

## Magnus Ljunggren

### Šaljapin in Ålsten

Fedor Šaljapin was a true friend of Sweden.<sup>1</sup> Remarkably, his love of things Swedish was to a high degree concentrated on the little Stockholm suburb of Ålsten. It was there in the 1930s that he encountered the kind of youthful idealism that spoke directly to him as a Russian.

When Šaljapin left Russia for exile in the summer of 1922, he chose, significantly enough, to perform first in Sweden with concerts at the Auditorium and the Music Museum in Stockholm and Lorensberg in Gothenburg (in August-September). The program featured opera pieces and songs.

In May 1930 he returned and sang the title role in *Boris Godunov* at the Stockholm Opera. On this occasion he met with two émigrés based in Sweden—Matvej Šiškin and Vladimir Semičev. The pair invited him to visit the amateur theater in Ålsten that the exiled Menshevik Šiškin had founded the year before to carry out his radical, Stanislavskij-inspired ideas of a theatrical school for the common people. Šaljapin appears to have been captivated by Šiškin's enthusiasm for adult education. Because time was short, it was decided that the visit would take place during his next visit to Stockholm.

Semičev, a journalist and writer, gave an account of the meeting in the newspaper *Ridå* (*The Curtain*) that Šiškin had founded a few months previously to promote his theatrical pedagogy. "I love this calm, magnificent, introverted people," Šaljapin declared. "Vikings!—a wise and robust race. - - - Old, healthy blood flows in its veins... A wonderful people and a wonderful country. I would like nothing better than to have a house in Sweden somewhere near a lake, sit and fish, have a motorboat, rest up here and then set sail for other lands and cities to sing..." In his remarks here we can easily recognize the Scandinavian craze, with its love of the bare cliffs and whispering forests of the North, that swept Russia around the turn of the century.

In April 1931 it was time for Šaljapin's next visit to Stockholm, which lasted for a couple of weeks. In newspaper interviews he explained—once again—that he was prepared to settle down in these latitudes, gladly in the Stockholm area, "in this cold land where the people have

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account of Šaljapin and Sweden see N. I. Gorbunov, *Po skandinavskomu sledu Šaljapina. V poiskach neizvestnogo* (Moscow, 2008).

such warm hearts.”<sup>2</sup> “I love your country,” he exclaimed, “a land of the North like my own,” where “beneath the white skin of the cold countries all the blood” is concentrated “in the deep emotions.”<sup>3</sup>

At the Opera he sang his showpiece roles in *Boris Godunov* and Gounod’s *Faust*, where he played Mephistopheles. He had intended to continue on to Oslo, but the visit to Norway was canceled, and his solid success at the Opera was followed on April 17 by a specially arranged Šaljapin evening at The Auditorium with a very diverse program of opera arias, romances, ballads, and Russian folk songs. Reviews the next day described the event as a complete “triumph.”<sup>4</sup> Šaljapin’s love of Sweden had been returned.

At Den Gyldene Freden (The Golden Peace), a restaurant in the Old Town popular among artists and once a haunt of the famous eighteenth-century poet Carl Michael Bellman, he had an opportunity to listen to Bellman’s songs sung to the lute. According to Semičev, Šaljapin hummed along, immediately picking up the characteristic features of the melody—even more evidence, it seemed, of how at home he was in Sweden.<sup>5</sup>

Now his promised visit to Ålsten finally came to pass, and it too was a great success. After his performance at The Auditorium Šaljapin drove out to Šiškin’s house in the suburbs to get to know the theater troupe and give them a taste of his repertoire. Holding torches, the young students greeted their guest in the yard. Waiting for him inside was a motley gathering of Russian émigrés, theater people, and several representatives of Swedish cooperatives and the Social Democratic Party. Šiškin, who had been active in the prerevolutionary Russian cooperative movement and was building up a contact network among working-class groups, strove to attract broad social support for his pioneering activity.

We are well informed about what happened at Šiškin’s that night, both because Semičev reported on it in *Ridå* and because one eyewitness is in fact still alive. *Ridå* also carried an emotional greeting in Russian from Šaljapin to the theater collective.<sup>6</sup> The evening began with a welcoming speech in English by the leader of the group, which called itself The Birds (Fåglarna), followed by speech choir performances. Šaljapin was enthusiastic, remarking that he would some time like to do *Oedipus Rex* with a speech choir like this one. He then gave a

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<sup>2</sup> *Dagens Nyheter*, 7 April 1931.

