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Compte rendu/Review

AUTANT-MATHIEU, MARIE-CHRISTINE, and MEERZON, YANA. eds. (2017). ***The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov.*** Abingdon & New York : Routledge. Illustrations. Tables. Chronology. Index. v-xxi, 431 pp.

This paperback edition of a book first published in 2015 and arising from an international conference held in Paris in 2007, consists of four sections and twenty-five essays devoted to the work of Michael Chekhov, the actor, director and theorist – nephew of the famous dramatist and short story writer, Anton Chekhov.

When Michael Chekhov died of heart-related problems in Hollywood at the age of 64 on 30th September 1955, he had been absent from his Russian homeland for twenty-seven years during which time he had lived and worked as actor, director and teacher in Germany, France, Latvia, Lithuania, England and the U.S.A.

Prior to his departure in 1928 from what was then the Soviet Union, Chekhov's career as an actor had begun at the Moscow Art Theatre, where he was influenced by the teaching of Stanislavsky, who directed him in productions of *Twelfth Night* and *The Government Inspector* [as Malvolio and Khlestakov]. Having joined the Art Theatre's First Studio, Chekhov came under the tutelage of Yevgeny Vakhtangov, in some of whose productions he acted, before establishing his own studio and then assuming control of the Second Moscow Art Theatre [MAT2 as the First Studio came to be known]. Here, he acted and directed between 1922 and 1928, performing a series of important roles, the most famous of which was as Hamlet.

Although heavily influenced by both Stanislavsky and Vakhtangov,

it was his friendship with the novelist Andrei Bely, whose *Petersburg* (Peterburg) he had dramatised and performed in at MAT2, that exercised the greatest influence on Chekhov's subsequent career. Bely's anthroposophical views, which Chekhov came to share, had been gleaned from the writings of Rudolf Steiner, whose lectures at Dornach Bely had attended and whose acting theories were based on the psycho-physical basis of eurythmy, the notion of 'cosmic radiation', and the attainment of a 'Higher Self'. This essentially religious, even mystical, approach to the art of theatre and its messianic goal of a Theatre of the Future, which Chekhov also espoused, proved unacceptable to a Soviet society, the philosophical basis of which was dialectical materialism and whose artistic credo, formulated in the 1930s, was a prescriptive socialist realism. Chekhov, encountering opposition both from within his own theatre and from external political sources, felt he had no option but to continue his work abroad. This led to permanent exile from the country of his birth where, under Stalin, he became a 'non-person' eliminated from the historical record until his rehabilitation, first during 'the thaw' in East-West relations and subsequently during the post-Soviet period.

The history of early modern, post-medieval theatre in Western Europe had essentially been of a secular nature unlike, for example, the theatre of Ancient Greece where religious mythology and theatre were closely linked and, in common with the theatre forms of Asia and the Far East, the means of performance were highly stylised. The dominant performative mode in post-Renaissance European theatre was largely realistic and text-based, culminating in true-to-life naturalism in the 19th century.

Towards the end of the 19th century, dissatisfaction with theatrical naturalism and its reductionist perspectives, allied with a rejection of neo-Darwinian versions of human evolution and Marxist theories of historical materialism, as well as Benthamite utilitarianism and the industrial commodification of everyday life led, in the arts, to the embrace of spiritual alternatives to a world increasingly seen to be dominated by mechanical production and scientific theories of cause and effect.

Another sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo, especially as this affected the theatre, was the feeling of inferiority felt by serious practitioners such as Stanislavsky, whenever the art of theatrical performance was compared with the sister arts of ballet or music. The art of the actor was seen to be essentially amateurish, with no basis in practical training of a kind which characterised that of the dancer or musician. Therefore, Stanislavsky and others concerned with theatre as an art form, rather than as a pastime for dilettantes, sought to develop means whereby the actor could train his or her instrument (the human body) in ways comparable to the training of a ballet dancer or a concert pianist.

Simultaneously, artistic reactions against a dominant realism, which

gave rise to 20th century Modernism, also included a backward glance to medievalism and amplified definitions of a realism which incorporated the realms of myth and the supernatural. The Symbolist Movement in Russia and elsewhere represented a reaction against materialist versions of the world proposed by the likes of the Russian philosopher Nikolai Chernyshevsky, or Germany's Karl Marx. A counter-movement to this tendency led by, among others, Vladimir Solovyov in Russia and W.B. Yeats in Western Europe, involved a belief in the occult and the existence of a spiritual world beyond the one immediately apprehensible to the senses. At the turn of the twentieth-century it is unsurprising that, just as much as it was by writers, painters and musicians, this was also felt to be the case by theatre practitioners.

