislavsky was trying to say," Falls told me in Moscow recently. "It wasn't until I found Tovstonogov's book, which put Stanislavsky in perspective, that I could make any sense of it."

Robert Falls is one of the finest and most successful theater directors in the United States. He

has been an institution in Chicago for nearly 35 years and has been the artistic director of Chicago's famous Goodman Theater since 1986. His frequent productions on Broadway have brought him fame and awards. Twice he won the coveted Tony Award for Outstanding Director of a Play. The actors he directed could fill a who's-who of Western stars, including John Malkovich, Brian Dennehy, Vanessa Redgrave, Philip Seymour Hoffman, John Leguizamo and many others.

And through it all, there has always been a Russian connection for Falls.

First came the discovery of Tovstonogov's book, published in the early 1970s in a small print run by the Soviet Progress publishing house. Then there was a trip to the Soviet Union in 1985 when Falls discovered Lev Dodin.

Dodin at that time was not the world-famous director he is today. In fact, he was still struggling to gain recognition even among his peers in the city that was then called Leningrad. Falls told of how his delegation was officially steered away from Dodin's work, but that some insistent and knowledgeable translators found a way to get him into Dodin's "Brothers and Sisters" on a night when he had no other commitments. Falls has remained a fan and friend ever since, frequently coming back to St. Petersburg to see Dodin's work.

Falls was in Moscow during the first two weeks of April to take in shows presented by the Golden Mask Festival, as well as to see some of the key Moscow shows outside the festival. Actually, he ended up spending several extra days in the Russian capital thanks to the havoc one unpronounceable volcano wreaked on world air travel. But haven't we had enough Eyjafjallajökull stories to keep us satisfied for awhile?

I caught up with Falls the day he arrived at the Theater Yunogo Zritelya to see Kama Ginkas's production of "The Lady With the Lapdog." Standing in the office that Ginkas shares with his wife Genrietta Yanovskaya, the theater's artistic director, I asked Robert to share some of his impressions. It was a fitting location for our video chat, since both Ginkas and Yanovskaya were prize students of Tovstonogov back in the 1960s.

Falls talked about the Tovstonogov book and his appreciation of Dodin's work. He also talked about seeing Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire" as directed by Nikolai Kolyada of Yekaterinburg. Falls pointed out that this play is "oversentimentalized" in the United States, and that for him Kolyada's production captured the true "violent poetry" of the play.

He also talked about seeing Ginkas's production of "Medea" and a production of Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya" by Rimas Tuminas at the Vakhtangov Theater.

But you can hear and see all that best by clicking on the picture below.

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