The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov. Edited by Marie-Christine Autant Mathieu and Yana Meerzon. New York: Routledge, 2015. 434 pp.

Reviewed by Conrad Alexandrowicz

As I write this, I'm in the middle of rehearsals for Giraudoux's *The Madwoman of Chaillot* at the University of Victoria's Department of Theatre, in which I'm employing various key tools developed by Michael Chekhov over the course of his career as an actor, director, and visionary pedagogue. They include the Imaginary Body, Archetypal and Psychological Gestures, Atmospheres, and Qualities of Movement. It has been fascinating to read this wide-ranging and very thorough collection of essays by a host of renowned Chekhov scholars and practitioners in Europe, the UK, and the US while engaged in the process of introducing a cast of twenty young actors to what is for them an entirely new set of ideas and practices about acting and the theatre.

My own exposure to Chekhov's methods occurred in the summer of 2014 when I participated in the National Michael Chekhov Association's (NMCA) annual Summer Training Intensive, held at the University of Southern Maine. Instructors and actors Lisa Dalton and Wil Kilroy, passionate, devoted and articulate adherents of Chekhov's work, were mentored by the late Mala Powers, whose name appears frequently in this book; while working as an actor in Hollywood, she was taught and coached by the Russian master. I was struck by many things about the work: that it proceeds from the assumption that an actor is an artist, not merely a puppet; by its balance of methods that reveal meaning in both text and the body; and by its use of specific, sensible, and accessible tools in the creation of characters. Chekhov's method relies on specific techniques to stimulate actors' imaginations via the medium of the body, rather than emotional substitutions derived from personal history. Together his methods define the word "psychophysical" in the realm of acting.

In their introduction, hardworking editors Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu and Yana Meerzon claim that "Chekhov's ideas are well-known and widely taught today" (1). This is a relative and debatable point: most of my students had never heard of him, and I suggest that familiarity with his body of work is specific to geographical location or institutional disposition. In the biographical information on the NMCA website Dalton and Kilroy describe his "unique contribution to acting [as] one of the best-kept secrets of the theatrical world" (http://www.chekhov.net/chekhovintro.html). Why is this the case?

Born in 1891 and the nephew of Anton Chekhov, Michael Chekhov became one of Konstantin Stanislavsky's most brilliant pupils and is widely considered to be the finest actor Russia has ever produced. Already deeply in trouble with the authorities due to his innovative directing and teaching methods, he left the Soviet Union in 1928, never to return, and embarked on a peripatetic journey as an artistic exile, which took him to Germany, Austria, Latvia, Lithuania, France, the famed Dartington Hall in England, New York City, and finally Hollywood, where he appeared in a number of films and was nominated for an Academy Award for his work in Hitchcock's *Spellbound*. He was lucky to escape as he did, given that his fellow theatre visionaries in Soviet Russia fared much worse: Stanislavsky spent his last years under virtual house arrest, while Vsevelod Meyerhold was tortured and murdered by Stalin's police in 1940. One of the gripping things about this volume is the picture it paints of the astonishing ferment in the arts and letters in Russia in the first decades of the last century, the life of which was, tragically, squeezed to death by the Soviet regime. As Maria Ignatieva

writes, the "humanistic traditions of Silver Age Russian culture, with its multiplicity of viewpoints and scientific and artistic search for the meaning of human life, was gradually crushed by Stalinist officialdom, which would be firmly established by the mid-thirties" (173).

One imagines that Chekhov would be one of theatre's "best-kept secrets" if he had *not* left the Soviet Union, given the efficacy, comprehensiveness, and versatility of his method, equally applicable to stage and screen acting. But he remains a secondary figure by comparison with his much more famous mentor and teacher, despite the fact that his work was transported whole, as it were, due to his exile, unlike that of Stanislavsky, which came to the West in bits and pieces. Moreover, it was not subjected to the vicissitudes of translation because Chekhov—apparently much to his discomfort (according to Autant-Mathieu, writing on page 88 of this volume)—was forced to work and teach in English when he came to Dartington Hall and thereafter to the US, whereas Stanislavsky's writings were subjected to what is now regarded as a very problematic process of translation. The devoted following Chekhov's work has acquired over many decades has failed to dislodge the American "Method" as the hegemonic force in actor training in North America. As Ann Bogart and Tina Landau observe in *The Viewpoints Book*, "our misunderstanding, misappropriation and miniaturization of the Stanislavsky system remains the bible for most practitioners. Like the air we breathe, we are rarely aware of its dominance and omnipresence" (Bogart and Landau 2005, 16).

