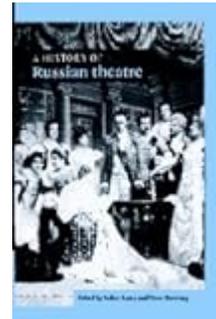


**Robert Leach, Victor Borovsky, eds.** *A History of Russian Theatre*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. xv + 446 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-43220-7.



**Reviewed by** Susan Costanzo (Department of History, Western Washington University)

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### Strutting and Fretting on the Russian Stage

Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky have assembled an international team of scholars who provide a survey of developments in Russian theatre from earliest ritualized spectacles to recent paradoxes of “free” theatre in the post-Soviet era. Although not affiliated with any series currently underway at Cambridge University Press, the volume presents an unusually cohesive overview of this critical medium of cultural expression. While maintaining a clear chronological framework, chapters are written by specialists who focus on their research fields, and careful attention is given to trends for each topic and period.

The starting point of the collection is the generally accepted argument “that the two main streams of twentieth-century theatre practice flow from the work of Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, who bestride the modern theatre like colossi” (p. 2). Although Robert Leach’s introduction also notes other individuals from Russia who have also had some world-wide significance, these two individuals so dominate scholarly perspective that, like it or not, they become the focal points around which treatments of Russian theatre are organized.

Although theatre as we understand it was imported to Russia from Western Europe, Victor Borovsky adds in

his introductory remarks that Russian theatre quickly became distinctive from other European theatre “primarily as a result of the cultural ideals and tastes of the aristocracy—which had established professional public theatre in Russia—meeting the counter-flow of a native, popular theatre movement” (p. 7).

The survey itself begins with Catriona Kelly’s typically lively review of early Russian performance traditions, including *skomorokhi* (minstrels), *kaliki-perekhozhie* (wandering cripples), *yurodivye* (holy fools), and various forms of ritual games. The introduction of western theatre transformed these indigenous spectacles, especially as a result of the “flood” of foreign practitioners from 1700 to 1840 (p. 29). While giving rise to new forms of popular entertainment, such as school plays and *vertep* and *Petrushka* puppet shows, the new performances contributed to the growing cultural gap between the elite and the masses. Borovsky summarizes developments in elite theatre over roughly the same period but also recognizes the influence of those new popular forms, in particular school plays, which were noteworthy for their function as early didactic theatre, an emphasis that remained in all theatrical genres into the Soviet years.

Trends in the nineteenth century receive the most detailed analysis. Because theatre throughout the world was still dominated by actors and playwrights, chapters

here focus on them along with important media. Playwright Aleksandr Ostrovsky, for instance, gets an entire chapter. The inclusion of chapters on ballet by Andy Adamson and opera by John Warrack in the nineteenth century is particularly refreshing, since they are typically neglected in spite of their obvious interdependence. Kelly offers more materials on folk, amateur, and provincial theaters in another chapter that presents a rare attempt in this volume to incorporate theatres outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg/Leningrad. Issues related to the commerce and politics of theatre also are addressed. The result is a detailed picture of the richness of Russian theatre and a sense of the genuine excitement that surrounded the enterprise. The generous sprinkling of photographs throughout the text adds the visual element that required in order to appreciate performance. This section also provides a wealth of precursors that provided fodder for the innovations of Konstantin Stanislavsky, Viacheslav Meyerhold, and other early twentieth-century directors.

The pinnacle of the volume focuses on the early twentieth century, when Stanislavsky and Meyerhold reigned in not always hospitable environments. In the chapter on Stanislavsky and his Moscow Art Theatre, Jean Benedetti presents the important corrective that dispels the Soviet myth of the compatibility of Stanislavsky and his partner Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (p. 270). Meyerhold's restless energy receives attention by Benedetti, Leach, Spencer Golub, and Inna Solovyova, although their interests are broader. As a denouement, Solovyova, Birgit Beumers, and Anatolii Smeliansky cover the era since 1929, and Leach concludes the volume with a chapter on Russian theatres' influence on the West, including some discussion of emigre theatre.

The section that addresses most of the Soviet era reveals the limitations of this cohesive approach. Because

of the pivotal role of Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, the contents on either side of this watershed era are designed to enhance our understanding of their legacies. While that strategy offers distinct benefits for the pre-Silver age, the period since 1929 suffers considerably. For the most part, this shortcoming is not the fault of the contributors, who are forced by space limitations to discuss a few influential directors in keeping with the rise of director-centered theatre. While one might quibble over which directors and which productions warrant attention (a nit-picking exercise), gaping holes are more problematic. The eras of the Cultural Revolution (and TRAM -Theatre of revolutionary youth) and World War Two are omitted. Ballet, opera, amateur and provincial theatres receive at best passing mention in the Soviet era, and so readers are left without any sense of their ongoing importance for theatrical developments. Actors, and playwrights also play a small role, excuse the pun, and contradict claims on the frontispiece that they receive treatment in all chapters.

Throughout the survey, authors usually incorporate some useful historical context, even in the pre-revolutionary era when broader political developments made somewhat less of an impact on theatre than in the Soviet era. In some places, however, the necessary brevity results in oversimplifications that border on distortions.

Given the work's effort to be comprehensive, the bibliography and index are a bit skimpy. The former is limited to books, predominantly of Russian and British origin. The index only provides entries for individuals and play titles.

In sum, this survey is an important addition to literature on Russian theatre. It will be most valuable for undergraduates, but advanced students will also find useful material here.

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