Also by Mary Luckhurst

DRAMATURGY: A Revolution in Theatre

THEATRE AND CELEBRITY IN BRITAIN, 1660–2000

ON ACTING

ON DIRECTING

THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO BRITISH AND IRISH DRAMA, 1880–2005

THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO CONTEMPORARY BRITISH AND IRISH DRAMA

PLAYING FOR REAL: Actors on Playing Real People

CARYL CHURCHILL

Also by Emilie Morin

SAMUEL BECKETT AND THE PROBLEM OF IRISHNESS

Theatre and Ghosts

Materiality, Performance and Modernity

Edited by

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palgrave
macmillan

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First published 2014 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978–1–137–34506–6

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India.

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*For Roger
and
For Henriette*

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Michael Chekhov: The Spiritual Realm and the Invisible Body

Tom Cornford

Spirit and body transformations

For the Russian actor, director and teacher Michael Chekhov (1891–1955), the essence of artistry in acting, as in any discipline, was transformation. He wrote extensively about 'the hallmark of talent and the divine spark within the actor' – the 'ability to transform oneself totally' – and explored this transformation in unusual depth in his teaching.¹ Chekhov was an Anthroposophist, a follower of the teachings of the spiritual philosopher Rudolf Steiner, and his association of artistry with divinity was not merely a turn of phrase, but a reflection of that belief system. Steiner posited intimate connections between the human and the divine, or between 'the sense-perceptible world' and 'the spiritual realm,'² and he taught a process of 'clairvoyant perception' by which he claimed that his followers would be able 'to perceive the world we enter after death' and thereby see beyond physical appearances and 'move from the figure we perceive to the actual being.'³ For Steiner, however, 'clairvoyance' was not only spiritual but artistic: he defined the artist by the capacity to 'create in beauty a piece of the world, so that the image on canvas or in marble lets us see more of the world than we do on our own.'⁴

Applying this conception of artistry to the theatre, Steiner described his own stagings of mystery plays as the projection of 'spiritually perceived facts [...] onto a physical stage.'⁵ That definition would also serve to characterize what Chekhov called the 'Theatre of the Future,' in which 'the spirit of the human being will be rediscovered by artists' and 'concretely studied.'⁶ Speaking to his students at the Chekhov Theatre Studio at Dartington Hall in 1936,⁷ Chekhov addressed the apparent contradiction within this ideal of the 'concrete investigation

of the spirit of the human being' by separating performances into body and spirit.⁸ He argued that what is communicated by a performance is 'the spirit of the performance,' whereas what the audience 'can see and hear is not the spirit of the performance, but the body.'⁹ 'We must appeal to the invisible part of our body when we are acting,' he explained. 'You must always find something *under* the material, then you will find the right way to move the material.'¹⁰ Chekhov's teaching therefore consisted of numerous means of enabling his students to develop what he thought of as body and spirit in dialogue with each other.

Such a dialogue requires a medium that is capable of facilitating movement between sense-perceptible, physical reality and the spiritual reality that Chekhov believed was to be found within and beyond the physical. One example of such a medium is Chekhov's technique for creating an 'imaginary body' for a character, which he described as follows to his students and colleagues in a 1955 lecture:

Try to imagine what kind of body your character might have [...] you will see that the imaginary body of your character is different from yours. Observe this body for a while and then just step into this body [...] so that your actual body and the imaginary body will meet in the same space [...] Try to obey, as it were, this body. Try to listen to your own psychology. What happens within you, what happens with your psychology and even with your physical body if you trust this imaginary body into which you just stepped?¹¹

This technique is well known, but I want to argue here that it is only one example of an archetypal pattern in Chekhov's approach, in which an 'invisible body' is created as a means of exploring and expressing the intangible.

Chekhov employed this phrase in different contexts. When he described the communicative power of Otto Klemperer's conducting to his students, he talked about Klemperer's 'visible and invisible movements,' to distinguish between actions like down-beats which could be seen and identified and movements which could only be felt or experienced by the spectator.¹² These latter movements originated, for Chekhov, in what he occasionally termed the 'invisible body.' He described this concept in further detail in a critique of a performance given by one of his students at Dartington in 1937:

The body I gave you was an invisible body, which will affect your visible body, [...]. The invisible body must lead, entice and coax your

visible body [...]. The invisible body must be the leader and you must follow it with great care. [...] Our physical body needs time to adjust to the invisible one, so don't force it. Your invisible body will coax the visible one if you will give it time.¹³

Like a ghost or spirit guide, the invisible body therefore both haunts and leads the Chekhovian actor, occupying the liminal space between his tangible, embodied experience and an intangible, spiritual realm of insights into his role and the play. The concept enables an actor to create impressions which seem to go beyond the realm of the purely physical and visible and thereby communicate, through the performing body, what Chekhov described as the spirit of a character or play.