Scholar Sharon Marie Carnicke has undertaken crucially important work on this topic, given the extent of the problem to which Bogart and Landau allude, exposing the complex and troubled history of Stanislavsky's work and its legacy. She notes that by the time of the Moscow Art Theatre's tours to New York in 1923 and 1924, the Soviet regime had already determined that realism was the only theatrical genre that could serve the goals of the revolution, and that in their enthusiastic response to the work "Americans became unwittingly and ironically complicit in developing his Soviet image" (Carnicke 2010, 16). In this collection, Carnicke has contributed an essay about how the remarkable Russian actor and teacher Mariya Knebel kept Chekhov's work alive in the deep freeze of Soviet cultural policy. She notes that "before emigrating, Michael Chekhov had already become persona non grata on two counts: his broadly imaginative approach to acting, which stretched the bounds of realism, and his deep belief in anthroposophy, the spiritual tenets of Rudolf Steiner" (191). And as Monica Cristini writes earlier in the volume, "Steiner was not only a philosopher, but also a playwright, director, teacher of actors, and, last but not least, founder of eurythmy, a new and original kind of *spiritual dance*" (70, italics in original), in which both musical pitches and those of the human voice were keyed to specific movements of the body. Indeed, the figure of Steiner is evoked all through the collection, a testament to the importance of his metaphysical ideas to Chekhov, and their animation in every component of his method.

The book is divided into four sections and considers Chekhov's work from every conceivable perspective: chronological development, historical context, collaborations and affinities, interdisciplinary links and applications, and contemporary usages. In the first part, "Michael Chekhov in Context: Theory, Practice, Pedagogy," Andrei Kirillov writes astutely and convincingly about what is perhaps the most significant departure Chekhov made from Stanislavsky's System: his rejection of "affective memory" as the principal device in the actor's toolbox in favour of his imagination and his physicality. According to Kirilov, Chekhov rejected "the idea that the actor's performance should be conditioned by personal, emotional, affective memories, since they always belong to the sphere of the ego. Declaring such . . . experiences derived from life to be unsuitable on stage, he instead favours objective, creative, fantastic, impersonal, or suprapersonal experiences, and

draws a strict line between these two kinds of experiencing" (48). Kirillov notes the implicit contradiction in the Stanislavsky System, which requires that the actor reproduce lived experience in public: "The very nature of theatre contradicts the nature of natural experience" (44). And, as Monica Cristini observes, this can be traced back to Steiner, who believed that "the life of the actor should remain separated from the life of the character, because the latter lives in a world that does not belong to real life but to the artistic reality on stage" (76). Underlining this idea, Autuant-Mathieu notes that Steiner's anthroposophy was Chekhov's "secret guide, gradually edging out . . . Stanislavsky" (87).

Perhaps the most renowned of Chekhov's inventions is the Psychological Gesture (PG), which is neatly summed up by John Lutterbie as "a powerful tool in the development of action and character . . . [c]ombining the force of physical movement with the imaging of psychological states" (96). Actors devise movement phrases, drawing from Chekhov's list of Archetypal Gestures—Push, Pull, Lift, Smash, Gather, Throw, Tear, Drag, Penetrate, and Reach—in addition to other elements, that emblematize their characters, the meaning of a scene, or the arc of an entire play. Lutterbie argues for Chekhov's prescience in this area: "Chekhov's understanding in practical terms of the visceral connection between movement, emotion and cognition predates what neuroscientists are coming to accept only now: the brain cannot be divorced from the body, and reason and emotion are inseparable" (102). Put that in your pipes and smoke it, "Method acting" gurus!

