

Strasberg Versus Chekhov

2 books on
acknowledged
acting systems
vie to awaken
the actor within

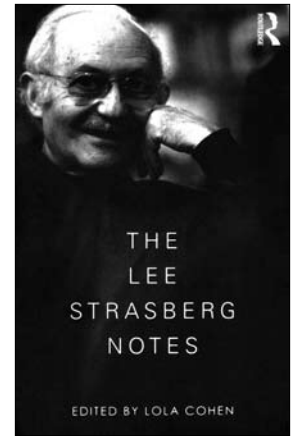
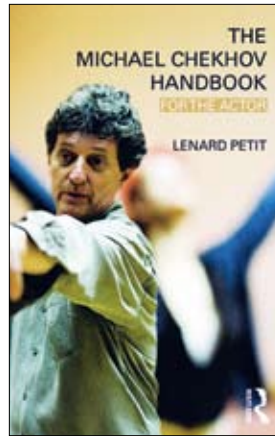
BY GERALD FREEDMAN

THE MICHAEL CHEKHOV HANDBOOK: FOR THE ACTOR

By Lenard Petit.

Routledge, New York and London.

182 pp., \$24.95 paper.



THE LEE STRASBERG NOTES

Edited by Lola Cohen.

Routledge, New York and London.

201 pp., \$24.95 paper.

WHAT IS THIS FASCINATION TO ACT, TO BRING to life a story in the form of a script or a narrative that asks to be illustrated? Is it the appeal of assuming the psyche of another, of exploring an alternative world and inhabiting another set of responses other than our own? Or is it simply a layer of pretend, of living in the imagination as an extension of childhood memories and fantasies? Whatever explanation we favor, “acting out” or “being possessed” seems to exist in every culture, and “acting” in front of an audience in our Western society is thousands of years old. The “sharing” of storytelling seems to be essential in our consciousness. An endless stream of books, techniques, instructions and instructors has been developed to help us accomplish this with greater skill, ease and truthfulness.

Two books on acting as taught by acknowledged masters have recently become available. *The Lee Strasberg Notes* is a collection of previously unpublished transcripts of Strasberg’s classes on acting, directing and Shakespeare, compiled and edited by Lola Cohen. In *The Michael Chekhov Handbook: For the Actor*, Lenard Petit, artistic director of the Michael Chekhov Acting Studio in New York City, details the technique of the eponymous Russian actor and theoretician whose system evolved into an alternative of Stanislavsky’s. The books read as if they came from opposite ends of a spectrum, yet they reach conclusions that lie somewhere in the center.

Both books profess a search for “truth” in behavior. I do not know how to define truth in acting except to observe that you recognize it when it is present or recognize the absence of it. Truth is, in fact, subjective, an agreed-upon assumption. Both techniques profess to be solidly based on the Stanislavsky system, but each master has extended and emphasized different elements of the training. Strasberg dismisses Michael Chekhov with a few sentences, but I think the Chekhov technique has much to offer. It is particularly

useful in opening the actor who is “stuck” in his head.

I come to these texts with a bias in my own personal training. I studied in the 1940s with Alvina Krause, who created her own set of exercises from reading Stanislavsky and observing professional actors. I then studied briefly with Bobby Lewis and Harold Clurman, and also consider Jerome Robbins and George Cukor as important mentors. I was an early member of the Actors Studio and became most active in the ’60s when I was an observer and a moderator of the Directors/Writers Unit at the Studio. It was there that I encountered Strasberg, as well as Elia Kazan and Cheryl Crawford. So my bias is heavily weighted on the side of the Group Theatre experience as those artists interpreted Stanislavsky’s system in their individually diverse ways. I had heard of the name Michael Chekhov and his “psychological gesture” on the periphery of other training, but that technique remained mostly an anecdotal mystery. Until now.

Strasberg’s training, or “the Method,” as it became known, relies heavily on exercises and techniques to unlock the psychic and sensory memories locked within an individual. The Chekhov technique, by contrast, is based on the imagination and a series of movement exercises derived from archetypes. Both of the preceding statements are gross simplifications of these masters’ techniques; to evaluate their effectiveness, one must read their books to digest their individual voices, and one must work the exercises aimed at expanding the actor’s instrument (which is his or her self).