<sup>3</sup> *Aftonbladet*, 13 April 1931.

<sup>4</sup> *Stockholms-Tidningen*, 18 April 1931.

<sup>5</sup> V. Semičev, “Samvaro med Sjaljapin,” *Ridå* 2-3 (1931), p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> “En hälsning från Sjaljapin” (dated April 14), *Ridå* 2-3 (1931), p. 1.

spontaneous speech to the young actors in which he talked about his own first halting steps on the stage. He urged these “Birds” to have faith in their abilities, stressing that artists of limited means often manage better than the well established because their ambitions and expressive drive are so strong and not at all sated.<sup>7</sup> He had said something similar in his greeting in *Ridå*, where he noted that it was “hardship” early in his career that had generated “hope and a fiery imagination.” It was this privation that had “built castles.”<sup>8</sup>

After this the young people got their chance. A balalaika group of five children led by Vladimir Semičev’s younger brother Boris accompanied Šaljapin when he sang “Sten’ka Razin.” They had been practicing “Dva razbojnika,” but since the key was unsuitable for Šaljapin they exchanged it for the other song. Inga Tobiasson, née Olsson, still has vivid memories of the evening. At the time she was 10 years old, today she is 96. Šaljapin went on to sing other pieces without the balalaikas, including “Blocha” and “Ėj uchnem,” the song of the Volga boatmen.

Subsequently the balalaika group grew to become a children’s theater ensemble that worked with drama, music and dance. Like The Birds, The [Pine] Cones (“Shishki”, as they called themselves after Šiškin’s name) performed on various stages in Stockholm and also toured around Sweden. Both The Birds and The Cones often presented Russian pieces, the older students doing such things as Čechov’s one-act plays and the younger ones performing Dargomyžskij’s operatic version of Puškin’s dramatic poem *Rusalka*. For Šiškin it went without saying that he would work with children as much as he did with adults. Play and pleasure were central ingredients in his pedagogy. Already Stanislavskij had highlighted the child at play as a model for the adult actor.

The event lasted long into the wee hours. Šaljapin improvised his own continuation of one of the plays performed by The Birds. He drew a caricature of himself on a cellar wall that is still there today, signed “Šaljapin visited Ålsten 19 17/4 31.” He also helped sculptoress Signe Ehrenborgh-Lorichs to model his plaster life mask, which has also been preserved. He taught The Birds to sing “Ėj uchnem” and executed a Russian peasant dance for them. As he was fond of doing, he told humorous anecdotes based on events in his life. It was already light out when he returned to his hotel in downtown Stockholm.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Samvaro med Sjaljapin,” p. 12. See also Gorbunov, *Po skandinavskomu sledu...* Chapter XXI, “Elka Šaljapina,” pp. 475-509.

<sup>8</sup> “En hälsning från Sjaljapin,” op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> “Samvaro med Sjaljapin,” p. 12.

A lot can be said about Šaljapin's self-portraits. He was in fact very skilled at swiftly and accurately capturing his face with just a few quick strokes of the pen. Besides the portrait on the wall in Ålsten his prolific production from his first three visits to Stockholm included no fewer than seven caricatures from various angles published in Swedish dailies. A couple of these are quite similar to the wall drawing.<sup>10</sup>

It almost seems as though Šaljapin drew self-portraits as a way to lighten up burdensome interviews. On one occasion in 1930 *Stockholm-Tidningen's* Russian-speaking reporter Bengt Idestam-Almquist found him a bit out of sorts during their meeting at the Grand Hotel in Stockholm. He seemed distracted and worried and was busy doodling something on a piece of paper that turned out to be yet another self-portrait. Eventually he loosened up and suddenly blurted out his artistic credo, declaring that modernity in art was in fact alien to him. He had not found a single modern work worth including in his own repertoire. The opera must aim for the skies, for "art comes from God." If it doesn't live up to its lofty mission it deserves to "die"—and here, according to his interviewer, he used a synonym that was "seven times more vulgar" than the original Russian verb. It's not easy for art in the modern milieu, he declared. The new conveniences such as "streetcars, automobiles and other things are admittedly good for the body, but they diminish the soul."<sup>11</sup>