Chekhov's invisible body and the art of persuasion

In spite of Chekhov's declaration of 'open war on excessive materialism in [...] the arts of the theatre,' his work always began with and continually returned to the materiality of the body.¹⁴ 'To be an actor,' he said, 'means that I am using my body – [...] my body is the instrument, the tool, by which I can present myself to an audience.'¹⁵ It was Chekhov's extraordinary physical ability which so struck the young Deirdre Hurst du Prey (1906–2007), who first saw him performing on Broadway in 1935, and would go on to become his student, his assistant and a leading teacher of his technique. She remembered this 1935 performance, of Khlestakov in *The Inspector General*, as 'an absolutely unique thing of genius on the stage: this man cavorting like a ballet dancer, leaping onto the table and onto the chairs, with a silly little curl up on the top of his head [...] and flapping his coat tails.'¹⁶ Hurst du Prey went on to insist that Chekhov's performance somehow managed to exceed the capacity of the body which produced it: 'we learned afterwards he had a heart condition that would prohibit anything like that, but no: he did it.'¹⁷

Chekhov did indeed have a heart condition (it caused his relatively early death in 1955) but to read Hurst du Prey's claim literally would be to misrepresent it. Her recollections testify not so much to medical reality as to the extremity of Chekhov's capacity to create the impression in his audiences of a transformation so complete that it seemed to exceed the confines of everyday reality. Descriptions of Chekhov in rehearsals and performances repeatedly emphasize this ability. The director John Berry recalled that 'before our eyes – and I witnessed this – Chekhov became taller,' and one of Chekhov's students, Jack Colvin, described

how, in rehearsals, 'the whole physical man changed: I saw him become fat, heavy, tall, thin.'¹⁸

As a young actor, however, Chekhov had frequently despaired of his capacity to achieve such transformations. In a questionnaire sent to him by the Russian Academy of the Arts in 1923, he was asked: 'in your considerations of the exterior features of the part, do you begin with your own assets as a base, or do you try to adjust yourself to the ideal image, as you see it?' His answer reveals an ongoing struggle to transcend the limits of what he would later term the 'physical body': 'I am anxiously trying to create an ideal image. Not only do I disregard my own attributes but try by all means to overcome them. Naturally, a certain amount of limitations will always remain and it never fails to sadden me.'¹⁹ This 'ideal image' which Chekhov strove to reproduce in performance was created, he said, 'from elements which come out of nowhere, so to speak, and it is surprising and new to me as well.'²⁰ It was not, in other words, only the 'limitations' of his body that he sought, through his acting, to transcend, but also those of his conscious mind.

The acting technique that Chekhov would go on to develop would always mistrust 'cold, analytic, materialistic thinking,' which, he argued, 'tends to throttle the urge to imagination.'²¹ Rather than systematically breaking a play into its constituent parts for the purpose of gaining a fuller understanding of it, Chekhov advocated an approach which made each play strange, deliberately placing staged events beyond the reach of rational understanding:

Glimpses of this unfamiliar terrain lead us to believe that our images have a certain independent existence of their own – that they come from another world. [...] The acceptance of this independent world of the imagination [...] brings the artist to the verge of discovering new and hitherto hidden things.²²

For Chekhov, 'the actor imagines with his body' and he often gave the name 'feeling' to the form of knowledge to which the 'world of the imagination' gives the artist access.²³ This conception of knowledge was not only embodied and active but also inherently resistant to rational explanation, and led Chekhov to the conclusion that 'those indescribable, unspeakable things that the actor has accumulated in his soul while working creatively on his part will be communicated only through Radiation.'²⁴ By 'Radiation', Chekhov simply meant 'to give, to send out.'²⁵ This action is related to the element of fire: just as fire radiates heat and light, the actor, in Chekhov's technique, radiates

the 'Activity [which] permeates the whole being, psychologically as well as physically.'²⁶ There are descriptions of this effect in Chekhov's performances. According to the director Viktor Gromov, responding to Chekhov's performance at the Second Moscow Art Theatre in 1924, Chekhov's Hamlet stood, in his meeting with the ghost, 'motionless, almost frozen, but quivering [...] like a string drawn tight, which is suddenly plucked, vibrating to the voice of the ghost and the music.'²⁷ In 1921, the playwright Karel Čapek remarked upon a similar quality in Chekhov's performance of the title role in Strindberg's *Erik XIV*:

I saw many truly inspired actors. Their loftiest art was the skill of convincing you that behind the shell of their character's body, somewhere inside them, there hid an intense life of the soul. Chekhov does not have this 'inside'; everything is bared, nothing is hidden, everything is impulsive and sharp; with great intensity it flows into the play of his entire body – this delicate and tremulous tangle of nerves.²⁸

Gromov's and Čapek's descriptions of a form of acting both 'intense' and 'delicate,' 'motionless' and 'quivering' are revealingly paradoxical. They emphasize Chekhov's fully-embodied expressiveness, but notably they do not describe it so as to make it easy for a reader to imagine. Instead, the metaphors of a string 'vibrating' and a 'tremulous tangle of nerves' convey the enduring impression left by Chekhov's striking performances, and suggest that it was the communication of feeling through Chekhov's performances which most struck these viewers.