These are not competing techniques. They both seek to open up the actor’s physical instrument to respond freely to stimuli in the moment. They both rely on awakening the actor’s imagination as a door to inner emotions. But their methods emphasize different ways of going about this. The Chekhov technique seems more playful and childlike in its approach to the physical; the Strasberg technique draws

upon a more inner-directed psycho-physical foundation. They both advocate relaxation and concentration as a way of opening a channel to the senses. Strasberg says, "When you use your imagination for unlocking the doors to all the senses, you become real, alive, vivid and true. You will then have the belief, the faith, the imagination to create the living reality that is demanded by the performer."

In laying out the steps to accomplish a mastery of the Chekhov technique, Petit describes a series of exercises based on archetypes (without narrowing them to stereotypes). His prose is clear and precise, although the technique's working vocabulary is peppered with unfamiliar terms like "inner and outer body," "sweet spot," "molding" and "radiating." These exercises lead to the capstone of the Chekhov process, "the psychological gesture." "The psychological gesture will lead to the inner and emotional impulse," writes Petit. "The body cannot lie when you open the channels to the senses through large physical actions."

Strasberg presents it another way: "Some people have the idea that what we want to do is 'free' the actor. I don't give a damn about freedom in that sense. Our work isn't about freeing the actor. I want to put the actor in an artistic prison. The idea that expression is freedom is wrong. Expression means that you have something that you want to express in a way that is clear and true."

The Chekhov credo, as Petit describes it, seeks the same end: "There is a spiritual element to this work that must be acknowledged. This spiritual element is not religious. The creative spirit (imagination) is differentiated from the reasoning mind [in that it] can grasp understanding through archetypes and through a desire to find wholeness... The rational mind works through analysis. Analysis separates and divides, whereas synthesis unifies." Petit goes on to quote William Blake, who he calls "imagination's fearless champion." Blake wrote, "What is now proved was only once imagined." Blake, Petit explains, "saw the imagination as a divine and active gift in human beings. It is our connection to pure energy."

The Strasberg notes are edited by Cohen from hundreds of hours of classes and seminars videotaped at the Strasberg institutes in New York and Los Angeles. The book contains cogent comments from Stanislavsky on the topics of directing and

playwriting, and there is a short essay on Shakespeare and Stanislavsky. I miss Lee's acerbic wit and humor, but the notes convey a rich feast of penetrating insights and observations on theatre, acting and actors, from Edmund Kean to Laurence Olivier.

Reading Petit's *Handbook* led me to a DVD demonstrating the exercises. It helped fill out and amplify the text. The author observes that the Chekhov technique "is often described as 'outside in,' while other approaches, involving more thinking and less movement, are described as 'inside out.' That is how the two techniques of Chekhov and Strasberg are often characterized." But Petit goes on to argue the opposite: "In my opinion, the Chekhov technique is not 'outside in'; it is perhaps the most 'inside out' process there is. For the actor, it is the body that has to be mastered. There is no other way, because that is the instrument."

The Chekhov techniques for acting are, indeed, based in one primary point of reference—movement. Strasberg's exercises are more centered in a psychological concept, which leads to emotional release through concentration on the sensory experience and

on the re-training of conditioned habitual behavior and responses.

Neither book seems to me a beginner's text. For the actor with some previous experience or basic Stanislavsky training, both books can be enriching and expanding. As Petit puts it, the Chekhov training "is much easier to do than to talk about it. And it is not really worth talking about before you have the experience of it. It is all about having an experience. After this happens, then we can talk about it."

I couldn't agree more. I've been teaching acting for a very long time, and I never have known how to use a textbook to create results (though Uta Hagen and Stella Adler can be useful for beginners). But at certain stages in an actor's development, there are books worth recommending to stimulate and amplify the training—and these two books by modern masters are worthy additions to that list. **✎**

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Two for the Bard

Whoever wrote Shakespeare's plays, there's a raft of autobiographical content to contend with

BY GERALD WEALES

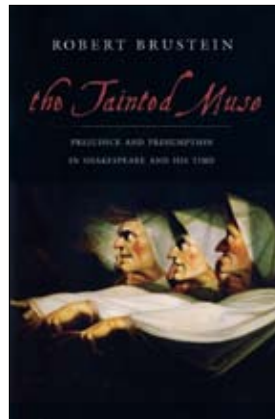
THE TAINTED MUSE

By Robert Brustein.