Stanislavsky's attempts as both actor, director and theorist, to transform the theatre of his day, and the art of the actor, from routine imitation of inert and conventional forms into something imbued with an energy comparable to a Lamarckian 'life force', had distinct other-worldly overtones, as did the idea of converting the theatre into something resembling a temple of the arts. For this to happen, the actor needed to work on both the physical apparatus of the body and the psychic apparatus of the mind and imagination, in addition to learning how to draw on emotional wellsprings of feeling. The theory Stanislavsky developed, which became known as his 'system', suggested the practical means of achieving a level of stage performance which, in terms of artistry, could bear comparison with that of the trained ballet dancer or musical executant. However, a problem lay, less in the means whereby the physical aspects of performance – movement, gesture and vocal delivery – could be made subject to objective laws and achievable outcomes, but rather in the training of those aspects of a human being which are less susceptible to scientific analysis, such as the emotions, the human psyche or spirit, the imagination or soul, and where the unresolved problem of the mind/body dichotomy loomed large. This could never be resolved by simply proposing the existence of a spiritual realm attainable through a process grounded in the world of physical action and the complex web of human thought and feeling.

Although a disciple of Stanislavsky, in an important sense Michael Chekhov's espousal of Steiner's theories led him to embrace a theatrical code of esoteric proportions, resulting in the substitution of theatre for life itself, in the belief that a capitalised Theatre of the Future would have socially transformative powers leading to both the theatricalisation and spiritualisation of social life in general. Stanislavsky may be said to have been among the first to have identified the theatre as a source of individual and social renewal – one which was virtually independent of economic and political realities. He might also be described as among the first of a series of theatrical "gurus" – charismatic leaders who surrounded themselves with a group of disciples within the closed ambiance of a studio or laboratory where their devotees sought to practice what

they preached, the results of their efforts often giving rise to published manifestos. A notable exception to this trend is the example of Bertolt Brecht who, as well as being a theorist congenitally opposed to everything represented by Stanislavsky, was an important dramatist as well. In the present volume, Brecht barely merits a mention, in spite of the fact that his theory of the "gestus" and Chekhov's notion of the Psychological Gesture would seem to be complementary concepts meriting comparative discussion. However, unlike the politically committed Brecht, Michael Chekhov may be described as the archetypal "guru" in the sense implied above, this Companion having been assembled, for the most part, by those who consider themselves disciples and devotees who seek to perpetuate Michael Chekhov's legacy in the 21st century.

The quality of the essays in this handsome edition varies considerably – from the hyperbolically enthusiastic, the opaque, the not-so-well written (or poorly-translated), and the febrile; to the informative, the intellectually substantial and the rationally objective. Extracts from the editors' introduction bear witness to some of the difficulties inherent in attempting to convey the essence of Chekhov's artistic theories. References to his, "…tuning into [sic] suprasensory forces […] using one's arms and legs as conduits for the cosmic forces that take possession of the 'I' and enlarge it" (8-9) as aspects of a system based on what Chekhov called the 'Four Brothers' of "feeling, ease, form, beauty and the whole", involving exercises in concentration and meditation of an occult nature which enable one to "…see luminous images and hear the inaudible" (9), run the danger of appearing either eccentric or bathetic. However, one has only to read what Karel Capek had to say about Chekhov's performance as Strindberg's Erik XIV (3) or Andrei Bely's description of Chekhov as Hamlet (319), or Stark Young's review of his production of *Twelfth Night*, or Nikolai Remisoff's discussion of his American production of *The Government Inspector* (the last two both missing from this volume) to realise that we are dealing with a remarkable and extraordinary individual in the history of twentieth-century theatre.

Part One looks at his work as director, collaborator [with Georgette Boner, a creative and financial supporter], anthroposophist, studio teacher and theorist. Throughout his career in the West, Chekhov tended to return, time and again, to work achieved as director and actor during the Soviet period of his life. For this reason, works such as *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Government Inspector* reappear in almost every country in which he briefly settled, either as staged productions or in studio work, as do dramatised versions of Dickens' *The Cricket on the Hearth* and of short stories by his uncle Anton. Original work consisted mainly of a dramatised version of Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, staged in New York, a performance as Ivan in Aleksei Tolstoy's historical drama *The Death of Ivan the Terrible*, and a dramatised fairy tale, *The Castle Awakening*. Actual dramatic texts seem to have served Chekhov as little more than pretexts for theoretical experimentation in furtherance of

his philosophical ideas. So, for example, *Hamlet* is seen "…as a type of spiritual theatre, the meaning of which lies outside the text" (24). This was the main reason why Sean O'Casey, when approached by Chekhov to become writer in residence at Dartington Hall, turned down the invitation on the perceived grounds of Chekhov's apparent lack of concern for the integrity of dramatic texts.

