



THEATRE

Theatre entered my life early.

To begin with, my mother went on playing her Juliets, Katerinas, and princesses until the unmistakable curve of her belly began to show. In other words, we were already playing all those roles together.

Unfortunately, you can't change or shorten the length of a pregnancy, which meant that while she was away, all my mother's roles were given to other — non-pregnant — actresses!

But at last I was born, and as soon as she could, my mother returned to the theatre. To win back her roles and fight for new ones.

Fight — exactly.

The theatre and its inhabitants, those hardworking actors, existed in a kind of tangle of intrigues, gossip, petty nastiness, friendships formed "against someone"...

I was about three months old when my mother brought me to the THEATRE.

Actors, when it isn't about the theatre, roles, or competition, are sweet, kind, decent, normal people. But THE THEATRE!

Here you could never relax. You had to sense the atmosphere, the pulse, the director's mood, the manager's hobbies and habits (his wife's temperament), make sure you didn't blurt out something you shouldn't (it would immediately be repeated to the person you'd said it about), and much more besides.

On its worst days, the atmosphere there was like a terrarium.

But I was a newborn baby, and I was treated differently. I acquired no fewer than three mothers: Mama Tanya, Mama Alla, and Mama Liza.

Mama Tanya, or Pani Kurovska, and Pani Allochka Logoshevets were actresses. Mama Liza was not an actress, which may be why I don't remember her surname. Mama Liza was a costume attendant and, in addition, took care of the wigs. It was in her large room — the costume workshop — that I lived when I was still in swaddling clothes. While my biological mother was rehearsing or performing. The costume workshop was filled with enormously long rows of wooden beams from which the costumes for all the productions hung. Along the wall ran long, narrow tables where curled or balding wigs rested on wooden wig blocks. There was an electric hot plate there, used to heat the curling irons for the wigs. The same hot plate was used to make my porridge and warm my milk. During the intervals, all my mothers would come there and play with me.

I was loved.

I became aware of the atmosphere, the place, and my surroundings later, when I was a little older. One day, I touched one of the costumes with a fur collar, grabbed hold of it, began rubbing my nose against the fur, and squealing with delight. My mothers enjoyed this so much that they brought me two old fur muffs at once, and everyone happily watched me go into ecstasies whenever I touched the fur.

When I grew a little older and could even say a few words, they began carrying me onto the stage in plays where the heroine was supposed to be holding a baby. Before that, they had used a bundle to represent a swaddled baby, but now I played the part.

But my acting career came to an unexpected and very quick end.

In the play *Gypsy Aza*, based on the work by Mykhailo Starytskyi, I was carried onto the stage in one of the scenes...

It was the scene in which Aza, the Gypsy woman abandoned by her people, wakes from the sleeping potion they had given her and discovers that her fellow Gypsies have left her behind.

The actress playing Aza rolled about on the "ground" (the stage floor, covered with a shaggy green carpet meant to represent grass). Her desperate wailing and sobbing brought the actor-villagers running, dressed in embroidered shirts, plakhtas, kyrsetkas, necklaces and headscarves; the men wore bryls — straw hats. Alarmed and bewildered, they all kept asking one another: "Who is this woman? What's wrong with her? What's wrong with her? What's wrong with her?"

A very dramatic scene: the actress rolling about on the floor, the beautifully dressed villagers gathered around her, anxiously repeating:

"Shcho z neyu?!"

The orchestra in the pit, led by the Polish conductor Pan Piotrus, began softly in the lower register.

With the violins, he drove the sound higher and higher, louder and louder, until it reached its highest, loudest note — and ended with a **resounding beat of the drum**.

Everyone onstage fell silent.

A dramatic, tense pause hung in the air...

And then, in a clear little child's voice (apparently indignant that all these adults still hadn't managed to find the answer to the question "What's wrong with her?"), I said loudly:

"The lady fell down!"

It wasn't even that the audience burst out laughing.

Worse than that, the actors onstage couldn't keep from laughing either.

They turned away from the audience; some covered their faces with their hands (as though overcome with concern for the Gypsy woman) to hide their laughter.

The scene was ruined.

They brought down the curtain.

I was never invited to play that part again.

Pan Piotrus was the conductor. Everyone loved him.

By then I was about three years old, and I could make my own way to the orchestra pit, sit on one of the musicians' laps. Touch the instruments.

There was quite a character in the orchestra. He played percussion. **And, just like in the jokes, his name was Vasya.**

Vasya was a drinker.

During rehearsals, Vasya often hit the drum at the wrong moment.

Pan Piotrus would stop the rehearsal. He would look Vasya in the eye and say, anguish in his voice and a Polish accent:

"Vasya... what did I ever do to you?"