While Chekhov's transformative capacity as an actor was undoubtedly rare, it was not quite, as Hurst Du Prey had claimed, 'unique.' In 1931, four years before Chekhov's Broadway performances of Khlestakov, the young Charles Laughton stunned audiences with the physical expressivity of his portrayal of a murderer attempting to live with his secret guilt in *Payment Deferred*. The critic John Mason Brown described Laughton's face in the role as 'one of the most expressive masks that I have ever seen in the theatre,' and recounted the extension of that expressivity to the extremities of his body: 'his hands and feet and his whole body are ever the willing and expressive instruments of the things he has to say.'²⁹ As in the case of Chekhov, those things which Laughton's performances 'had to say' were usually psychological or emotional experiences he sought to transmit. James Agate would later describe him as 'a master of that kind of character-acting which is as much a matter of mind as of make-up.'³⁰ Likewise, Chekhov's

manically active portrayal of Khlestakov ultimately served to illuminate the character's spiritual (rather than merely physical) condition, as the critic Dodonov observed: 'spiritual pettiness, nothingness is essential to this Khlestakov.'³¹

This ability of the actor to suggest the content and character of thought or spirit through physical means certainly connects Laughton and Chekhov, but there are also important distinctions to be made between them. Whereas Laughton's expressive capacity was always put to the service of realistically-imagined characters, Chekhov had a strong aesthetic preference for non-naturalistic styles. Harold Clurman has suggested that this preference led to a mixed critical reception of his Khlestakov and fostered mistrust from American actors at The Group Theatre:

We all considered Chekhov a true acting genius, though the New York press had been unable to recognize it. The actors felt that they had achieved some measure of honesty and truth in their work, but Chekhov's gift for combining these with sharply expressive and yet very free color, rhythm, and design was something in which they knew themselves to be deficient, and which they therefore envied.³²

This mastery of stylized performance depended upon a further distinction between Chekhov's work and Laughton's: that of technique. If Tyrone Guthrie observed that Laughton depended excessively upon 'inspiration' and 'did lack technique,'³³ Chekhov dedicated his life to what he called 'the most urgent task of the actor,' not simply to re-shape characters but 'to re-shape himself, his technique, his being as an actor,'³⁴ and, ultimately, as he said to his students, 'to learn how we can have our inspiration at our command.'³⁵

Chekhov's technique

Chekhov began the process of 'prying behind the curtain of the Creative Process' under Stanislavsky in the 1912 First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre.³⁶ It was here that Stanislavsky first began formally to teach his 'system,' which was devised as a technique for initiating in an actor a creative state capable of generating what he called 'the life of the human spirit of the role.'³⁷ This is (to borrow Sharon Carnicke's self-confessedly awkward but useful coinage) a 'physiospiritual' undertaking, which depends upon what Stanislavsky considered to be the 'organic connection between body and soul.'³⁸ Stanislavsky took this

understanding, in part, from the study and practice of yoga and its central idea of *prana*, a Sanskrit word defined by Yogi Ramacharaka (whom Stanislavsky had read) as 'the principle of energy exhibited in all living things, which distinguishes them from a lifeless thing.'³⁹

Stanislavsky believed that by creating and sustaining 'the life of the human spirit of the role' his actors were learning to experience, shape and, in Ramacharaka's term, 'store away' its *prana*.⁴⁰ Following Ramacharaka, Stanislavsky believed that this accumulated *prana* could then be radiated to an audience. He was experimenting with this practice as early as 1909 in his production of Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*:

we needed [...] a kind of invisible radiation of feeling and creative will – eyes, facial expression, fleeting elusive tones of voice, psychological pauses [...] We had once more to return to immobility, absence of gestures [...] leave the actors motionless on their chairs; let them speak, think and communicate their suffering to the thousands in the audience.⁴¹

We can trace the exploration of *prana* in Stanislavsky's practice to the 1912 Studio and exercises in 'emanating your activity [...] from your whole being'⁴² between 1919 and 1920 (Sharon Carnicke tells us that Stanislavsky 'saturates his rehearsal notes [...] with references to it') and on to 1933, when Stanislavsky was instructing a singer in his Opera-Dramatic Studio to 'reach your hand out [...]. So that your hand calls to her, so that it radiates the call.'⁴³

But Stanislavsky's understanding of *prana* was somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, he associated it with movement (it 'moves, and is experienced like mercury, [...] from your hands to your fingertips, from your thighs to your toes').⁴⁴ On the other hand, Stanislavsky assumed that, as Ramacharaka claims, accumulated *prana* is lost in the process of movement: 'Every thought, every act, every effort of the will, every motion of a muscle, uses up a certain amount [...] of *prana*.'⁴⁵ Stanislavsky therefore often sought to practise the radiation of *prana* by limiting performers' movements (as in the example of *A Month in the Country* above), which may well have had the concomitant effect of limiting the capacity of the performers to experience the inner movement they were attempting to radiate. This contradiction is characteristic of the tendency, from which Stanislavsky never quite managed to escape, of privileging the 'inner feelings' of a performer,⁴⁶ and treating the body as having only secondary significance – as a means to 'illuminate,

illustrate and so put across the invisible shape of a character's mind to an audience.'⁴⁷

The latent mind-body dualism of these remarks contradicts Stanislavsky's professed aim to develop psychophysical techniques. But there is another way of reading Ramacharaka's description of the practice of yoga, which can both help us to circumvent that contradiction and offer a means of reconciling the apparently opposed goals of acting (which is outwardly-directed) and yoga (which, as a meditative practice, is inwardly-focused). Ramacharaka is careful to stress that, although yoga does not value the world of the physical for its own sake, 'the body is the instrument in which and by which the Spirit manifests and works.'⁴⁸ The addition of 'and by which' to that sentence is of crucial importance: it transforms the metaphor of the body as a vessel for the spirit into a conception of a body-spirit relationship in which the body is the instrument *by which* the spirit works. With this understanding, we could no more conceive of or explore the spirit without the body than we could comprehend a violin sonata without a violin.