Steiner's influence on Chekhov lay in his formulation of the concept of *Sprachgestaltung* or *Ursprache*, where the word is seen "…as a spiritual dimension of the human being" (70) and the actor invokes an objective world of images that can be "… recalled from the sub-conscious through the exercise of concentration or meditation which will '…free imagination from the intellect and reasoning'" (*ibid.*). This formulation, might also be said to recall the *zaumnyi iazyk* (transrational language) of Velimir Khlebnikov, a Russian contemporary of Chekhov's. Steiner's interest in Eastern mysticism also coincided with Chekhov's familiarity with yoga, the techniques of which he had learned during his years with Stanislavsky, and later "…practised meditation, explor[ing] the interior movement of minerals and vegetation…' [sic] (87).

The book is generally keen to make distinctions between the Stanislavsky system and that of Chekhov, in so far as "…the actor's performance should [not] be conditioned by personal, emotional affective memories [but by] objective, creative, fantastic, impersonal, or supra-personal experiences…" (48) with the result that, "The artist is mediator, a[n] instrument of God, reflecting the cosmic truth in a mystical sacrament of incarnation" (50). Other important Chekhovian concepts mentioned are "rhythm" and "atmosphere", the latter of which "…should be composed of a studied mix of rhythms and radiance" (59). [This last term refers to the radiation of feeling between performers on stage and between performers and audience]. The so-called Psychological Gesture (or PG) is described as a means towards the development of a 'Higher Self' and "…bear[s] a resemblance to archetypes in the creation of a role" (99). "Striking [a] pose associated with the gesture provides perceptual information in the form of proprioception [which] refers to the awareness of the physical relationship between different parts of the body" (102). Examples cited are the positions adopted for 'brooding' and 'domination'. Chekhov was very struck by Meyerhold's work during the 1920s, and was even invited to work with him during the 1930s – something which proved impossible. However, the connection between Chekhov's Psychological Gesture and Meyerhold's theory of biomechanics is treated at length in Part 2 (219-234).

The discussion of the ways and means by which an actor 'radiates' on stage and which involve the concepts of *prana* (thought streaming from the head) and *feeling* (emotion streaming from the solar plexus), seems irresistibly reminiscent of ideas Chekhov shared unconsciously with D. H. Lawrence, especially as expressed in the latter's *Fantasia of*

the Unconscious (1923). Interestingly, Lawrence was similarly in self-imposed exile from his homeland, whose work was banned, or remained comparatively unread until his 'rehabilitation'. Chekhov describes how, when performing the death of Ivan the Terrible, "…I did in actual fact radiate out into the audience both the slowing down of time and its complete standstill" (133), a claim which may, or may not, be taken with a pinch of salt.

Part 2 focuses on Chekhov's encounters with Shakespeare, his acting abilities, his relations with Vakhtangov, his Soviet legacy, his time spent in England, connections between biomechanics and the psychological gesture, and comparisons with Eugenio Barba's anthropological theatre. Chekhov's Shakespearean performances tend to highlight a preoccupation in his choice of repertoire with works where a conflict between what he sees as 'good' and 'evil' tends to be foregrounded. This was as true of his view of *King Lear* as it was of *Hamlet*, both of which are seen to involve modes of transcendence through either spiritual suffering or self-denying love. As well as being a fine tragic actor, one is also made aware of what a great comic actor and master of 'the grotesque' Chekhov was. For this reason, a comparison with the acting styles of Chaplin and Keaton might have been appropriate, Chekhov having been known in his homeland as 'the Russian Chaplin' (317). Something of the bathos inherent in inadequate performance description is epitomised here by the characterisation of Chekhov's Khlestakov, which is likened to "… a pod with peas inside […] and these peas – one by one – jumped out of him", while his [erotic] *retroussé* nose "pointed up to the sky, as if in permanent erection…" (171). We also gather that Chekhov "…trained himself to enter the stage 'wearing' a different body, woven out of pure psyche, or soul" (177) and, in furtherance of the horticultural imagery, we are given to understand that, "Revealing one's 'good and bad seeds' on stage in front of a room full of people, is not an easy task…" (189), a sentiment with which it is difficult to disagree…

The section on Chekhov's Soviet legacy provides an opportunity for some gratuitous anti-Soviet sniping as well as a chance to celebrate the work of the actress Maria Knebel in preserving Chekhov's legacy. The essay on his time in England actually says very little about Dartington Hall and concentrates, instead, on why Michel Saint-Denis' London-based activities tended to attract more attention that those of Chekhov in the Devonshire countryside. Here, an apparent inability to access sources in Russian highlights discrepancies throughout the volume between those who have read original material, or accessed sources in Russian, as opposed to others who have had to rely on what has been made available in translation only. The piece on comparisons between the Psychological Gesture and biomechanics is the most intellectually wide-ranging, in contriving to translate an intake of breath (the psychological gesture) and the (biomechanical) action of mounting a "horse" into the

surprisingly contiguous realms of history, psychology and politics. The piece on Chekhov and Barba includes the suggestion that an actor can "…go beyond the playwright or the play" (245) a concept which might even have had Shakespeare raising an eyebrow, as well he might over notions of "somatic communication" (the "how") and "semantic communication" (the "what") [246].