Vasya would blush. The rehearsal would continue, and Vasya would bang the drum at the wrong moment again.

Pan Piotrus would stop the rehearsal once more.

Silence would fall.

And Pan Piotrus, almost in a whisper, would say:

"Vasya! I'll kill you and bury you to this music!"

There was a long bench running along the wall of the orchestra pit. Actors, stagehands, special guests, and I would sometimes sit there. You could watch the performances from there. I was short enough not only to sit on the bench but to stand on it — my head still couldn't be seen from the auditorium.

They were performing a play about the Revolution — that very one, the Revolution of 1917. My mother played a counterrevolutionary. Beautiful, but bad, because she didn't like the Revolution or the commissars.

One of the female commissars, a devoted Bolshevik (played by Aunt Zoya Privarskaya), was treacherously shot by my mother. On top of that, my mother's character seduced a fiery revolutionary commissar (Uncle Shimansky) and made him fall in love with her.

But Uncle Shimansky the Commissar, devoted to the Revolution, discovers that his beautiful sweetheart (my mother) has shot his comrade in the struggle against imperialism — the female commissar (Aunt Zoya)! His revolutionary wrath instantly wipes out his love for the counterrevolutionary (my mother). And his "noble fury" results in his deciding to strangle the enemy of the Revolution (my mother) with his own revolutionary hands.

And there she is onstage, in a blue satin dress — the dazzlingly beautiful Socialist-Anti-Revolutionary and commissar-killer (my mother). The commissar approaches her in revolutionary fury, wearing a leather cap with a red star and a leather jacket with a little red rag pinned to his chest.

To me, this is no longer Uncle Shimansky, because he grabs my mother by the throat and begins to strangle her. And my mother, gasping for breath, tries to tear his hands away from her throat...

And then, from the orchestra pit, I screamed at the top of my lungs:

"MAMA!!!!"

The musicians quickly carried me, hysterical, out of the orchestra pit. I was sobbing and couldn't calm down.

They carried me to my mother's dressing room. She shared it with Aunt Zoya Privarskaya — the very commissar my mother had shot.

Both actresses finished their scenes and returned to the dressing room.

I was still in tears.

I already understood how absurd the whole incident had been, and I was embarrassed, but the scene had made such a powerful impression on me that I was still sobbing. Aunt Zoya asked with a smile:

"Why didn't you cry when your mother shot me?"

My mother smiled indulgently and said:

"All right, that's enough now!"

After that, my mother and the musicians were no longer allowed to let me into the orchestra pit during performances. So I acquired a new place at the side of the stage, behind the wings, perched on whatever props happened to be there. Sometimes they were sacks meant to represent sacks of grain or sand, depending on the play. Sometimes it was a throne, chairs, or boxes. Sometimes just a stool.

My mother took me along on the theatre's tours. Every summer, all the actors would pile into several large buses and set off for other cities, other Soviet republics. Behind the buses came trucks carrying enormous containers filled with scenery for the productions. In this way, we travelled through almost the entire Soviet Union.

On my earliest tours, I still couldn't walk. I would stand in the aisle between the bus seats, holding on to the seats with both hands. One day the bus braked — **and I walked!**

Those were the first independent steps of my life — in a touring theatre bus.

One of the actresses jumped up from her seat and, with the knife she had just been using to cut an apple, began making little crosses over each of my footprints. **Blessing them.**

The actors quickly moved their bags out of the aisle, clearing the way for me.

And I walked!

"On tour," as the actors called it, everyone was put up in hotels, two to a room. Sometimes they gave as many as three performances a day if there were children's matinees in the morning. The actors got very tired. It was important to get some proper rest between performances.

But no one was afraid of ending up in a room with my mother and a small child. From a very early age, I knew I mustn't make noise when my mother and the others were sleeping. I learned to move without making a sound and to play quietly while everyone slept. I learned to **"stay out of the way."**

Later in life, that **"staying out of the way" often got in my way.**

I knew all the lines and all the actors in every play. I always knew when they mixed up their lines, or forgot them and improvised.

But sometimes improvisation saved a performance.

That happened once while we were on tour. One of the actors had diarrhea.

They were performing *Wedding in Malinovka*. There is a scene where Popandopulo divides the loot with Smetana: *"This is for me, this is for me again, and this is for me all the time!"*

The scene was over, and so were the lines, but the actor playing Andreyka, the farmhand, who was supposed to come onstage next, was somewhere in the toilet battling diarrhea.

So the actors began to improvise — scuffling, chasing one another around the stage. Shouting things like, "I won't give it to you!" For a long time.

But the audience laughed. They suspected nothing. The actors were exhausted, and still the next character hadn't appeared.

But eventually he did... They managed to finish the performance.

