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Martha Coigney Recalls Marilyn Monroe and More

By John Freedman

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If just one person were chosen to serve as American theater's prime link to every other theater tradition in the world, it surely would be Martha Coigney. Martha was an employee of the International Theatre Institute, or ITI, for 37 years. For 35 of those years she was director of ITI/US. She became president of ITI/Worldwide in 1987, taking over from the renowned Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka and continuing in the position until 1995.

The stories from Coigney's life are studded with an amazing array of heroes and heroines. When working as assistant to Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio in New York in the late 1950s, she once washed dishes with a helpful Marilyn Monroe, and she occasionally exchanged small talk with Paul Newman. When asked what Karl Malden was like in real life, she smiled, shrugged her shoulders and said, "Just like he was on screen. A fine, solid man."

The Monroe story deserves to be told in more detail.

One of Coigney's many tasks at the Actors Studio was to stop students who arrived late for class from entering the room until the first break. Monroe, whom Coigney recalls as a "lovely, sensitive woman that Hollywood typecast terribly," was invariably among that group.

Strasberg, the director conducting Monroe's class, resolved to make an exception for the popular Hollywood actress. "When Marilyn arrives late, just let her in," he once told Coigney.

"I can't do that," Coigney told him. "I can't make everyone else sit and wait and let her go in alone."

"Just do it," Strasberg said.

But Coigney would not. When Marilyn invariably arrived late, Coigney would open the door, let Marilyn in and then invite the rest of the late students to enter with her.

This caused Strasberg to have a private talk with the actress.

The next morning Coigney arrived at her usual early hour to open the studio and get it ready for the day's work. A few minutes later Marilyn Monroe showed up.

"What are you doing here so early?" Coigney asked in surprise.

"Strasberg said he knew I would never come on time," Monroe explained. "But he said, 'Can't you come early instead of late?' So here I am." After a pause, Monroe added, "As long as I'm here, is there anything I can do to help?"

"Sure," Coigney said, "you can help me wash the dishes."

Monroe happily joined in cleaning plates and glasses.

It was during this stint at the Actors Studio that Coigney acquired a great love for actors. She has been known to be sarcastic about directors and suspicious about writers ⊠ but I have never heard her speak of any actor with anything less than love and affection.

One actor Coigney remembers with particular affection is Mikhail Tsaryov, one of the most famous actors of the Soviet era. Tsaryov, whose name can also be spelled and pronounced "Tsarev," began his career in the 1920s in Leningrad, but first achieved fame in Moscow in the 1930s as one of Vsevolod Meyerhold's top actors. He joined the troupe of the Maly Theater in 1937 and remained there until his death in 1987.

Tsaryov for many years was one of the most prominent theater administrators in the Soviet Union. He twice was managing director of the Maly and was the theater's artistic director from 1985 to 1987. He was chairman of the Russian Theater Union, better known as VTO, from 1964 to 1986, and he was president of the Soviet branch of ITI from 1959 until his death. It was in this capacity that Martha Coigney often crossed his path.

She remembers him as a strong, honest adversary when in negotiations and a charming man in off-hours. "It was like what Margaret Thatcher said about Gorbachev," Coigney explained to me during a chat on Thursday. "We can do business together."

She has fond memories of Tsaryov's 80th birthday, which coincided with an ITI congress in Paris in 1983. Coigney had glasses of champagne brought in to surprise the actor, and she recalls him being moved to tears. He was quite "bouleverse," she said.

But it was, perhaps, a meeting with Tsaryov during the Six Day War in 1967 that made the biggest impression.

All of the world's ITI representatives were gathered in New York when the war broke out in the Middle East. This prompted Tsaryov to say, "We meet at what could be the end of the world. But we make peace. We are the diplomats."

"That got a huge laugh," Coigney now recalls, "but it was true."

In fact, Tsaryov's comment helped convince Coigney that she had found her calling. At that time she was preparing to begin seeking another job, but ITI's mission of reaching out to the world "one artist at a time" was too important for her to ignore. It is a mission to which she remains faithful to this day as the organization's Honorary President for life.

Click on the picture below to hear more of Coigney's remembrances of Mikhail Tsaryov. The conversation was recorded in the living room of Coigney's New York apartment, and on occasion her beloved and proud poodle Lola put in an on-screen appearance. The Tony award that Coigney and ITI/US were given in 1998 is visible at the end of the video.

A correction: In an earlier version of this article, directing great Elia Kazan was named as the instructor in the anecdote about Monroe's lateness and Coigney. It actually was Lee Strasberg, Coigney said.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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