In January 1933 Šiškin's studio had its ceremonial opening. The mayor of Stockholm gave a speech. Also present were a number of Social Democratic notables, several theater directors, actors, authors, and critics. The Birds performed Gor'kij's *Pesnja o Sokole*, and Boris Semičev conducted the balalaika orchestra. Šaljapin sent an ecstatic letter in German addressed to "my worker friends" in which he remembered the torches that greeted him and spoke of the "holy flame" these young people had lit. He remarked on the happiness their project gave him and expressed his regret that he could not attend the inaugural ceremony.<sup>12</sup>

Later that year Šiškin founded the National Amateur Theater Association (Amatörteaterns Riksförbund, which still exists today), and the Swedish "people's theater" was born. There already existed extensive cooperation among educational associations, temperance

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<sup>10</sup> See also Gorbunov's discussion of the self-portraits in *Po skandinavskomu sledu...*, Chapter VI ("Pravda, ja ljubil ešče risovat"), pp. 113-30. One or more of them may have been done earlier.

<sup>11</sup> *Stockholms-Tidningen*, 9 May 1930.

<sup>12</sup> *Ridä* 1 (1933), p. 6.

organizations, and the Tenants Association (Hyresgästföreningen), whose theatrical group, The Winds (Vindarna), was also led by Šiškin.

Late in the fall of 1935 Šaljapin returned to the Stockholm Opera, where he sang opposite the young Jussi Björling in *Knjaz' Igor'* and *Faust*. On November 30 he made another late evening visit to Ålsten, this time of a more official nature. He was once again greeted with torches. There was standing room only in the 90-seat studio auditorium. Notables were present now as well, including Swedish Foreign Minister Rickard Sandler in the first row. The program featured excerpts from Russian plays staged by the Birds, *Rusalka* by the Cones, and performances by the balalaikas.

Šaljapin sang and accompanied himself on the piano. He spoke warmly of the studio as “the best place in the world” and praised “the young hearts that burned” in his admirable friend Šiškin’s circle, “prepared to sacrifice everything for the future of art.” He declared he was deeply moved by not least the balalaika group’s Russian folk songs. He concluded by exclaiming “Long live beautiful Sweden, long live the Swedish people. I want with all my heart to be here with you.”<sup>13</sup> Thus for Šaljapin Sweden seems always to have been linked to fire and the heart.

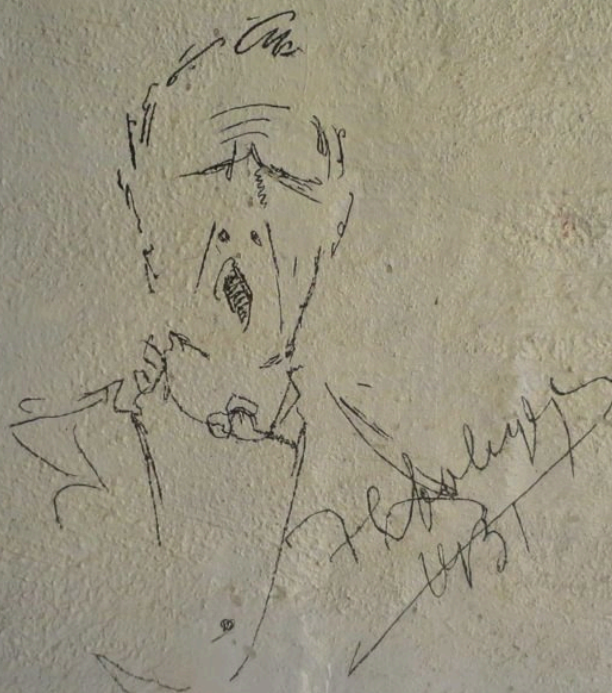
At this point Šaljapin had only two and a half years left to live. Šiškin made it all the way to 1962, but he did not get on quite as well as before in the Sweden of the 1940s and 1950s. He does, of course, have his rightful place in the early history of the Swedish amateur theater. So, to some degree, does Šaljapin.

Translated by Charles Rogle

Photo: Carl-Gustaf Burén

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<sup>13</sup> *Ridå* 1, 1936, pp. 5-6.



Chaliapin gästade Årten

1931