

Theatre Research in Canada Recherches théâtrales au Canada

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MARIE-CHRISTINE AUTANT-MATHIEU AND YANA MEERZON,
eds. The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov. London:
Routledge, 2015. 433 pp.

Dassia N. Posner

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This collection of essays is a model of writing Indigenous sovereignty in a way that always attends to the complexity of Indigenous life and always commits to an Indigenous future. The inclusion of multiple artists, multiple nations, multiple perspectives, and multiple essay formats speaks to the diversity that is belied by the unitary term “Indigenous.” This diversity also points to the interconnected though distinct relationships that comprise a web of relations. *Performing Indigeneity* displays and creates connections among its contributors and with its readers. It calls readers to care for, to sustain, to carry with them its knowledge. It is good medicine for it demonstrates and “makes community” (Nolan 2).

Work Cited

Nolan, Yvette. *Medicine Shows: Indigenous Performance Culture*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2015.

MARIE-CHRISTINE AUTANT-MATHIEU AND YANA MEERZON, eds.

The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov.

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DASSIA N. POSNER

In the words of editors Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu and Yana Meerzon, *The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov* is “an astonishingly comprehensive assessment of [Chekhov’s] life, work, and legacy.” Indeed, this beautifully conceived, expertly written work brilliantly illuminates the significance and development of Chekhov’s art and innovations. Not only is the book edited by two of the world’s leading Chekhov experts, it brings together many of today’s leading voices in Russian theatre and acting pedagogy, focusing on “theatre scholars and practitioners from countries where Chekhov lived and taught” (Russia, Germany, France, Lithuania, the UK, and the US) and “where Chekhov’s ideas are well known and taught today” (Finland, Italy, and Canada) (1).

The twenty-five chapter collection takes a multi-perspectival approach: it aims “to present a comprehensive picture of the historical, theatrical, and cultural contexts” (2) of Chekhov’s acting system and legacy in order to more fully reveal the depth and sophistication of his innovations. The book ably demonstrates the relevance of his teachings and creative work to theatrical experimentation that extends beyond psychological realism. Chekhov, after all, deals in those aspects of theatre that are intangible yet essential: atmosphere, the imagination, energy, the soul. Chekhov’s psychophysical system both replenishes and draws from the actor’s spiritual and imaginative wellspring; in the words of the editors, it “free[s] the mind and body, opening [the actor] up to experiment and the joy of creativity” (11).

The book is thoughtfully arranged in four sections. The first, “Michael Chekhov in context: theory, practice, pedagogy,” illuminates Chekhov’s central influences and ideas, ranging from his First Studio origins to anthroposophy to the psychological gesture. The second, “Michael Chekhov on stage: collaborations and encounters” features several chapters that

assess Chekhov's work alongside collaborators, inspirations, and inheritors. Section three, "Michael Chekhov's heritage and interdisciplinary performative practices," examines Chekhov's innovations in relation to visual art, movement, dance, and film across Europe, Asia, and the US. The book's final section, "Michael Chekhov's theatre system and acting pedagogy today," features essays on practice and pedagogy that capture the electric joy of freeing the fantasy.

Several chapters warrant specific mention. For this reader, the book's most cogent and illuminating essays were those by Yana Meerzon on Chekhov's various definitions of the spectator in the creative process, and by Sharon Marie Carnicke on Maria Knebel's influential revitalization of Chekhov's interrupted Soviet legacy. Expertly researched and written essays by Liisa Byckling, Maria Ignatieva, and Laurence Senelick are rewarding to read as a cluster, as they provide creative biographies of Chekhov via different aspects of his work: his directing, his approach to acting as play, and his recurrent engagement with Shakespeare.

In Monica Cristini's words, "Chekhov's work on concentration, dream, and fantasy grew out of the main anthroposophical concept of a (hidden) spiritual dimension in man" (70); that this idea is also found in Russian symbolism and neo-romanticism more broadly reinforces the value of viewing Chekhov's work in the context of the theatre culture that shaped him. Essays that take on this task from a variety of perspectives include Autant-Mathieu's essay on Chekhov and "the cult of the studio," Andrei Malaev-Babel's exploration of the "creative dialogue" between Chekhov and Yevgeny Vakhtangov, Rose Whyman's investigation of the influence of Delsarte on Chekhov's psychophysical work, and Julia Listengarten's illumination of futurist, expressionist, and phantasmagorical traits in Chekhov via parallels with Malevich and Russian painting. Chapters by Carnicke and Crista Mittelsteiner center on women, Maria Knebel and Georgette Boner, who were central to the development and dissemination of Chekhov's work. Additional essays that analyze Chekhov in relation to innovators and forms ranging from Eugenio Barba to *kathakali* reveal mutually enriching resonances even when direct influence is not the point.