Yale University Press, New Haven and London.
288 pp., \$26 cloth.

DURING A RECENT CALL-IN TELEVISION INTERVIEW, a reader asked Scott Turow about the autobiographical implications of a character in his most recent book. The novelist answered, "Fiction. I write fiction." Robert Brustein would probably take issue with Turow's response—at least, that's the impression one gets from *The Tainted Muse*, Brustein's new critical study, subtitled "Prejudice and Presumption in Shakespeare and His Time." The artistic director, playwright and theatrical gadfly concedes that circumstances (i.e., plot) may sometimes dictate the shape of a play's dialogue, and that the lines belong to the character who speaks them, whether that character is lying (Iago) or speaking truth (Isabella). Yet, Brustein goes on to posit, on occasion the Bard (and, by implication, any purveyor of invented stories since) breaks the fictional bonds that bind him and speaks through the voices of his creations, expressing the beliefs of his time—or, in Shakespeare's exceptional case, personal ideas that contradict or transcend the assumptions of the age. "The word I have chosen to describe this compound of convictions, ideas, obsessions, attitudes and opinions is *prejudices*," Brustein says in a summarizing afterword.

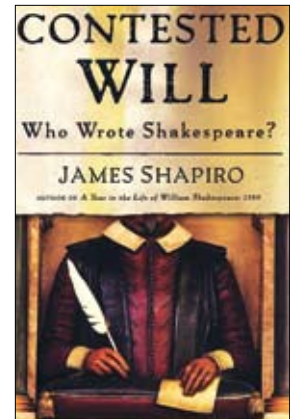
If Shakespeare had left an accumulation of letters, as Chekhov and Samuel Beckett did, or had published essays, as Arthur Miller did, or had written memoirs, as Tennessee Williams did, there would be a body of work to compare with the authorial presence peeping through the plays. No such luck with Shakespeare. Brustein is stuck with what he can read behind the lines. At first he is tentative about the process ("I recognize this as a precarious endeavor"), using phrases like "it may also suggest" and "this seems to have been." He can stretch the bounds of conjecture, as he does in a footnote on shipwrecks in the plays: "It is possible that Shakespeare may have suffered some sort of family loss at sea since he harps so much on this theme." As he makes his way through the studies within this study, however, Brustein lapses into certainty



CONTESTED WILL

By James Shapiro.

Simon & Schuster, New York, London,
Toronto and Sydney. 339 pp., \$26 cloth.



about "the Shakespearean obsessions." Authorial intrusions find their way into any line, character or action that helps prove the point he wants to make.

Brustein admits to being "somewhat mischievous" in his choice of "the vocabulary of contemporary academic discourse" in his chapter headings, and although his discussions range across the entire canon, he chooses a representative character for each chapter. Hamlet is the example in "Misogyny," called out for his "unbridled cruelty" to Ophelia, for it is in his play that "Shakespearean sex hatred" is most openly expressed. The lady's "painted good looks are a snare for the innocent"—Brustein even quotes John Donne's "No where / Lives a woman true and faire," never noticing that there is more wit than earnestness in the poet's "Song."

Osric, the butt of Hamlet's teasing, is the poster child for "Effemiphobia," a chapter on the feminine male. Primarily he is the forerunner of the fop of Restoration drama, preposterous in dress and manners, given to vocal flourishes. Brustein goes out of his way to indicate that Osric is not homosexual; in fact, his active sexuality, given the lubriciousness of women posited in the preceding chapter, makes him all the more female. Shakespeare turns out to be prejudiced in favor of the "plain-dealing soldier," who makes his appearance in the chapter on "Machismo"—think Hotspur or Kent in *King Lear*. This chapter tends to fall apart when the author gives so much space to Iago, whose forthright self-presentation is contradicted by the content of his speeches, and to Thersites, in whom plain-dealing becomes hysterical abuse. In the chapter on "Elitism and Mobocracy," Brustein hears the voice of Shakespeare in the "virulent antidemocratic rants of his characters," but a few paragraphs later comments on his "considerable sympathy for the common man."

