Modernism to Realism on the Soviet Stage by Nick Worrall (review)

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costumes, to a point where it was unable to see anything at all. But stage design and all that went with it should help the drama take place, not aim to displace it. This argument led finally to the grand idea that the staging – if not the building itself – should help the audience's awareness and perception. The sense of an audience's being at one with the performers and not just watching them is a modern (and an ancient!) view of theatre that has been pursued in our own day by directors as challenging as Richard Schechner, Joseph Chaikin, and the Becks, to name only a few of those on the North American continent. In Appia's last years, especially after the Great War with its appalling losses, his writing was increasingly taken up with the ethical and social, if not actually political, role of dramatic art as he saw it as a source of healing and renewal: the apparent distinction between the artist and his audience would dissolve when together they created their best art.

Both books reviewed here are helpful in telling and explaining this story, and are pleasing in their exhibition of many examples of Appia's designs and scenarios. Nevertheless, it remains true that he was long on theory and comparatively short on practice, and Beacham does not really address this issue. We cannot be assured that Appia's work "swept away the foundations that had supported European theatre since the Renaissance" (*Essays*, p. 3; *Theatre Artist*, p. 17), nor that before this theatrical art was in a "disastrous state" (*Essays*, p. 3). The endless ramps and steps that Appia's sketches convey to us are somewhat uncritically accepted, being presented chiefly in description and not analysis. And it can be readily seen that such abstract sets would be serviceable to only a limited range of productions and a very few genres – the *Spieltreppe* (*Jessnertreppe*) that became the vogue were a notorious invitation to histrionic mountaineering. Nevertheless, these books must join the others of importance on the story of twentieth-century theatre.

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NICK WORRALL. *Modernism to Realism on the Soviet Stage*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989. Pp. 238, illustrated. $49.50.

Perhaps theatre scholars owe Mikhail Gorbachev a debt of gratitude. Thanks to the more flexible policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, fewer obstacles stand in the path of historians who wish to work in Soviet archives and, as a result, interest in Russian and Soviet theatre has revived. Recently published scholarship on Russian theatre includes Nick Worrall's *Modernism to Realism on the Soviet Stage*, a study of directors Alexander Tairov, Yevgeny Vakhtangov, and Nikolai Okhlopkov.

Although Worrall slips in an occasional personal anecdote, the book is primarily a descriptive study of selected productions by these three directors. It includes a very useful "Table of Historical and Theatrical Events," a general introduction, a chapter on each director, and a selected bibliography. Readers familiar with Konstantin Rudnitski's glorious *Russian and Soviet Theatre: 1905–1932* may find Worrall's treatment of

Russian modernism rather thin by comparison. Nonetheless, *Realism to Modernism on the Soviet Stage* is a useful contribution to the growing body of literature about Russian and Soviet theatre and should be of interest to Worrall's designated audience: the "general reader."

The chapters on Tairov and Vakhtangov are particularly intriguing. Perhaps because the tendency in the West is toward commercial theatre, many Western practitioners look with suspicion upon Russian artists who were, as Worrall puts it, "artistic fanatics." We do not share the reverential attitude toward theatre that was commonplace in Russia even among many provincial actors. The "religiosity" of Stanislavski's single-minded devotion to theatre is well known and this attitude was adopted by directors like Tairov and Vakhtangov, both of whom displayed a passion for theatre that may, at least in the eyes of Western observers, transcend the bounds of reason.

Worrall observes that Alexander Tairov never achieved the international recognition he deserved – indeed, Tairov may be the most underrated director of this century. As co-founder and artistic director of the Kamerny Theatre, Tairov attempted "to forge a theatre of pure aesthetics, founded on the basis of the 'master actor.'" In *Notes of a Director*, he reminds us that "theatre is theatre," and that a new theatre can only be forged through "theatricalization of the theatre." Perhaps Tairov finds few disciples in this country because American theatre thrives on the neo-Stanislavskian notion (attributed to Stanislavski rather unfairly, I think) that theatre should be indistinguishable from life and that acting is merely a process of recreating "real" behaviors on stage. Tairov's experiments with pure aesthetics and theatricality provide a much needed corrective for the "Stanislavskolatry" that prevails in the West.