This conception of an interdependent body and spirit would characterize the acting techniques developed both by Chekhov and by his friend and collaborator Yevgeny Vakhtangov, both of whom had trained with Stanislavsky and taught his 'system' before going on to adapt and reconstruct it in their own studios (Vakhtangov in 1913, and Chekhov in 1918). Whereas Stanislavsky's articulation of what he called the 'spiritual content' of a role or play was deeply hindered by censorship and self-censorship (he feared that the inclusion of the word 'spirit' might cause his writings to be banned),⁴⁹ Vakhtangov and Chekhov felt that this aspect of Stanislavsky's 'system' was one of its 'unresolved elements,' and they sought to address it in the development of their own techniques.⁵⁰

Vakhtangov pointed to crucial shortcomings in Stanislavsky's 'system', to its lack of a clear means 'to immediately become inspired by the material offered by the author,' and to the absence of a clear point of entry into what Stanislavsky had called 'the kernel of the character.'⁵¹ Chekhov recorded his struggle to achieve both of these aims in preparing to play Khlestakov in Stanislavsky's production of *The Inspector General* at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1921. Chekhov was attempting to define 'the whole psychology' of his role when his director 'suddenly made a lightning-quick movement with his arms and hands, as if throwing them up and at the same time vibrating with his fingers, elbows and even his shoulders. "That is the whole psychology of Khlestakov", said he, laughingly.' Chekhov records that '[his] soul was charmed by Stanislavsky's

action': 'I knew from then on how Khlestakov moved, spoke, felt, what he thought, how and what he desired, and so on.'⁵² Although it may be tempting to read this description as a claim to a kind of Platonic definition of the essence of the character, to do so would be to jump to premature conclusions. In fact, Chekhov repeatedly emphasizes the 'creative individuality' of each actor and the need to reject, reinvent and refine such images of a role in order to develop a performance of it.⁵³ Therefore, while Chekhov's techniques are certainly holistic, they are not essentialist and do not require us to assume that a character somehow pre-exists their definition in performance. When Chekhov says that he 'knew' the part, he means that he was able to imagine it. And he was able to imagine it by means of what he would later call an 'invisible body.'

The 'invisible body' would become crucial to the interventions made by Vakhtangov and Chekhov into acting technique, for it was through its expressive action that Stanislavsky had defined – albeit unconsciously – the 'kernel' of Chekhov's character. And Chekhov's embodied response to Stanislavsky's action (the response of his physical body to the invisible body with which it was presented) would take on equal significance, for it was through that embodied response that Chekhov was able to imagine the character. In the same year, Vakhtangov was directing Chekhov in the title role of Strindberg's *Erik XIV*, and Chekhov recalled asking his director 'many questions, trying to penetrate the very heart of the character,' when:

Vakhtangov suddenly jumped up, exclaiming, 'That is your Erik. Look! I am now within a magic circle and cannot break through it!' With his whole body he made one strong, painfully passionate movement, as though trying to break an invisible wall before him or to pierce a magic circle. The destiny, the endless suffering, the obstinacy, and the weakness of Erik XIV's character became clear to me.⁵⁴

This experience reiterated Stanislavsky's gestural depiction of Khlestakov, but whereas Stanislavsky's use of gesture to define that character was recorded by Chekhov as a spur-of-the-moment response to his failure to articulate an idea, Vakhtangov and Chekhov were beginning to approach the use of such combined image-gestures much more deliberately and systematically.

The movement of 'trying to break an invisible wall' described by Vakhtangov was not only a physical expression of the character's psychological life or a tangible depiction of the kind of performance the director wanted Chekhov to give. This movement also tied Chekhov's

Erik into a larger pattern in Vakhtangov's production. This was the idea of two polarized but coexisting realities: the dead world of the courtiers and the living world of the common people (to which the king tries – and fails – to escape).⁵⁵ The 'magic circle' held Chekhov's Erik within the world of the court and his gesture represented the character's failed attempt to escape to the common people. Vakhtangov's gesture for Chekhov's character therefore captured, in a tangible and embodied experience, the guiding idea in his whole production, addressing not only the problem that he had identified in Stanislavsky's technique for capturing the 'kernel' of a character, but also how 'to immediately become inspired by the material offered by the author.' The invisible body that Vakhtangov created was, therefore, not only a technique enabling the actor to imagine a character, but also a means for the director to interpret a play.⁵⁶

Vakhtangov and Chekhov's uses of image, movement and gesture in this period drew on numerous influences. Vakhtangov studied with the director and teacher Sergei Volkonsky, who taught the movement system of François Delsarte and Emile Jaques-Dalcroze's Eurhythmics.⁵⁷ According to Irwin Spector, Dalcroze's work 'centred on the physical means for stimulating the mind, of activating the nervous system to the point where it could respond to the mental stimuli, of developing physical reflexes so that the muscles would do the will of the mind easily and quickly.'⁵⁸ Likewise, Ted Shawn records that Delsarte's system of movements for vocal training and acting was based on his faith that 'communication by gesture itself is more powerful and more immediate than communication by written word, or even spoken word without demonstration by bodily movement,' that gesture is 'the universal language by which we can speak to each other with immediacy, clarity and truth.'⁵⁹ In his book, *A Man on the Stage* (1912), Volkonsky described gesture as 'an expression of a human being's inner self by the means of his external self,' and as 'a process of self-modeling that constantly evolves both in terms of a man's relationship to self and to his surrounding world.'⁶⁰ Volkonsky's book was recommended by Vakhtangov because, he said, it demonstrated 'how vital it is to train in *plastique*, [...] to sense *modeling*, and the *sculpture* of the role, scene, play,' in just the way that he had sensed and communicated his interpretation of Erik XIV through movement.⁶¹

