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Bakhtin and Theatre?

Dick McCaw. *Bakhtin and Theatre: Dialogues with Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Grotowski*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016. 247pp.

For Bakhtin theatre was a dead genre. Dick McCaw cites Holquist and Clark's biography of Bakhtin on his experience both as a theatre practitioner – who produced *Oedipus at Colonnus* with Lev Pumpiansky in 1918 – and as a theorist who gave two lecture series on theatrical production in 1919 (pp. 27, 33). Other than that Bakhtin merely “used theatre as a constant point of reference” (27), although it remains unclear what he actually meant by it or even knew about it. McCaw doesn't hide this fact from us and concurs with Marvin Carlson, who

puts the matter well when he complains that Bakhtin only offers ‘dramatically flavoured observations’, and he shares Tzvetan Todorov's ‘frustration and puzzlement’ that the reader ‘waits in vain for an extended comparison of the novel and drama, parallel to the frequent comparison of the novel and the epic’. (59; the citation is from Carlson's 1992 essay on “Theatre and Dialogism”)

Bakhtin is known to have “declare[d] his interest in types of ‘artistic thinking’ whose ‘significance extends far beyond the limits of the novel’” (2). Prompted on by this gesture, McCaw carries out his assumption that “it is possible to offer an overview of [Bakhtin's] principal concepts while at the same time discussing his field of theatrical reference. [...] my argument will be a reading against the gradient of Bakhtin's arguments about drama and theatre” (27). This is done on the examples of three leading theatremakers of Bakhtin's lifetime: Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Grotowski. Three chapters are dedicated to Stanislavsky's writings (though less so of his actual theatre practice) and a chapter each is dedicated to Meyerhold and Grotowski. The validity of these dialogues – as McCaw repeatedly calls them – is based on an argued *concurrency*, and that in both senses of the word: as occurring more or less simultaneously, and as being in a certain state of agreement: “Stanislavsky's ideas and project can be understood in terms of Bakhtin's early philosophy; Meyerhold's ideas resonate with the writings of [Bakhtin's colleagues and co-authors] Voloshinov and Medvedev in the 1920s, and Bakhtin's later writings” (149). The concurrency between Bakhtin and Grotowski necessitated a dedicated subchapter citing that “Grotowski admits to having been ‘brought up on Stanislavski’” (184) and arguing that given “his emphasis upon the person of the actor, it is not surprising to find connections between Grotowski and Bakhtin, particularly with those early writings that evoke so many resonances with Stanislavsky” (185).

Many of the connections McCaw proffers are fascinating – namely in the earlier three chapters on Stanislavsky and Bakhtin, relating to the notions of character, actor, author, realism, art and life, and time and place. The affinities between the two thinkers are suggestive though one wonders how much of the shared ground is predicated upon the shared cultural, historical and political moment – or even how much of it was indirectly dictated by the revolutionary times of the 1920s (and those are considered only generically by McCaw). There might be common roots to the four thinkers' work – such as Oriental inspirations, religious mysticism, in particular the *via negativa* tradition going back to Pseudo-Dionysius; McCaw mentions *via negativa* as a key concept of Grotowski's but doesn't explore that connection with Bakhtin's or Stanislavsky's religious outlooks. A very surprising omission is the concept of *narration* or *narrative* (*skaz*). While these are central to Bakhtin's analysis of

the novel, nowhere is its dramatic analogue tackled by McCaw though one may argue it would be this aesthetic concept that would apply most readily to both art forms.

Bakhtin and his circle were experiencing a profound crisis of metaphysics – once arguing for a collective knowledge, once claiming that language exists only as utterances (Voloshinov, cited on p. 34). My worry is that Bakhtin’s writing cannot be approached as a coherent system without a clear link to the political, ideological and social turmoils the society was going through. Bakhtin’s philosophical and even critical incoherence may be approached as a process of development – from a quasi-phenomenology of the early writings to the later literary studies on the chronotope or dialogism. The conceptual system that McCaw is drawing upon in relation to Bakhtin’s notions of the *empathy, character, realism*, the opposition of *art and life, author or place and time* were in a way instrumental, not philosophically rigorous: in his mature work Bakhtin was writing literary criticism. Adding to this Bakhtin’s tangential interest in theatre, McCaw’s method can be seen as problematic from the point of theory. The main methodological problem is that his book draws parallels that are accidentally similar, rather their similarity exists by association, not by causality or any traceable direct link. Such a study could be made to link the three directors with Husserl, Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty without a clear historical reason on the basis of these phenomenologists’ systems of thought. It is less plausible with Bakhtin, who doesn’t present one.

