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Italian-American filmmaker and photographer John R. Pepper has repeatedly visited St. Petersburg as a photographer until three years ago he directed, at The Vasilievsky Theater, "My Dear Mathilde" by Israel Horovitz. This year the director came to our city at the invitation of the Russian Institute for the Performing Arts. Its on Mokhovaya Street, together with 4th year students of 'Studio' run by Yury Krasovsky, that Pepper presented the play "True West" - the play is written by the famous playwright, co-writer of Antonioni and Wenders, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, Sam Shepard.

On the eve of the premiere our correspondent met with John R. Pepper and asked him about his love for Italy and Russia, the current times and acting.

NT: John, when did your love affair with Russia begin?

JP: My first acquaintance with this country happened in 2012. Curator Marina Dzhigarkhanyan saw my photos in Italy and invited me to participate in a photo exhibition at the "Manège Museum" he said. "I got off the plane and immediately felt as though I was home. It's like love that suddenly overtakes you. And my affair with St. Petersburg began. Later I traveled in many places of the country, more than many Russians; I traveled to Vladivostok, Irkutsk, Novosibirsk, Samara, and more. I've been in some places that my Russian friends have not really heard of such as the Chara Sands desert (my next album will be dedicated the deserts of the world). It's a real desert, like the Sahara, is located north of Chita. This part of Russia is particularly interesting and unique in its own way, because there were 'The Decembrists'. Wherever they went, they brought with them culture and raised the artistic and intellectual level of the society in which they were."

NT: You have worked at the Vasilievsky Theater.

JP: When 3 years ago, my French agent offered me a job in St. Petersburg, I so wanted to work here, that I said: "Given the opportunity to work with Russian actors I will even direct the phone book!"

NT: At that time you literally sang the dithyramb for the actor Dmitry Vorobiev. Who else from the Russian artists do you also value?

JP: Elena Rakhlenko, an actress from St. Petersburg, is amazing, but totally underrated. She is appreciated in the theater where she works but, in my opinion, her potential is bigger. In Moscow there is an actress, Miriam Sekhon, who works at "Practika" theater and "Studio of Theatrical Art". Also, in the same theatre, there is a wonderful actor, Casmir Liske; he is an American who has been living in Moscow for more than 14 years. In my opinion, he is one of the finest actors around at this time.

NT: Does your method of working with actors differ depending on the country in which you are directing, in Europe, USA or Russia?

JP: Yes and no. Actors are actors. It's like making love, I don't know how the other men do it; everyone has his own approach. But there are 3 basic methods, from which one pushes off: Stanislavsky, Grotowski and Commedia dell'Arte. Each of these systems has its own vocabulary. The problem in today's European theater is that training is no longer perceived as seriously as before. But I think that actors must train. I also worked for 2 years as assistant to the great Eduardo De Filippo. The actors, who worked and trained with him, could do anything.

NT: What is important about what you learned with the Italian master of the world theater?

JP: He taught me a sense of timing on stage. How you say a replica, convey the emotions, all this is also about timing. Another thing that I learned from him: acting – you pretend. You should keep it simple. The British actor Laurence Olivier, whom I met on filming "A Little Romance" by George Roy Hill, said the same thing to me.

NT: The famous George Roy Hill probably shared with you the secrets of the Hollywood cinema.

JP: I adore this director. He took a chance and brought me to Hollywood from Paris. He had problems with his right leg, but, despite his wealth, he refused to pay for a driver; I was "youngest guy in the office" I was chosen to drive him from his office to his home everyday. Los Angeles is a huge city, like Moscow, and we had to drive over an hour each way. There were no cell phones then and I had him all to myself. I asked questions and he answered them. Every day I spent with this man was like a master class. He taught me to tell the same story in different ways using film 'montage'. But, most important, George told me: "If you want to be a director, you need to go to work in the theater first because there is no montage. Only in the theater, one can learn how to communicate with actors. You need to do your work upfront because when the curtain rises, they can do anything they want, they are absolutely free - - free from any director's diktats.

NT: You were born and grew up in Rome, 20 years living in Paris, worked in Hollywood, staged the plays all over the world...

JP: Wherever I work - -be it in Russia or in Zanzibar- - it doesn't matter; my system of work remains the same. The only thing that is different is what I eat and drink, and that is very

important to me. I am who I am. I do not live in the USA, because I am not comfortable in that atmosphere. First of all, I'm Italian. In Italy you can be more expressive, like in Russia. Now I live in Sicily, in Palermo. And Sicily it is a different world: an island that has always been under pressure from various countries, and its people have created their own identity through a mixture of cultures.

NT: Have you ever wanted to stage the Russian classics?

JP: Yes! Being here has taught me to better understand the characters of Chekhov and Ostrovsky etc. Of course, I would like to stage something from the Russian classical repertoire, but not in Russia.

NT: What can be interesting for a Russian audience in the American play "True West"?

JP: The idea of staging the play "True West" by Sam Shepard came after my acquaintance with the teacher of the Russian Institute of Performing Arts, an expert on the American theater, Julia Kleiman. This play is realistic, accurate, and naturalistic. Russian theater mostly revolves around symbolism. After the Soviet period, when art was dominated by socialist realism, Russian theater once again became interested in stage convention. Naturalism ceased to be of interest. At the Moscow theater "Practika" they say: "We don't believe in the Fourth wall". When I decided to stage "True West," I spoke with 15 scene designers and no one could come up with a 'realistic' set! But fortunately, I met set designer Eldar Karhalev, who is also tired of the widespread interest with 'symbolism' in the theater.

"True West" is the story about two brothers. One of them is the good guy; the second is the bad one. The first wants to be like the second, and in the end, both change places. The performance of this play should be of interest to a Russian audience because of the important themes of the *past* and *family*.

NT: Do you think were able to teach something to the Petersburg Academy students?

JP: They don't need to learn much as they can do almost everything. But I use a technique that is different from that to which they are accustomed. I'm not just directing the play. I'm trying to give them a different experience: how to prepare for the role, creating the character; I discussed with them some of the technical techniques to use which are different (not better or worse, just different) than the ones they use. I am very pleased that these young actors (some of them are planning to engage their lives directing) listened to me. Two of them admitted that they used my technique in their own work. It appears that I have also performed another aspect of my 'mission' at the Academy. In the play the young actors have to 'stretch' and create American characters - people they had previously only seen in films or TV series. They do it well... But, as I said before, we must remember that most American acting techniques go back or begin in Russian theater.

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