Although all three directors were devoted to the art of theatre, Worrall believes that only Vakhtangov was truly obsessed. This is the popular opinion, but readers must also be aware that Vakhtangov's early death and unrealized potential have given rise to an overly-romantic image of the director as tragic genius. Nonetheless, the chapter is refreshing at least in part because Worrall covers the broad spectrum of Vakhtangov's work rather than focusing on only a few enormously successful productions.

Most studies of Vakhtangov emphasize his ability to synthesize trends represented by Stanislavski and Meyerhold. Although Vakhtangov was indebted to Stanislavski, their relationship was complicated and often turbulent. Stanislavski frequently criticized and restaged Vakhtangov's work at the First Studio, but Worrall's account of Stanislavski's tutelage suggests that any direct influence of Meyerhold on Vakhtangov was negligible. We forget that Stanislavski was intensely interested in non-realistic production, thus when he appeared at a rehearsal of *The Deluge* and was "dismayed by the excessive naturalism," *he* set about restaging the play in order to make it more theatrical. Given the usual clichés about Vakhtangov's heritage, it is interesting that his fascination with pure theatricalism may have been more a consequent of Stanislavski's influence than Meyerhold's.

Worrall's interest in Nikolai Okhlopkov remains puzzling and he does not present a convincing case that Okhlopkov is a director worthy of renewed attention. My impression is that, more than an artist, Okhlopkov was a chameleon who adapted to all

political regimes no matter how repressive. Tairov and Meyerhold paid dearly for their artistic intransigence. Had he lived, Vakhtangov would probably have suffered a similar fate. Indeed, the formalist tendencies in Vakhtangov's productions make it tempting to conclude that the timing of his death was fortunate. Okhlopkov, on the other hand, was a proponent of socialist realism whose productions seem to have been conceived at the Rolf Hochhuth school of excessively graphic, melodramatic overstatement. Worrall calls Okhlopkov the "true heir of Meyerhold," but although he studied with Meyerhold, it is not clear how Okhlopkov carried on his teacher's legacy.

There are other problems with *Modernism to Realism*, and perhaps the most damaging is the scarcity of photographs. Given the fact that this is primarily a production history, it is odd that photographs are not only scarce, but of poor quality. How is it possible genuinely to appreciate Tairov's visual genius without photographs? Perhaps Worrall's case for Okhlopkov would be stronger if there were more photographic evidence. Again, it is tempting to compare Worrall's book with Rudnitski's.

Modernism to Realism also left many unanswered questions. For example, why did Vakhtangov experiment with cross-gender casting in *The Dybbuk*; why was Tairov relieved of his responsibilities at the Kamerny Theatre and what was Alicia Koonen's role in the founding and eventual success of the theatre; why, if Okhlopkov's natural affinity was for mass spectacles, did he stage so few of them? I wonder whether these and other questions are not answered because, judging by the notes and bibliography, Worrall did not use archival material. Because it is still difficult to obtain access to Soviet archives, Worrall can be forgiven for not using them, but because apparently he has not, there is still work to be done on all three directors.

Finally, because *Modernism to Realism* is intended for the general reader, Worrall, quite naturally, tends to oversimplify. This is particularly bothersome in the introduction. Like so many Western scholars, Worrall gives a cursory nod to Gogol, Ostrovski, and Shchepkin, then proceeds to credit Stanislavski with all significant theatrical reform. Stanislavski did not spring like Athena from the head of Zeus. There were progressive entrepreneurs (Anna Brenko and Mikhail Bordai, among others) who attempted to change the repertoire and reform production practice long before the Moscow Art Theatre appeared. Perhaps it is time to direct attention to these earlier innovators. In spite of a few weaknesses, *Modernism to Realism on the Soviet Stage* is a valuable contribution to Russian theatre scholarship and will be of interest to readers wishing to become conversant with development during and after the revolution of 1917.

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PIA KLEBER AND COLIN VISSER, eds. *Re-interpreting Brecht: His Influence on Contemporary Drama and Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990. Pp. xiii, 220. $39.50.

The years that have intervened between these essays being written for the 1986 Toronto Brecht Conference and now their publication some four years later have not served this