McCaw is well aware of these challenges: he argues against an imposition of a theoretical system. An overarching argument in his book is a debate between scholarship (or scientific investigation) and practice – often illustrated on the epistemology of being – just being, phenomenologically, without the accidental frames of mind that originate in intellectual study. In this debate, McCaw is a practitioner – from his acknowledgement that it was Carl Heap who introduced him to Bakhtin during their work with Medieval Players to his argumentation that occasionally uses practice as a trump card. So he quotes from Stanislavsky’s *The Actor’s Work*:

As you have probably noticed, whenever science and technology have not been of help, we have turned to our own natural, biological creativity, to our subconscious, to practical experience. And I invite you to do the same now. Let us move out of science into our own lives, which we know, and which provide us with wide experience, practical knowledge and information, rich, inexhaustible emotional material, skills, habits etc. etc. (74)

McCaw’s book asks after “the responsibility of the scholar to the ‘practitioner’” (238) and emphasises from the outset that practice is an ontological activity that often surpasses theory – citing Bakhtin critic Caryl Emerson on “the relation between philosophy and artistic thinking” and on her claim that Bakhtin “outrightly insists that techniques of art, to be aesthetically legitimate, must be capable of extending and refining philosophical problems that can’t be resolved – that cannot be even conceptualised – in any other way” (2). And McCaw summarises that

It is precisely my aim to demonstrate that ‘techniques of art’ (in this case theatre) can extend and refine philosophical problems raised in Bakhtin’s writings. It is with this notion of doing ‘philosophy by another means’ [Emerson’s words] that I shall address questions about character, about empathy, about learning and development, and about kinds of knowing, and the conditions under which they take place. (2)

McCaw's discussions sometimes go on a tangent almost providing a prescriptive observation theatre practice as such – such as when discussing an actor's character work, the engagement in empathy or the notion of estrangement or *ostranjeni* [sic] and the opposition of sensation and cognition, linking it (inconsequentially) to Brecht's *Verfremdung*. Moments such as these may puzzle the reader – unless we recognise that the author is not only writing about Bakhtin and the three directors but also as a practitioner himself – about theatre as a tool of sensation and cognition. McCaw is often trying to marry too much – almost in a syncretic or eclectic way – as when drawing parallels between the two Russian directors and Brecht, or between Voloshinov's critique of de Saussure (Voloshinov "argues that language only exists in utterance") and speech act theory – "or what Searle would later call Speech Act" (34). Or between Bakhtin's notions of *I* and *other* (*drugi*) and Martin Buber's *Ich und Dich* (58, 186–91 and 231–2); or affinities with Lakoff and Johnson's cognitive theory (219), with Merleau-Ponty (225, 228) or Barthes (229). With a view to theatre, McCaw brings in Zola, Craig, Appia, even Laban (52–3) or Antoine and Brahm of the Meiningen troupe (93–9). While he is cautious not to posit explicit links between these practitioners and Bakhtin, the connections themselves are tenuous (such as the links between Bakhtin's and Appia's understanding of the human body, pp. 54–5). Methodologically McCaw contradicts himself; on the one hand he posits that "[o]ne cannot think of language without thinking of the speaker, the listener and the time and place of utterance" (34), while on the other he draws parallels between contextually, culturally and philosophically distant thinkers only on the basis of their interests in what are essentially panhuman questions – what are knowledge and cognition, what is the human body, time and space, character, art, theatre... And this contradiction lies at the heart of McCaw's book, as when he justifies his usage of Bakhtin's concept of *chronotope*:

The point of connection with theatre is obvious since all theatre performances take place at a particular time in a particular venue and are performed by actors whose movements and groupings in space are grasped as moving images which evoke a kinaesthetic response in the audience. The difference is that Bakhtin is writing about a symbolic language while in theatre time and space signify directly. (7)

Indeed, the difference is significant and McCaw takes care not to be "applying or super-imposing theory upon a practice". In conclusion he summarises that his study "has been about identifying gaps and absences in two areas of thinking [theory and practice] and testing how each can complete the other. A dialogue" (238).

McCaw's book provokes the reader – potentially a theatre maker – to take Bakhtin's refined thoughts of several panhuman concepts and have them reflect upon one's own creative thinking with the "hope that this book offers a new way of thinking of theory and practice" (23).

P.S. The book is written in a lucid style and provides a helpful overview of the work of its four key personalities. At times there are imprecisions and lapses of an editorial nature – Słowacki is the author of *Kordian*, not Wyspiański (11); the correct name of the Polish politician is Władysław Gomułka, not Władisław Gromulka [!] (3). Or, while Bakhtin and Stanislavsky are listed in the index, Grotowski and Meyerhold are missing from it.