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Performance Activism: Precursors and Contemporary Pioneers
by Dan Friedman (review)

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for Voice and Singing.” This chapter explores the archival evidence suggesting that Chekhov sought to implement at Dartington Rudolf Steiner’s Eurythmy and Speech Formation in conjunction with his own acting methodology, yielding largely unsatisfying results. While Oram cites contemporary evidence proposing that more positive results occur with an extended period of practical integration, the focus that Steiner and Chekhov share on esoteric belief systems consistently presents problems to modern performers and teachers. Oram argues that the supposed universalism of Chekhov’s humanist approach becomes untenable in this way, but with fragmentation, his principles can be adapted to suit contemporary voice and speech training.

In “The Moment You Are Not Inwardly Moving and Inwardly Participating, You Are Dead,” movement educator Roanna Mitchell explores the application of the Chekhov technique to movement and dance pedagogy. Principally, Mitchell explores the potential of Chekhov’s work as a bridge between acting and movement/dance, too often experienced as related but distant polarities of performance. As movement is a fundamental part of acting, dance, and directing, Mitchell investigates and relates ways that Chekhov’s work can be a helpful pathway to bridge the interstitial space between those disciplines, drawing examples from movement and dance teachers based in Laban, commedia dell’arte, mask work, and mime that have engaged with Chekhov’s work in an effort to further grow and deepen their own explorations.

In “Feeling Space, Making Space: Michael Chekhov’s Approach to Theatre Design,” Sinéad Rushe unravels how Chekhov’s approach to design at Dartington Hall speaks to how he intended all elements of his methodology to work together. Rather than remaining within individual disciplines, his approach requires that actors, designers, and directors stretch beyond their spheres of comfort. Rushe endorses finding new approaches to theatrical education that avoid constraining any artist within a silo of exploration and instead migrate the realms of the designer and actor closer together so that explorations occur concurrently, drawing from precedents such as the partnership between Brecht and scenic designer Caspar Neher.

Finally, in Section Three, “Chekhov Technique: Beyond the Theatre,” Caoimhe McAvinchey, professor of socially engaged and contemporary performance, pens, “[i]f the new theatre is to have meaning, the audience too must play its part—Chekhov technique in applied, therapeutic and community contexts” (154). This chapter ends the book by examining how various artists have used Chekhov’s work in their own differing areas of applied practice. For example, Effie Makepeace uses Chekhov’s tool of Atmospheres to coach medical students on how they enter and exit rooms, working with them on becoming cognizant of the effect that their energy can have on patients and refining their ability to use it in helpful ways. McAvinchey suggests that Chekhov’s work can find a space in the evolving and varied modalities of socially engaged practices like applied theatre.

This book is a valuable and informative resource for practitioners who have a preexisting foundation in Chekhov’s

work and are looking to expand their practice in new directions. However, as a dense, detailed series of annotated reports, it could prove intimidating to those not already well versed in Chekhov’s work and terminology. Nonetheless, it represents an important accounting of the adaptability and applicability of the techniques of Michael Chekhov to a variety of disparate theatrical practices.

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Performance Activism: Precursors and Contemporary Pioneers. Dan Friedman. Palgrave Studies in Play, Performance, Learning, and Development. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021; pp. 292.

While theatres continue to feel the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, performance scholarship is benefiting from numerous contributions composed while theatre practitioners were stuck on the couch. One such contribution is Dan Friedman’s *Performance Activism*, an admirable investigation of the foundations of a movement defined as one that enacts specific engagement with social issues and conflicts via an expanded notion of performance that moves beyond a more traditional theatrical approach. In Friedman’s words, performance activists “are seeking new ways, through play and performance, to be helpful to the poor and oppressed, to build community, to address local and international social and political issues, to bring antagonistic forces and communities together, to heal, to educate, to free the imaginations of those who have had their imaginations beaten or bombed or starved out of them” (2). As this passage manifests, Friedman has the tenor of an activist. He makes no attempt at achieving an objective tone. As the book engages a wide range of movements and examples, Friedman participates in the pivot that many performance activists no doubt had to do during the pandemic; while he appears to be itching to get back into the streets, his monograph supports its more sedentary goals: to trace and record the “movement’s discovery of itself” (2).

After a brief introduction, the book is divided into sections: Part I: “Performance Leaves the Theatre and Joins the Revolution,” followed by Part II: “(Some of) What Performance Activism Does.” This structure suggests that the larger expansion of epistemological notions of performance was a necessary precursor of performance activism and that this movement, apart from the many pockets wherein performance *and* activism have been happy bedfellows for some time, is now ready to be labeled a discrete category within applied theatre. This claim is not so much defended as expanded repeatedly until the reader is excited to understand the vast work done by performance activists and is less concerned about the clarity of definitions surrounding a field that is “just coming into being” (278). The briefest, final section, Part III: “Re-performing the World,” takes performance activism to a deeper and more personal level with its specific case study approach.