Vakhtangov's role in the expansion of acting technique in the wake of the early explorations of Stanislavsky's 'system' was curtailed by his early death in May 1922. After this, Chekhov took over his friend's role as director of the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre, which became

the Second Moscow Art Theatre. There, the following year, Chekhov began work on a production of *Hamlet* which would open in November 1924. At the start of rehearsals, Chekhov told his colleagues that 'we need to approach *Hamlet* with a spiritual logic.'⁶² He defined the play, similarly to *Erik XIV*, as a struggle between the darkness and materialism of Claudius's court and the light of the spirit (the Ghost), towards which *Hamlet* travels in the course of the action, and which he reaches at the point of his death, described by Chekhov as 'the visible embodiment of the victory of the spirit of light over the Spirit of darkness.'⁶³

This approach to interpreting the play by means of a guiding image, like Vakhtangov's guiding gesture, also defined its rehearsal process. Before a rehearsal in 1923, Chekhov reportedly 'suggested to everybody that they see an image of the whole production of *Hamlet* directorially and then see their own image (role) throughout the play.'⁶⁴ Chekhov defined these images in very similar terms to those which would later define the invisible body, as 'a being which exists independently,' 'not an invention but something received and accepted from above.'⁶⁵ He then asked the actors 'to imitate our image,' to question it, and to allow it to guide them.⁶⁶ When one actor – evidently accustomed to Stanislavsky's methods – replied, 'I definitely need tasks,' Chekhov said that he should 'look for a task that corresponds with the image.'⁶⁷

Chekhov's emphasis upon the creative power of the image owed a great deal to his friendship with the novelist, poet and theorist Andrei Bely (1880–1934), whom he met in 1921. Chekhov used Bely as an exemplar when describing his vision of the creative process as a dialogue with images that are generated by the artist but also have an independent life:

He would conceive the general outline of a novel and then patiently observe the characters he had brought to life. They would surround him day after day, evolving and trying to establish relationships among themselves, altering the plot and uncovering deeper meaning until they had finally become symbols. [...] An artistic imagination of such dimensions as his was capable of combining two processes that are mutually exclusive. It allowed the images it created to have an autonomous existence, while at the same time subordinating them to the will of the artist. [...] The contradiction turned into co-operation between the images and the author.⁶⁸

This conception of the creative process owed a great deal to Bely's immersion in Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy (to which he had introduced

Chekhov), and to Steiner's description of 'imaginative clairvoyance' through which, he claimed, 'we inscribe onto the world what we perceive as expression, as revelation, of the world.'⁶⁹ This capacity to read the results of one's own unconscious writing was a result, Steiner argued, of the way in which clairvoyance enables a 'being of the next higher hierarchy' to become 'the force ruling us,' so that 'we record what holds sway through us.'⁷⁰

For Steiner, the images thus recorded originate beyond conscious experience and in what he called the 'etheric body.' Steiner described this etheric body as a container of 'all our memories': 'even those things that have sunk down into the depths of the soul, things we are not aware of in waking consciousness, are contained in the etheric body in some way.'⁷¹ Further still from conscious experience, and also involved in the process of clairvoyance was, said Steiner, the 'astral body,' which 'contains even those things we have not experienced. [...] It is in a certain sense built into us out of the spiritual world, and it contains not merely those things we already have in us now but also those we will learn in the future.'⁷² Steiner taught that 'astral vision' must be developed by means of imaginative exercises. His book *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* offers a guide to the practice of these exercises, beginning by asking the reader to direct 'the attention of the soul to certain happenings around us': 'on the one hand, life that is growing, budding, thriving, and on the other, all phenomena of fading, decay, withering.'⁷³ Steiner believed that the development of 'astral vision' would enable his pupils, in the process of contemplating a growing plant, to 'notice a little flame proceeding from the plant: that is the astral counterpart of its growth.'⁷⁴

Chekhov recalls practising this guided meditation while 'lying in the garden on bright sunny days':

I [...] gradually came to the experience of *movement, invisible to the external eye*, that was present in all natural phenomena. There even seemed to me to be such movement in motionless, solidified forms. It was movement that had created form and still maintained it. [...] I called this invisible movement, this play of forces, 'gesture'. [...] It seemed to me that through them I could penetrate into the very essence of phenomena.⁷⁵

Chekhov converted this experience of the gestures of natural phenomena into an acting exercise in which the actor is instructed to 'look at, or imagine, forms of different plants and flowers' and 'ask yourself, "What Gestures do these forms conjure before me?":' 'a cypress streams

upward (Gesture), and has a quiet, positive concentrated character (Quality); whereas, the old many-branched oak, rising upward and sideways (Gesture), will speak to us of a violent, uncontrolled, broad character (Quality).⁷⁶

Chekhov's emphasis on using movement, rather than an image, as the basis for experiencing the nature of a plant's growth drew upon both his movement-based explorations with Vakhtangov and his study of Steiner's Eurhythmy. This movement-practice is intended to convert 'the forms and gestures of the air,' created by sound and speech, into 'movements of the whole human being' in order to generate 'visible speech, visible music.'⁷⁷ This is Chekhov's description of the eurhythmic gesture for the sound 'ah' (as in 'father'): 'Imagine we open our arms widely and stand with our legs apart and follow with our feelings this Gesture, trying to experience it strongly. What do we experience? A kind of astonishment, awe, admiration, and similar feelings.'⁷⁸ Steiner's 1924 lectures on speech and drama focused frequently on the question of 'how to bring gesture into speech,' because, he said (echoing Volkonsky), in gesture 'the force, the dynamic of the human being himself is present.'⁷⁹

