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Acting Chekhov in Translation: 4 Plays, 100 Ways by Robin
Beth Levenson, and: *Modern Theatre in Russia: Tradition
Building and Transmission Process* by Stefan Aquilina
(review)

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***Acting Chekhov in Translation: 4 Plays, 100 Ways.* By Robin Beth Levenson. Peter Lang Publishing, 2018. Paper \$50.35. 309 pages. 8 illustrations.**

***Modern Theatre in Russia: Tradition Building and Transmission Process.* By Stefan Aquilina. Methuen Drama, 2020. Cloth \$100.00. 229 pages. 12 illustrations.**

Early twentieth-century Russian performance practices continue to have an enormous influence on contemporary theatre, and the authors of these two studies describe how the modern Russian approach to theatrical production took hold and evolved in two disparate contexts. Robin Beth Levenson's and Stefan Aquilina's books are vastly different in scope, approach, and conclusions; however, each superbly demonstrates the dissemination of dramaturgical ideas that were developed during the early years of the modern age of Russian theatre. The people and companies highlighted by the two authors were inspired by and reacting to the work of luminaries such as Konstantine Stanislavsky, Anton Chekhov, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, and Vsevolod Meyerhold. Stanislavsky and Meyerhold serve as a bridge between the two texts, as their contributions are vitally important for both works. In the accessible and insightful *Acting Chekhov in Translation: 4 Plays, 100 Ways*, Levenson articulates the English-language staging history of Chekhov's four most-produced full-length plays. In the scholarly and detailed *Modern Theatre in Russia: Tradition Building and Transmission Process*, Aquilina shows where and how Russian theatrical modernism developed, particularly in the two decades following the establishment of the Moscow Art Theatre. Each volume details how the ideas of early twentieth century Russian theatre found expression through performance, scholarship, education, and criticism. The two authors scrutinize different time periods, artists, and productions, but each is grounded in the same source materials, and taken together, the two books offer a complex and sometimes surprising assessment of the variety of directions and movements that emerged from modern Russian theatre and performance. The two texts are also united in articulating how the contents can be used for practical application in both rehearsal spaces and classrooms.

Levenson's *Acting Chekhov in Translation: 4 Plays, 100 Ways* is the all-too-rare scholarly text that places performance choices at the forefront of the study. Levenson explicates the choices of actors, directors, and designers in benchmark productions of Chekhov's works instead of focusing on socio-historical contexts or contemporary theory-driven interpretations. Rather than merely relying on textual and performance history and criticism, Levenson explicates the choices of actors, directors, and designers in benchmark productions of Chekhov's works. Further still, she looks deeply into the art of translation to show how even small alterations and choices can have a massive effect on shows currently in production, as well

as those of the future. She writes in her final chapter that "Actors, translators, and educators might realize common interdisciplinary goals and join together to promote continued exploration of the nature of translation of dramatic literature and its relationship to acting praxis and theory" (265). *Acting Chekhov in Translation* provides a solid template for this kind of work.

Acting Chekhov in Translation is well-organized and thorough. Levenson's ten chapters are suffused with references and footnotes, and the appendices provide a full bibliography, a glossary, and information about 145 different translations of Chekhov's major works. Levenson's text is written accessibly enough to include in an introductory undergraduate course, yet also has the depth appropriate for a specialized upper tier course. The first three chapters of the text examine approaches to translation and feature the translator as a vital member of the artistic team. Since the primary topic of her study is the impact that translation has on performance, she spends the necessary time identifying the work of the translator, the primary approaches utilized in modern translation, and the role that the translator-as-artist plays in the production process. Here she explains how choices regarding the creation of a translation, version, or adaptation are at the heart of the translator's role in the eventual staging of the work. Chapter 4 expounds upon Stanislavsky's notion of "Action," demonstrating how the acting process is influenced by the subtleties of translation. More than a third of the text is occupied by her five chapters on Chekhov's works, with one about Chekhov's dramaturgy followed by chapters on each of the four plays. These four chapters are tremendously useful for the study and/or production of *Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *Cherry Orchard*. Levenson closes with a chapter titled "A Body of Beauty," where she celebrates the prodigious influence of Chekhov and suggests routes for further exploration of the many subjects covered in her book.

Acting Chekhov in Translation is as much about script analysis as it is about translation, and in her four chapters on the major plays, Levenson approaches the texts from the perspective of an actor. Chapter 6 focuses on *Seagull*, and after a brief introduction to the overall text, Levenson looks at how translation can affect artistic choices. She begins by examining the implications of the title and character names. This is followed by excerpts from seven different translations of the opening scene in *Seagull*. Later in the chapter Levenson adds excerpts from eleven different translations of *Seagull*'s final scene. She then looks at how particular areas of analysis can provide insights into performance choices for this play. Action, Stage Directions, Word Choice, Punctuation, Rhythm, Syntax, Circles of Attention, and Pauses are each looked to as catalysts for performance choices, and Levenson successfully shows the wide possibilities for interpretation between one translation and the next.