As Oksana Bulgakowa and Jacqueline Nacache's chapters on Chekhov's film roles illustrate especially vividly, Chekhov's artistic life could not be contained within set styles and genres, steeped as it was in the mystical wonders of the fantasy. Gytis Padegimas and Cynthia Ashperger capture the joy that Chekhov's freeing innovations can provide to theatre artists, the former by relating how a *samizdat* (underground publication) version of Chekhov's writings allowed him to reject the artistically deadening restrictions of Socialist realism in favor of experimentation and play, the latter through an account of her work with two actors who together created a Chekhov-based rehearsal process that freed them from imagination-stunting habits and rehearsal practices. The book fittingly concludes with an eloquent reflection on Chekhov's ongoing legacy by former student Joanna Merlin, President of the Michael Chekhov Association (US) and one of the most active perpetrators of Chekhov's system today.

The book's authors admirably tackle Chekhovian concepts that are notoriously difficult to explain—usually succeeding, though occasionally rendering them a bit more opaque. The varied potential translations of the word *obraz* (image, figure, character, representation), for instance, might have been connected via a more explicit initial definition or a glossary of Chekhov's key terms to follow the excellent chronology of his life and work. In an essay that

primarily clarifies differences between Chekhov and Meyerhold, Jonathan Pitches misses the opportunity to mine the similarities between these two great inciters of the imagination, especially with regard to the grotesque, the actor's "duality of consciousness" (14), and the spectator as co-creator. The book's scattered references to Futurism, eccentricism, and commedia dell'arte lay tantalizing breadcrumbs for additional research on Chekhov and Russian avant-garde theatre.

It is a strength, not a weakness, however, that the book leaves room for readers to become co-creators of future scholarship and practice. An essential complement to publications that focus on practical Chekhov exercises, *The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov* promises to become a standard guide—especially in the wake of its more affordable paperback release in 2018—for students, artists, and scholars of Chekhov's work, as well as for readers interested more broadly in Russian theatre, acting pedagogy, and the unleashing of the creative imagination.

HEATHER DAVIS-FISCH, ed.

Canadian Performance Histories and Historiographies: New Essays on Canadian Theatre, Volume 7.

Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2017. 433 pp.

VK PRESTON

Canadian Performance Histories and Historiographies, edited with a strong introduction by Heather Davis-Fisch, throws down a methodological gauntlet with critiques of nationalism and the writing of history in theatre and performance studies in Canada. This cohort of fresh, critical approaches challenges a "maturation" trope of theatre's growth as a form "new" to the country, taking up sources from unproduced manuscripts, oral histories, and burlesques to using methods that demonstrate past exclusions in national theatre historiography. Davis-Fisch's curation of these essays turns on the prefix "re" as it offers a three-part organization: "(Re)integrations," "Returns and Re-examinations," and "Rethinkings" (italics mine). The book's organization thus foregrounds marginalized sources and untold histories with calls to retool approaches in performance research.

"Interventions into the Maw of Old World Hunger," the edited transcript of a brilliant roundtable by Jill Carter (Anishinaabe / Ashkenazi), Karyn Recollet (Cree), and Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō), will doubtless be received by the field as a key text. Challenging the ways settler scholars have adopted and appropriated Indigenous methodologies, Robinson addresses the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a "machine that gathers stories" (227), offering critiques of testimony, extractivism, and scophilia embedded in the TRC's digitized and streaming structures of memory and feeling. Activating dance imaginaries and Cree conceptions of both human and non-human shapings of knowledge, Recollet beautifully seeds creative possibility and memory in practices of "active and ongoing refusal" (212), asserting more-than-human choreographies from stars to stones (213). Thickening this conversation, Jill Carter turns towards the Anishinaabe prophecy of the eighth fire, an account of Odawa values and storytelling. "Conciliation" activates relationship and performance, she