Chekhov's use of gesture was not, however, confined to the practice of speech, or even to the idea of expressing 'the dynamic of the human being himself.' Speaking to his students at Dartington, Chekhov emphasized the huge variety of applications for gesture as a means of exploration in training and rehearsal:

We have spoken about psychological gesture as something which is organic, bound together with the human body and human psychology, but is to be found everywhere, not only in the human body. In nature, and in living things, and in dead things. In everything, and everywhere an artist can find or create psychological gestures which are not in immediate connection to the human body. For instance, this stick has a gesture. The length, thickness and colour of this stick make a certain impression on the human soul and this soul, if it is an actor's or artist's, reacts on all these impressions and this reaction can be made or molded *as-if* it is psychological gesture.⁸⁰

Once psychological gestures such as these have been created, they too function as invisible bodies. Speaking to an audience of colleagues and students in 1955, Chekhov asserted that 'psychological gesture [...] follows us invisibly or intangibly, as our guide and friend, as something which inspires us all the time while we are rehearsing or performing.'⁸¹ Thus

psychological gesture can define an invisible body through movement, and can harness and develop any impression or experience in an embodied artistic form. Gestures allow a performer or director, Chekhov said, to 'express [...] the idea, the interpretation, the action, the text, [...] the feelings, the atmosphere, everything.'⁸²

The invisible body of the theatre

The last of the elements of a performance listed by Chekhov as capable of being defined by gesture, the atmosphere, takes the invisible body and its uses beyond the realm of the individual actor. Chekhov defined atmosphere as 'a feeling which does not belong to anybody [...] which lives in the space in the room,'⁸³ but described it most effectively by evoking its absence:

What would become of the content of that vitally important opening scene of Gogol's *Inspector General* were it perceived without its atmosphere? Blandly stated, the scene consists of the bribing officials absorbed in discussions of escape from punishment which they expect with the arrival of the Inspector from Petersburg. Endow it with its proper atmosphere, and you will see it and react to it quite differently; [...] you will perceive the content of this same scene as one of impending catastrophe, conspiracy, depression and almost 'mystical' horror.⁸⁴

For Chekhov, therefore, scenes must be filled with atmosphere in order to communicate content and a significance that sits 'between the spirit and the body of the performance' (or, as in the example above, between the 'impending catastrophe' and 'the bribing officials absorbed in discussions').⁸⁵ Like any invisible body, the purpose of the atmosphere is to bring, in Chekhov's terms, the spirit of a performance into its body.

True to that bodily metaphor, Chekhov taught his students to explore and develop the atmosphere physically as well as imaginatively, despite its necessarily ephemeral nature. He insisted that they 'penetrate into the atmosphere with our [...] hands, legs, bodies, voices,' and thereby give each atmosphere a distinct, embodied form, transforming each atmosphere into another invisible body.⁸⁶ The atmospheres created within a play and their interactions within it would then underpin and provide a context for dramatic action. In Chekhov's words, 'the psychology of the whole stage which surrounds the actors is always [...] one

harmonious whole with the actor.⁸⁷ Chekhov called this 'harmonious whole' the 'rhythmical body' of the theatre:

We are wrong if we think that on the stage we have a body and a costume and that is the only body. When I am standing on the stage, the stage itself, the music, my partner's body, the lights, my partner's speech, my speech – are all parts of the large and very complicated rhythmical body of our theatre.⁸⁸

Of all of the examples of invisible bodies to be found in Chekhov's work, this idea of the invisible body of an entire theatre, incorporating all aspects of its expressive capacity, is unquestionably the most significant. It prioritizes embodied understanding in the creation and the reception of theatre, an understanding which is developed through experience, by actors in rehearsal, and by both audience and actors in performance. The simultaneously physical and spiritual nature of that experience facilitates the dialogue between these notionally distinct categories required by Chekhov's vision of a 'spiritual theatre.'

For Chekhov, the actor is at the very heart of this spiritual theatre. This is of great significance to actor training today because, far from seeing the actor as a body to be controlled by a directorial or authorial mind and read by detached spectators, Chekhov's theory places the actor's capacity to shape and communicate experience (both tangibly and intangibly) at the centre of the art form. This is, however, not simply to reduce theatre to acting, but to see the paradoxical art of performance – which always is and is not really happening – as an extension of the condition of the actor whose body always is and is not doing what it does. Chekhov therefore insists both that the actor must be considered as part of the theatre as a whole and that this greater wholeness can only be understood by each individual in terms of his or her own embodied experience. For all Chekhov's emphasis on the intangible, his conception of theatre depends fundamentally upon its basis in materiality, upon the shared physical presences of actors, audience and stage, but it does not end there. Chekhov's proposed route to a spiritual theatre was not to renounce the body but to commit to it as an instrument for the exploration and expression of a spiritual realm.

Notes

1. Michael Chekhov, *The Path of the Actor*, ed. Andrei Kirillov and Bella Merlin (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 183.