While the introduction notes that performance activism exists “primarily outside of the academy” (1), what follows is a turn to the (unruly) discipline of performance studies as a field that broke down the walls of theatre and the performances of everyday life, therefore enabling new possibilities of using performance in therapeutic or political settings. Part I takes this expansion further, examining various movements from the United States and Europe that established foundational ideas upon which performance activism is built. Friedman includes encyclopedic summaries of “Agit-Prop,” “Psychodrama,” “Performance Art,” and “Avant-Garde Theatre,” among others. The author notes that Augusto Boal’s well-known Theatre of the Oppressed is a progenitor of performance activism; but as this book seeks to fill holes in the existing scholarship, he chooses to put his efforts elsewhere.

The larger choices Friedman makes about what is and what isn’t included in the book demonstrate how performance studies has spread outside of the academy. Richard Schechner’s well-worn discussion of theatre and ritual is covered extensively. A section in the “Improvisation” chapter focuses on Viola Spolin and her Hull House movement in 1930s Chicago; yet Shannon Jackson’s groundbreaking work, *Lines of Activity: Performance, Historiography, Hull-House Domesticity*, is not mentioned. Nor is Jan Cohen-Cruz referenced, either as a central scholar of Boal’s work or as a significant community organizer and former director of Imagining America. These seem to be notable gaps in Friedman’s knowledge and, perhaps, of his larger activist community’s knowledge as well.

Part II moves from historical precedent into modern-day case studies. They are fascinating, even gripping. In chapter 16, “Building Community,” we learn about the fate of the Kamiriithu Educational and Cultural Centre, razed to the ground after Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s production of *I Will Marry When I Want* (1977) attracted thousands of members to their open-air theatre. Here—as is a central theme throughout the book—performing is both a methodology and a goal unto itself. In the chapter “Politicizing,” the author details Michael Rohd’s Hope Is Vital movement, a precursor of the Sojourn Theatre, which began with him driving across the United States in search of locations to do community-based works. In chapter 12, “Building Bridges,” Lenora Fulani’s heroic and at times harrowing career is birthed out of the Crown Heights riots in Brooklyn, NY in 1991. Here and elsewhere, performance *is* protest. In chapter 14, “Healing Trauma,” Friedman tells of Sanjay Kumar’s efforts to build back the voices of lower-class “pandies” in India through devising their own work after more than fifty children in the community were killed and cannibalized by members of the upper class (197-98). While the chapter titles, indicative of the various things that performance activism *does*, are somewhat redundant and overlapping, watching Friedman’s world come into focus through these microcosms makes the book a rewarding read.

Friedman’s third and final section engages in a deeper discussion of the roots and impact of social therapeutics. Here, his personal connections are revealed. Much of this work

ties into that of Fred Newman, who, with Lois Holzman, founded the New York Institute for Social Therapy and Research in 1978. We learn how the Institute expanded into the Performing the World global gatherings, held biennially since 2001. The book is dedicated to these two (among others); Newman has clearly been a sage mentor to Friedman, while Holzman is the series editor for the Palgrave catalog that hosts this monograph. The author also reveals his own challenges, such as when he and others canvassed the streets of New York City and “raised \$1,300,024 from approximately 98,000 people” for the Castillo Theatre (262). As one takes in the burgeoning field of performance activism, the scope of their work—using theatre as a tool for liberation in various ways and in disparate locations—is breathtaking.

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The Great European Stage Directors, Volume 1: Antoine, Stanislavski, Saint-Denis. Edited by Peta Tait. Great Stage Directors series. London: Methuen Drama, 2019; pp. xi + 225.

The Great European Stage Directors, Volume 2: Meyerhold, Piscator, Brecht. Edited by David Barnett. Great Stage Directors series. London: Methuen Drama, 2019; pp. xi + 226.

The Great European Stage Directors, Volume 3: Copeau, Komisarjevsky, Guthrie. Edited by Jonathan Pitches. Great Stage Directors series. London: Methuen Drama, 2019; pp. xii + 204.

The Great European Stage Directors, Volume 4: Reinhardt, Jessner, Barker. Edited by Michael Patterson. Great Stage Directors series. London: Methuen Drama, 2019; pp. xiii + 203.

“[W]ho would unite so many scattered elements? Who would give the signal?” (1:31). These queries of stage director André Antoine about his leadership of the Cercle Gaulois encapsulate the challenges facing those writing the history of stage direction. The role’s malleable scope and evolving identity over time demand nuance and expertise with various disciplines, practices, and artists. Under the editorial guidance of Simon Shepherd, Methuen Drama’s series *The Great European Stage Directors* answers these challenges by providing an essential and compact resource directed at students, academics, and practitioners. Although the blurb for the series hazards overstatement by deeming itself “authoritative” and “comprehensive,” the series’ overall ambit engenders a substantive engagement with the topic and associated fields.

Rather than offer grand narratives, each volume in the series focuses on three specific directors whose lives, careers, and legacies span various practices, traditions, and chronologies. The complete series totals eight volumes, but Methuen Drama has released it evenly as two subseries, with the mid-twentieth century as a line of demarcation.