Part 3 concerns itself with Chekhov's heritage, and includes essays on his relationship with the visual arts, with Francois Delsarte's movement theory, with 'Eastern' theatre practice, with Yinyang Wuxing cosmology, and with his appearances in both German and Hollywood cinema. Chekhov's attempt "…to create an international language based on movements, gestures, rhythms and sounds" (253), are also seen to compare with experiments in synaesthesia by Vasily Kandinsky, an artist who also attended Steiner's lectures and who "…expressed his appreciation for Helena Blavatsky, a co-founder of the Theosophical Society…" (256). Chekhov's affinity with Goethe's romantic sensibility is also mentioned, in which connection it is worth citing the latter's observation that it was in her abnormalities that nature reveals her secrets. The Delsarte essay contains a genuinely helpful and informative discussion of the connections between Chekhov, Delsarte and Emile Jaques-Dalcroze in their collective artistic search for the "eternal type" and where, "Artistic expression reveals the archetypal life, soul, and mind of human beings" (269). Chekhov's friendship with Uday Shankar at Dartington is dealt with in a separate essay that invokes some tenuous connections between Chekhov's ideas and Indian *kathakali* dance. It also quotes Shankar as having said of Chekhov : "He would tell his students to concentrate on a door so as to open it, and I was told by some of them that they were able to do so; or […] move a piano – by psychic force alone!" (285). Such are the powers of persuasion…

The influence of Far Eastern theatre and suggested links between Chekhov, Chinese and Japanese theatre, the movement training system of Zhi Neng Qigong, and Yinyang Wuxing cosmology are extensively, if rather esoterically, explored. It is certainly true that Russian theatre was influenced by Japanese *Noh* drama at the turn of the 20th century, although whether these further comparisons are relevant remains a moot point. The essays on Chekhov's film appearances are hampered by the fact that the films are either very rare, of poor quality, or are no longer extant. Chekhov's most substantial performances were as the psychiatrist in Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* and as the clown, Polikoff, in Ben Hecht's *The Specter of the Rose* (based on the Diagilev ballet). In the case of *Spellbound*, a frame-by-frame analysis would have yielded more valuable results than the rather generalised descriptions which characterise this evaluation of Chekhov's merits as a film actor. It is, however clear that, despite his distaste for Hollywood, he took film acting very seriously and many of his Hollywood students were established film actors.

The final section on Chekhov's theatre system and pedagogy, as seen in today's world, covers his Lithuanian period, actor training, the practical application of his theories in production and, finally, his legacy. Ironically, a section which should have been among the most cogent, dealing as it does with the practical application of Chekhov's theories, proves to be the most disappointing, as well as the most personal in tone. Chekhov's Baltic period is dealt with by a Lithuanian, Gytis Padegimas, whose theatre training took place in Moscow during Soviet times and whose appreciation of the then 'forbidden' Chekhov helped him creatively to reconfigure the content of what he was being taught – something which has continued to influence his own teaching. However, he has little to say about Chekhov's actual activities in Lithuania and any general legacy he may have imparted. Lionel Walsh's experience of applying Chekhov's method in actor training does not inspire confidence when examples such as the following are on offer: "For instance, one might embrace with a quality [sic] of greed [presumably 'avarice' is meant] for the character Volponi [sic]…" (367). Even more dispiriting is Cynthia Ashperger's account of her production of Philip Ridley's play *Tender Napalm*, deploying methods based on a four-hour recording made by Chekhov himself during which, "The spirit and spiritual is mentioned twenty-two times in a period of eight minutes…" (377). As performed by a group calling itself the "Phantasmagoria Collective", actors were asked to "embody" two or three words at once, such as "hateful sexy tango", while a "castration fantasy", conveyed in explicit language, would seem to have constituted the show's creative nadir. Far more interesting is Joanna Merlin's mature account of 40 years' teaching the means and methods of his system, acquired at the feet of Chekhov himself and where "…the body's intelligence [is] a source of creativity […] beyond the limited capacity of the brain" (390). Once again, this seems reminiscent of D.H. Lawrence's observation that, to be emotionally educated was as rare as the phoenix. A leading light of the Michael Chekhov Association, founded in 1999, Merlin was at the forefront in perpetuating his legacy, the present Companion being, at its best, a fitting tribute to her work in "…giving *visceral* life to the image and the gesture" (396) of a remarkable and unique man of the theatre.

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