

*The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov*. Edited by **Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu** and **Yana Meerzon**. Abingdon: Routledge, 2015. Pp. xxi + 433 + 25 illus. £148/\$204 Hb.

*Stanislavsky in the World: The System and its Transformations Across Continents*. Edited by **Jonathan Pitches** and **Stefan Aquilina**. London: Bloomsbury, 2017. Pp. xiii + 461 + 40 illus. £22.49/\$30.56 Pb.

*Reviewed by Tom Cornford, The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, tom.cornford@cssd.ac.uk*

The sub-disciplinary field of actor training is a relative newcomer to theatre & performance studies, having emerged in the 1990s and consolidated itself in the first decade of this century. Early publications in this area tended to concentrate primarily on verifying and documenting techniques for use in training and rehearsal studios that could be shown to have emerged from the work of key practitioners. They included the two men whose work is explored here: the actors, directors and theorists of acting Konstantin Stanislavsky and Michael Chekhov. As well as making available a wealth of information to practitioners, historians and theorists of theatre-making processes, this approach to the study of actor training methodologies also had some less fortunate consequences. It tended to group training techniques into traditions named after powerful, white men, with the effect of both occluding the work of their collaborators (particularly women) in the generation of those techniques, and implying that value should be attributed to approaches that can be shown to be ‘authentic’ by being traced back to a supposed origin in the studio of a guru figure. Not only do these tendencies serve to corrupt the historical record by bending it to vectors of power that follow the lines of gender, class, ethnicity and other privileges, they also misrepresent the

nature of both creative and pedagogical practice, that emerge relationally, and in historically and culturally specific ways.

Recently, however, this approach has begun to give way to a more inclusive and multi-faceted approach to the study of actor training methodologies, an approach in many ways exemplified by these two publications. The first, *The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov*, edited by Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu and Yana Meerzon, takes a more synoptic approach to its subject, broken down into four sections exploring Chekhov's theory, practice and pedagogy; his on-stage collaborations and encounters; the interdisciplinary performative practices that can be traced through his work, and finally his system in acting pedagogy today. Under these headings, Autant-Mathieu and Meerzon have grouped a wealth of material on Chekhov, much of which is new to Anglophone scholarship, such as Liisa Byckling's account of Chekhov's directorial career; Sharon Marie Carcnicke's account of Chekhov's legacy in Soviet Russia; Oksana Bulgakowa's and Jacqueline Nacache's essays on Chekhov's work on film; as well as Gytis Padegimas' account of Chekhov's teaching in Lithuania, that pre-dates his work at Dartington Hall in the 1930s, offering English-speaking scholars further insight into Chekhov's work before the Anglo-American period which occupied the last twenty years of his life. There is also space in this expansive volume for reconsiderations of Chekhov's constellation of influences as well as explorations of revealing synergies with his technique. Fresh perspectives include Rose Whyman's exploration of the overlaps between Chekhov's artistic practice and the now lesser-known work of François Delsarte, Emile-Jacques Dalcroze and Prince Volkonsky; Jerri Daboo's consideration of Chekhov's relationship with Uday Shankar, and Daniel Mroz's exploration of intersections between Chekhov's technique, *Yinyang Wuxing* cosmology and the movement training system of *Zhi Neng Qigong*. Finally, the *Companion* offers space for key teachers of Chekhov's approach to acting to articulate their work, though these practitioners are notably

all based in North America. Therefore, despite the wide range of approaches to examining Chekhov's work in this volume, its articulations of Chekhov's technique in contemporary practice remain shaped by the particular conditions, assumptions and aesthetic preferences of North American acting. These contributions are not, of course, less valuable in themselves because, taken together, they represent a contemporary orthodoxy in the practice of Chekhov's technique. Indeed, the fact that they do is a testament to the pioneering work of North American practitioners in securing a legacy for Chekhov's work on that continent. Placed alongside the scholarly perspectives cited above, however, they also pose the question of what other legacies for Chekhov's technique may be established by placing it in new intercultural configurations today.

By contrast, as a result of the dominance of versions of Stanislavsky's work in North America and Russia during the twentieth century, Jonathan Pitches and Stefan Aquilina's *Stanislavsky in the World* sets itself the project of counter-balancing narratives from these 'well-trodden paths' of Stanislavskian influence (p. 1). Their collection is free from the requirement of a companion volume to adopt a compendious approach to its subject mainly thanks to the wealth of material about Stanislavsky that is already available. Pitches and Aquilina are therefore able to offer an account of Stanislavsky's influence that is more corrective than definitive in its ambition. They attempt to reframe conceptions of Stanislavsky's place in the world by reframing the world, which they divide into six parts: (non-Anglophone) Europe, China and Japan, Latin America, Africa, Australasia, India and Bangladesh. Their approach to charting trajectories of Stanislavsky's influence through this diasporic network draws on cultural transmission theory and incorporates both diachronic factors (such as training) and synchronic aspects of transmission (such as peer-to-peer collaboration). Like Autant-Mathieu and Meerzon, though, Pitches and Aquilina attempt, in their collection, to resituate training in the broader historical and cultural contexts with which

it is always imbricated to produce an account that is more concerned with ‘dispersal, migration and relocation’ than it is with the simpler notion of ‘transmission’ (p. 20).

Inevitably, the authors of chapters in *Stanislavsky in the World* take a range of approaches to this challenge, according to the availability of materials and their own training and preferences. Thus, for example, Franco Ruffini’s bibliographic account of Stanislavsky’s Italian translations sits alongside a detailed, archival exploration of Stanislavskian training in China from Jonathan Pitches and Ruru Li, and accounts of adaptations of Stanislavskian techniques in Africa from Kene Igweonu, Moez Mrabet, and David Peimer that depend mainly upon oral histories. These accounts are notably more engaging where they depart from well-worn debates and embrace, instead, the ways in which (in the words of Hilary Halba), ‘Stanislavskian ideas have entered into a complicated, even complicitous, relationship’ with those of other cultures so that by ‘both conscious distancing [...] and engagement’, a ‘hybrid articulation of acting’ is formed (p. 385). Sometimes, such accounts (as in the case of Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu’s chapter on Stanislavsky and the French theatre) demonstrate the limited extent to which Stanislavsky’s practices have proved adaptable to the conditions of another culture, in other cases (such as Syed Jamil Ahmed’s account of Stanislavsky in Bangladesh) researchers trace complex tangles of acceptance of and resistance to his approaches.

In sum, these two volumes, necessarily diverse and varied in methodology and argument though they are, represent a watershed in research on actor training. Their outward-facing approach to the field, engaging in complex questions of cultural transmission and adaptation, and their negotiation of the plurality of influences that shape creative practice connects approaches to actor training with wider debates within the field of theatre and performance studies. It also works conversely to highlight the common exclusion, hitherto, of discourses and practices of training from theatre histories. It has often been assumed that

discourses and practices of training, like those of rehearsal, represent (in the words of director Declan Donnellan) 'invisible work' (*The Actor and the Target*, 2002, p. 12). However, the researchers represented in these volumes make a powerful, collective case both for making the work of training and rehearsal visible as part of the broader theatre-making process, and for exposing and critiquing the power relations, historical contexts and cultural ideas that shape and are shaped by it.