I was fascinated by the way they produced the rumble of thunder and pistol shots in the theatre. For "thunder," an enormous sheet of metal hung backstage. Suspended from a horizontal pole, it would be shaken whenever "thunder" or a storm was needed, producing a thunder-like sound. This was, of course, accompanied by lighting effects.

Pistol shots were also made backstage — with two wooden blocks that had hollows cut into them. They were struck together, producing a sound like a gunshot.

Once, the stagehand who was supposed to strike those wooden blocks together was late with the sound. The actor onstage, hearing no shot, didn't lose his head. He threw the pistol aside and shouted:

"Then I'll strangle you!"

He began strangling him — and just then the shot rang out.

The theatre was my home.

I never saw the performances from the auditorium. During that period — not once.

During performances, I would sometimes wander through the foyer and peek into the refreshment bar. I loved chocolate candies; I think they were called *Mishki v lesu* — "Bears in the Forest."

All the spectators were in the auditorium. The foyer and the broad marble staircases were empty.

I liked wandering through them.

Portraits of the actors hung on the walls. Their names.

My mother's portrait.

My mother was dazzlingly beautiful. The most beautiful actress in the theatre.

I'm not saying this because every child thinks, "My mother is the most beautiful."

No.

Everyone said so. The audiences loved her for it, and some of her colleagues hated her for it.

I think it was, if not her greatest misfortune, then certainly her greatest problem.

For one thing, it aroused envy. And for another, my mother was completely fixated on her beauty.

She saw no other qualities in herself. Every woman automatically became a potential threat.

And beauty is a treacherous thing. With time, it leaves — betraying you, quietly, like a thief.

Alongside world-famous works, the theatre staged many Ukrainian classics.

And in almost every play, the same traditional scene would be repeated. Onstage there would be a raised platform covered in "green grass" — a sort of hill.

An actor would run up onto this hill. Usually it was an actor named Samosad. He was actually a dancer, though he could manage a line or two. But they didn't give him roles.

He danced instead.

The hopak.

From one play to the next, he would run up onto this green-covered hill. He would raise a hand to shade his eyes, as though peering into the distance.

He would look behind one wing, then behind the other.

Meanwhile, the other young men would gradually come out onto the stage.

And then Samosad would call out in a ringing tenor:

“Khloptsi! Divchata idut!” — “Boys! The girls are coming!”

And at that point, music would always burst out from the orchestra pit — something like **“Hop-tsa-tsa!”**

Against the rapidly darkening sky (the painted backdrop, above the white cottages receding into the distance), a yellow moon would appear and the stars would light up.

“Hop-tsa-tsa!” would gently give way to a tender Ukrainian melody, and to its sounds the girls would glide out from behind the wings.

They would glide out in a line.

Sometimes they held little wreaths above their heads, which were also crowned with wreaths and ribbons.

Sometimes they held hands.

All of them wore beautiful Ukrainian costumes, richly embroidered, with velvet embroidered kyrsetkas, colourful plakhtas, and embroidered aprons.

Each one different, and all of them very picturesque.

The girls would begin a round dance. Gradually, the young men would join them.

The music would grow livelier and more spirited, turning into a dashing hopak.

Then, little by little, both the dance and the music would calm down.

The sky would grow completely dark. Everyone would gradually wander off in pairs, disappearing behind one wing or the other.

Only the hero and heroine would remain onstage.

And only then did the plays differ.

Either they loved each other, or they quarrelled. Either it was a drama, or a comedy.

But most Ukrainian theatrical classics were dramas.

I don't remember who the director was, but this scene appeared in every Ukrainian play.

That is, Samosad always ran out first.

He seemed to have springs in his legs. Short, in his soft red boots, he bounced well, pointing his toe in its soft red boot. He would run over to one wing and look. Then he would bounce over to the other and peer intently into the distance.

And he danced well.

But the scene itself, and that cry — **“Khloptsi! Divchata idut!” — “Boys! The girls are coming!”** — passed from one play to the next.

Wreaths suited my mother, and so did crowns and diadems. Several times she was invited to screen tests at the Dovzhenko Film Studio in Kyiv. But my mother's type wasn't right for the role of Galya — a collective-farm girl earning her labour-days. She looked more like a French or Spanish queen. But what the country needed at the time were films about exemplary workers, collective farmers, and shock workers.

My mother had the wrong looks for that.

No one doubted that I would become an actress. I sang well, I studied mime, and I was good at reciting poetry.

True, I also drew, but somehow that didn't seem to matter.

My mother and my stepfather — also an actor, though a concert-stage actor — were against it.

They even sent me to music school to study piano. That was a good profession — **“you'll never be left without a piece of bread.”**

But that is another story.

Life had a script of its own for me.

And thank God for that!