Gytis Padegimas writes movingly of his time as a theatre student in Soviet Moscow in the 1970s and being fed a steady diet of the state-approved version of the Stanislavsky System. He came upon an underground, *samizdat* copy, much dog-eared and frayed from passing through so many hands, of Chekhov's *On the Technique of Acting*. He reports being "awestruck" by its contents, which revealed and valorized the human dimensions of spirit, of imagination and creativity in actor training that made the grey reality of Socialist Realism seem utterly inadequate. Chekhov's theories and practical advice encouraged him "to dig deeper into the mysteries of existence as an antidote to the ruling communist doctrine of materialism" (343). Teachers and directors Lionel Walsh and Cynthia Asperger write of their productive use of Chekhov's methods in rehearsing contemporary plays, in Walsh's case Michel Marc Bouchard's *Down Dangerous Passes Road*, and in the case of Asperger, *Tender Napalm*, by Philip Ridley: these approaches seem to have passed the test of time.

Other writers have noted fascinating connections between Chekhov's aesthetic philosophy and certain Eastern discourses: Daniel Mroz explores the affinities between his system and the *Yinyang Wuxing* cosmology of China, while Jerri Daboo explores the profound influence *Kathakali* dancer/actor Uday Shankar had on Chekhov while both were in residence at Dartington Hall. She proposes that it was the representation of archetypes in classical Indian dance that particularly inspired Chekhov, and invokes the example of the grandfather: "If the actor was to only use the memory of his or her real grandfather, then the portrayal will be limited by this memory. However, if the actor were to use the image of the archetypal—the universal, quintessential grandfather—the image would include all the grandfathers in existence" (292).

It is hard to imagine Michael Chekhov, so much a son of Russian culture—and of European sensibility generally—managing to survive in Hollywood, California, and indeed, as Jacqueline Nacache notes at the beginning of her essay, it's no secret that he had very little respect for it (328). But he spent his last twelve years there, and it's fascinating to read about the accommodations that he made—and that were made for *him*—to find some workable middle ground between his vision of the actor and the practices of Hollywood's movie culture. But Chekhov's genius first revealed itself

in his acting, and it seems appropriate that he returned to it in the last years of his life. However, as Nacache points out, it is paradoxical that "thanks to the permanence of film, it is only those roles that interested him the least, created in the restrictive atmosphere of the Hollywood film set, which today give us reliable evidence of his work" (328).

The collection ends, appropriately enough, with Joanna Merlin's account of her participation in Chekhov's acting classes in Los Angeles, beginning in 1949. She recalls how this experience changed her life, inspiring its latter sixty years "with an enduring optimism about the actor's unlimited artistic potential" (389). A well-known actor on stage as well as in films and television, Merlin is the only surviving Chekhov pedagogue who trained with him. She recounts the struggles undertaken by his many students to keep his methods alive over decades in the US and to promote them within the profession when Lee Strasberg's Method was the dominant discourse on both coasts. But she notes the growing interest in psychophysical methods such as Chekhov's: "In the years following Lee Strasberg's death in 1982 there has been a growing openness and hunger for alternative approaches to acting training in the US" (392). She credits various forces for this, including the influence of Grotowski, yoga, *Viewpoints*, and the work of Tadashi Suzuki. There are now numerous Michael Chekhov schools around the world, as well as practitioners in colleges and universities who have adopted his methods.

This collection is a fascinating, provocative, and even moving body of writings about one of the great inventors and visionaries of twentieth-century theatre, and forms a useful addition to the extant literature. It will be a welcome source and support for scholars as well as practitioners and may inspire some of the latter to look more closely into their own pedagogical positions and practices. This extends to theatre-makers as well. As Julia Listengarten notes, "Chekhov's theoretical discoveries and practical applications in theatre foregrounded cross-disciplinary and inter/multi-cultural practices subsequently developed in post-1950s experimental theatre" (264). The reverberations of this are still working themselves out in our own cultural moment, and in the digital age, we continue to test modes of cross-disciplinary and inter/multi-cultural practice, albeit with a changed inflection. And therefore Michael Chekhov still has much to teach us. Speaking from a Canadian perspective, I propose that his vision of the theatre's possibilities deserves much wider currency.

References

Bogart, Ann, and Tina Landau. 2005. *The Viewpoints Book*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.

Carnicke, Sharon Marie. 2010. "Stanislavsky and Politics: Active Analysis and the American Legacy of Soviet Oppression." In *The Politics of American Actor Training*, edited by Ellen Margolis and Lissa Tyler Renaud, 15–30. New York: Routledge.