2. Rudolf Steiner, 'Awakening Spiritual Thoughts,' in 'The Presence of the Dead on the Spiritual Path,' accessed 10 September 2013, http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA154/English/AP1990/PreDea_index.html.
3. Rudolf Steiner, 'Understanding the Spiritual World (Part One),' in 'The Presence of the Dead on the Spiritual Path.'
4. Steiner, 'Awakening Spiritual Thoughts'.
5. Steiner, 'Understanding the Spiritual World (Part Two),' in 'The Presence of the Dead on the Spiritual Path.'
6. Michael Chekhov, *Lessons for the Professional Actor*, ed. Deirdre Hurst du Prey (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1985), 141.
7. The Chekhov Theatre Studio was housed at Dartington Hall in Devon from 1936 until 1938 and then, until 1942, in Ridgefield, Connecticut. See Franc Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 26–31.
8. Chekhov, *Lessons for the Professional Actor*, 141.
9. Michael Chekhov and Deirdre Hurst du Prey, *The Actor is the Theatre*, ed. Deirdre Hurst du Prey, Michael Chekhov Theatre Studio Deirdre Hurst du Prey Archive, The Dartington Hall Trust Archive, vol. 1, MC/S1/7/A, 107. *The Actor is the Theatre* is an edited transcription of Chekhov's classes which Deirdre Hurst du Prey collected, edited in four volumes, and archived in the Michael Chekhov Theatre Studio Deirdre Hurst du Prey Archive, held at the Devon Records Office for the Dartington Hall Trust, UK. All excerpts cited by kind permission of the Michael Chekhov Literary Estate.
10. Chekhov and Hurst du Prey, *The Actor is the Theatre*, vol. 1, 174–5.
11. Michael Chekhov, *On Theatre and the Art of Acting* (CD, Working Arts Library, 2005), Disc 1.
12. Chekhov and Hurst du Prey, *The Actor is the Theatre*, vol. 3, MC/S1/7/C, 910.
13. *Ibid.*, 1049.
14. Charles Leonard, ed., *Michael Chekhov's To the Director and Playwright* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 31.
15. Chekhov and Hurst du Prey, *The Actor is the Theatre*, vol. 1, 196.
16. Martin Sharp, *Michael Chekhov: The Dartington Years* (DVD, Palomino Films, 2002).
17. *Ibid.*
18. Frederick Keeve, *From Russia to Hollywood: The 100-Year Odyssey of Chekhov and Shdanoff* (DVD, Aslan Productions, 2002). The italics in both citations reflect spoken emphasis.
19. Michael Chekhov, 'Chekhov's Academy of Arts Questionnaire,' *TDR: The Drama Review* 27, no. 3 (1983): 25.
20. *Ibid.*, 23.
21. Michael Chekhov, *To the Actor* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 3.
22. Michael Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*, ed. Mel Gordon (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 2, 5.
23. *Ibid.*, 95.
24. *Ibid.*, 116.
25. Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 19.
26. Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*, 113.
27. Quoted in Alma H. Law, 'Chekhov's Russian *Hamlet* (1924),' *TDR: The Drama Review* 27, no. 3 (1983): 38.