An intellectual history of theatrical modernism in practice throughout the leading theatre companies in Russia, Aquilina's *Modern Theatre in Russia*:

Tradition Building and Transmission Process is an engrossing and successful summary of an art form in wild flux during the first few decades of the twentieth century. Aquilina builds upon the plethora of works written about this era of Russian theatre by exploring specialized movements and individuals, many of which may not be familiar to the non-specialist. Though the familiar figures Stanislavsky and Meyerhold are discussed in detail, Aquilina's portrayal of each are eye-opening and informative. Furthermore, his detailed work on lesser-known figures such as Valentin Smyshlaev and Asja Lācis opens up the entire era to new avenues of interpretation. Aquilina writes that "much of the research going into the writing of this book was guided by the principle that there is material about lesser-known realities across the landscape of Russian modernism that is worth engaging in" (171). In addition to his focus on more obscure works, he provides a historical narrative of the era, and this is suffused by his use of contemporary literary and performance theories to clarify ideas about the transmission of cultural tradition.

After his useful and thorough introduction to the study (chapter 1), the main body of Aquilina's text is divided into five chapters. In chapter 2, "Stanislavsky: Renewing tradition through transmission," he explores the exchange of theatrical ideas, and details some lesser-known aspects of Stanislavsky's work. Aquilina centers on Stanislavsky's correspondence with the German actor Ludwig Barnay, and uses their relationship to demonstrate how scenic and other performance ideas are exchanged. He also presents information about Stanislavsky's use of improvisation, and how his "international disposition" affected communication with theatre makers in other countries. In chapter 3, "Misinterpretation of theatre practice: Stanislavsky-Smyshlaev," the author focuses on the figure of Valentin Smyshlaev, a relatively unknown former student of Stanislavsky. The two had a falling out over Smyshlaev's efforts at communicating Stanislavsky's work to a new generation of students. For this, his important insights have been mostly overlooked by scholars, particularly in English-language scholarship. Aquilina brings Smyshlaev's name back into the light, and shows how his work with the popularization of theatrical knowledge fits into this study and its overarching themes about cultural transmission. In chapter 4, "Amateur and proletarian theatre in post-revolutionary Russia," Aquilina shows how ideas about modern Russian theatre were picked up by numerous new theatre groups after the revolution, noting how it "gave rise to a new class of amateur actors and theatre makers" (132). Chapter 5, "Meyerhold: Bias in transmission process" details the problems with studying an important and controversial figure such as Meyerhold, particularly because of the many political and cultural reasons that authors in Russia, England, and the United States had to write about him in a biased manner. Meyerhold was a divisive figure, and his place in the international spectrum of politics and art, particularly in relation to Soviet communism, meant that authors in different cultures had to be careful about which aspects of him that they extolled, as well as disparaged and/or ignored.

In chapter 6, “Lesser-known names: Rediscovering female voices,” Aquilina presents a compelling overview about female practitioners in early modern Russian theatre. This is a tremendously illuminating look into the contributions of women such as actor Serafima Birman and scenic designer Alexandra Exter; but the bulk of this chapter is devoted to the Latvian-born director Asja Lācis. In addition to her work with therapeutic children’s theatre, she was also closely involved with the philosopher Walter Benjamin, and indeed Aquilina notes that “her amorous relationship with Walter Benjamin overshadowed the substantial impact which she had on his writing and development” (181). In addition to her contributions to Benjamin’s works, she also worked directly with Meyerhold, Bertolt Brecht, and Margarete Steffin, acting as a go-between to the latter pair when Benjamin began reviewing their works (181). Aquilina’s overview of Asja Lācis’ work is one of the highlights of his study, and he provides important context and stories about a major, but overlooked, figure in Russian theatre history.

Modern Russian theatre is an essential component in both educational and professional theatres, and is heavily represented in contemporary syllabi and production seasons. These two texts provide exceptional and clearly articulated approaches to the larger subject, and their shared focus on practical aspects for the stage and campus recommends both for classroom instruction. *Acting Chekhov in Translation: 4 Plays, 100 Ways* is well-suited to acting, directing, and theatre literature courses; and is a marvelous resource for artists getting ready to produce Chekhov on the stage. *Modern Theatre in Russia: Tradition Building and Transmission Process* is a bit more specialized, but would certainly be at home in both history and theory courses. Levenson and Aquilina have contributed texts that belong on the shelf of the student of modern Russian theatre, and together they demonstrate the sophistication and enduring influence of both the major and the overlooked voices of the field.

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***Theory for Theatre Studies: Sound.* By Susan Bennett. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2019. Cloth \$66.27, Paper \$15.00, E-book \$14.00. 151 pages.**

Theory for Theatre Studies: Sound provides a neat indication of what sound, as a neglected area of thought within theatre studies, can offer to undergraduate and postgraduate students, early career scholars, and theatre practitioners. One aim is to query the role of “sonic adaptation” (20) in relation to classical texts. Bennett seeks to recover listening histories from the theatres of ancient Greece to early modern England, revisiting the sonic skills of audiences across time. Knowledge of the role