In "Racialism" Brustein moves from Aaron, the villainous Moor of *Titus Andronicus*, to Othello, like Lear "more sinned against than sinning," and from casually dismissive

“I am a Jew” comments to Shylock, who is compared (to his credit) with Barabas, “the very embodiment of the Machiavellian villain,” in Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*. In “Intelligent Design,” Brustein says, “I know there is no way to prove my strong suspicion that Shakespeare’s religious thinking evolved from an unquestioning belief in a personal God into a quite morbid brand of Indifferentism.” He nevertheless tries to do so by focusing on “the corrosive nihilism that permeates *King Lear*.” In dealing with each of these “prejudices,” Brustein moves Shakespeare from compliance with the attitudes of his time to a far more complex understanding of the problems *The Tainted Muse* lays out.

JAMES SHAPIRO’S NEW BOOK, WITH its punning title (*Contested Will*), might be seen as a critique of Brustein’s study, although that was certainly not its intention. In describing the changes in the way Shakespeare has been perceived, Shapiro points out that Edmond Malone, in his 1780 edition of the plays and sonnets, added a note to Sonnet 93 identifying the poet with the cuckolded husband speaking the verse—and then went on to seek out the spoor of the author in the plays. “With Malone’s decision to parse the plays for evidence of what an author thought or felt, literary biography had crossed a Rubicon,” Shapiro says.

Shapiro believes that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare’s plays, but he traces the history of the authorship controversy, in which a “stupid, illiterate, third-rate play-actor” gets credited in some quarters with having wielded the pen. The intemperate speaker quoted here is Delia Bacon, den mother of the adherents of Francis Bacon (no relative of Delia’s) as The Author. She was the first to identify the presumed qualifications for authorship, which Shapiro lists as “pure motives, good breeding, foreign travel, the best of educations and the scent of the court.” As Shapiro points out, the literature of the authorship brouhaha is so vast that he can do no more than scratch its surface, but he discusses the major contenders among the horde of doubters, giving a nod to the odd and eccentric, even devoting chapters to the two most prominent candidates for the post of secret Shakespeare—Bacon and Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford.

Contested Will is not so much intent on disproving the doubters’ claims—although it does that, too—as it is in suggesting that those

doubts about Shakespeare are tangential, with little connection to a supposed anonymous stand-in for the man from Stratford. In the case of Mark Twain, a deep-dyed Baconian, Shapiro points out that the humorist subtitled his book *Is Shakespeare Dead?* “From My Autobiography,” and that Twain (using himself as the prime example) insisted that authors of fiction were always autobiographical. Sigmund Freud, who was a committed Oxfordian, embraced the Earl as the true Shakespeare, Shapiro suggests, as “a response to a threat to his Oedipal theory” (although I have a little trouble understanding how his “rejection of Shakespeare of Stratford” proves that contention). As for the assorted cryptographers and code-breakers who found hidden evidence in the plays of Bacon’s or Oxford’s authorship, they are mostly dismissed as amateur or professional puzzle-solvers.

Once Shapiro has scattered the pseudo-Shakespeares, he turns to a chapter on the dramatist himself, introducing references from his contemporaries, giving an account of the organization of the theatre at the time, describing the state of education in a town like Stratford, and citing Shakespeare’s

work as a co-author—which undermines any possible autobiographical reading of the plays. Considering the emphasis on motive in his discussion of two centuries of criticism, one wonders about Shapiro’s own motive in this chapter. It is perhaps revealed in a gathering of lines from the plays about imagination—including Theseus’s long speech from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*—and its relation to dramatic invention. Ironically, it is at this point that Shapiro begins to hear Shakespeare’s voice in the words of his characters, succumbing to the very autobiographical fallacy that he has hitherto been condemning.

Both of these books are fascinating to read, but in the end I find myself agreeing with a friend of Shapiro, who asked him, “What difference does it make *who* wrote the plays?” I wouldn’t care if it were a chimpanzee with a typewriter, as long as we have the plays. ☒

Gerald Weales is a drama specialist, a retired professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and the author or editor of a great many books, most of which are now out of print.

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