28. Andrei Malaev-Babel, *Yevgeny Vakhtangov: A Critical Portrait* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 188–9. The same passage is quoted (in a slightly different translation) in Yana Meerzon, *The Path of a Character: Michael Chekhov's Inspired Acting and Theater Semiotics* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2005), 18.
29. Quoted in Simon Callow, *Charles Laughton: A Difficult Actor* (London: Methuen, 1988), 42.
30. Callow, *Charles Laughton*, 81.
31. Quoted in Laurence Senelick, 'Embodying Emptiness: The Irreality of Mikhail Chekhov's Khlestakov,' *New Theatre Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (2009): 229.
32. Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years: The Group Theatre and the Thirties* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1983), 158.
33. Callow, *Charles Laughton*, 81.
34. Chekhov, *The Path of the Actor*, 128.
35. Chekhov and Hurst du Prey, *The Actor is the Theatre*, vol. 1, 82.
36. Chekhov, *To the Actor*, li.
37. Quoted in Sharon Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus: An Acting Master for the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 220.
38. *Ibid.*, 169.
39. Yogi Ramacharaka, *Hatha Yoga or The Yogi Philosophy of Physical Well-Being* (Chicago: Yogi Publication Society, 1904), 151.
40. *Ibid.*, 153.
41. Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavsky: His Life and Art* (London: Methuen, 1988), 191.
42. This quotation from Vera Solovyova's memories of the First Studio is taken from Sergei Tcherkassi, 'Fundamentals of the Stanislavsky System and Yoga Philosophy and Practice,' *Stanislavski Studies* 1 (2012), accessed 21 October 2013, http://stanislavskistudies.org/wp-content/uploads/Sergei_Tcherkasski-Stanislavski_studies_1.pdf.
43. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 178, 99.
44. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 178.
45. Ramacharaka, *Hatha Yoga*, 155; for a more detailed discussion of this contradiction, see also Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 176.
46. Konstantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary*, trans. Jean Benedetti (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 212.
47. Stanislavsky, *An Actor's Work*, 516. Benedetti's translation has a preference for 'mind' over 'spirit,' but both terms would be accurate. For a reflection on the significance of this decision, see Bella Merlin, "'Where's the Spirit Gone?' The Complexities of Translation and the Nuances of Terminology in *An Actor's Work* and an Actor's Work," *Stanislavski Studies* 1 (February 2012), accessed 21 October 2013, http://stanislavskistudies.org/wp-content/uploads/Bella_Merlin_Staniavski_Studies_1.pdf.
48. Ramacharaka, *Hatha Yoga*, 17.
49. See Tcherkassi, 'Fundamentals of the Stanislavsky System,' 1.
50. Andrei Malaev-Babel, ed., *The Vakhtangov Sourcebook* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 100.
51. *Ibid.*
52. Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*, 89.
53. *Ibid.*, 16.
54. *Ibid.*, 89.
55. This idea also characterized Vakhtangov's productions of Maeterlinck's *The Miracle of St Anthony* and *The Dybbuk*. See Malaev-Babel, *Yevgeny Vakhtangov*, 165, 202.
56. For further examples of Vakhtangov's use of gesture as a means of developing an interpretation, see Malaev-Babel, *Yevgeny Vakhtangov*, 202–13.
57. For more information, see Mark Evans, *Movement Training for the Modern Actor* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 20–3, 27–9.
58. Irwin Spector, *Rhythm and Life: The Work of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1990), 57.
59. Ted Shawn, *Every Little Movement: A Book about François Delsarte* (Pittsfield, MA: Eagle Printing and Binding, 1954), 92, 93.
60. Malaev-Babel, *The Vakhtangov Sourcebook*, 338.
61. *Ibid.*, 121.
62. Andrei Kirillov and Franc Chamberlain, eds, 'Rehearsal Protocols for *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare at the Second Moscow Art Theatre (2nd October–11th November, 1923),' *Theatre Dance and Performance Training* 4, no. 2 (2013): 243–79, 243.
63. Law, 'Chekhov's Russian *Hamlet*,' 35.
64. Kirillov and Chamberlain, 'Rehearsal Protocols for *Hamlet*,' 259.
65. *Ibid.*, 256.
66. *Ibid.*
67. *Ibid.*, 258.
68. Michael Chekhov, *Life and Encounters*, unpublished translation by David Ball, collection of the Michael Chekhov Centre UK, London, 58.
69. Steiner, 'Understanding the Spiritual World (Part One)'.
70. *Ibid.*
71. *Ibid.*
72. *Ibid.*
73. Rudolf Steiner, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds: How is it Achieved?* (Forest Row: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2004), 46.
74. Rudolf Steiner, *At the Gates of Spiritual Science* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1970), 134.
75. Chekhov, *The Path of the Actor*, 187–8. I have used the phrase that appears in the unpublished translation, 'natural phenomena,' rather than the phrase that appears in the published text, 'all phenomena in the world,' since Chekhov is speaking not only of phenomena 'in the world,' but of those *beyond* the world: nature, for Anthroposophy, extends beyond the earth's atmosphere.
76. Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*, 39.
77. Rudolf Steiner, 'A Lecture on Eurhythmy,' accessed 9 March 2012, <http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/Eurhythmy/19230826p01.html>.
78. Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*, 75.
79. Rudolf Steiner, *Speech and Drama: Lectures Given in the Section for the Arts of Speech and Music, School for Spiritual Science, Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland, September 1924* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1960), 52, 53.
80. Chekhov and Hurst du Prey, *The Actor is the Theatre*, vol. 4, MC/S1/7/D, 1412.
81. Chekhov, *On Theatre and the Art of Acting*, Disc 4.
82. Chekhov and Hurst du Prey, *The Actor is the Theatre*, vol. 2, MC/S1/7/B, 314.
83. Chekhov and Hurst du Prey, *The Actor is the Theatre*, vol. 1, 109.

84. Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 48–9.
85. Chekhov and Hurst du Prey, *The Actor is the Theatre*, vol. 1, 108.
86. *Ibid.*, 125.
87. Chekhov and Hurst du Prey, *The Actor is the Theatre*, vol. 4, 1416.
88. Michael Chekhov, *Lessons for Teachers of his Acting Technique*, ed. Deirdre Hurst du Prey (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 2000), 71.

11

Haunting Shakespeare, or King Lear Meets Alice

Peter Holland

This is the beginning of an exploration of aspects of ghosting in Shakespearean performance. In spite of the title, I should make clear now that it will have nothing to do with ghosts *in* Shakespeare's plays. Nor am I going to be concerned with the cultural hauntings by Shakespeare, the Derridean hauntology. Instead, I am interested in the textualizing of the performer's body and voice and the consequential modes of haunting that the performer may choose to create and those that are conjured into presence unwillingly. It will take me from the ghost seen in a performance that never happened through to the ghostliness of the ghosting of actors and, finally, to the representation of ghosts in the audience at another performance that never took place. Each problematizes how performance ghosting functions.

Ghosting and photography

In the Musée d'Orsay in March 2011, at an exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite photography, I encountered an image, a photograph by Julia Margaret Cameron taken in 1872, showing 'King Lear Allotting his Kingdom to his Three Daughters' (Figure 11.1).¹ Cameron took a number of photos of scenes and/or characters from Shakespeare. There are images of Isabella and Mariana, as one might expect, even if, on occasion, one Isabella can be confused with another (from Keats) or Shakespeare's Mariana becomes at times difficult to tell apart from Tennyson's. Cameron also produced images of Ophelia ranging from the fairly mad to the rather surprisingly modern, the last identified by Cameron as 'Ophelia Study No.2'.² More startlingly there is a superb image identified by Cameron as 'Iago, Study from an Italian' (Figure 11.2)³ (and I note the repetition of *study* in the title), taken in 1867 using as her model probably Angelo Colarossi, who