

On Rudolf Steiner's Impact on the Training of the Actor

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Introduction

This article considers Rudolf Steiner's cultural legacy in twentieth century theatre in the English-speaking world. It focuses on practical, aesthetic and spiritual indications given by Steiner for a renewal of speech and drama, and how these led to a training of the actor. A particular focus will be on Steiner's *Lectures on Speech and Drama* (1924). Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), who founded the Anthroposophical Society in 1912, believed he had two life tasks. The first was to bring to humanity the knowledge of reincarnation, karma and spiritual evolution, and the second was,

to show individuals the path of initiation so that they could discover the mission of evil in the world... [and] awaken human beings to what is human so they might overcome evil... He [also] lived in such a way that whenever he encountered a problem, he answered this problem with a positive initiative.¹

Following on from this, one of the distinguishing features of Anthroposophy was that it strove to enable art to have a redemptive and healing power for the soul life of the human being. Fundamentally, Steiner was addressing himself to human beings who felt a call to the spiritual life. The aim of the Anthroposophical Society was expressed as the integration of the spiritual human being with the spiritual in the universe, as the rightly-oriented human yearns for such a union: "only they can be anthroposophists who feel certain questions on the nature of man and the universe as an elemental need of life, just as one feels hunger and thirst."²

Of particular concern to Steiner was that the spiritual life of the Anthroposophical Society should have an artistic element.³ He was thus concerned with speech as an art, and the use of drama to make a connection between the present and the ancient Greek Mysteries. Marie von Sivers, an actress of Russian background who was later to become Steiner's second wife,

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¹ Michaela Glockler, *A Healing Education: How Can Waldorf Education Meet the Needs of Children?* (Fair Oaks: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2000), pp. 5-6.

² Rudolf Steiner, *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1985), p. 13.

³ Rudolf Steiner, *Creative Speech* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1978), p. 12.

took up Steiner's indications for speech from the beginning, and quickly became a leader in this area of Anthroposophical expression. Though it was not until near the end of his life that Steiner gave his lectures on speech and drama, they were nevertheless of great importance. He intended them to be for actors or those aspiring to take up the theatrical profession, but the audience grew to be much wider. As there were insufficient funds, he was unable to carry out his first intention, which was to begin an acting company.⁴ The primary resources on Steiner's speech and drama impulse come foremost from these lectures; his teachings on speech published as *Creative Speech*, and the lectures entitled *Poetry and the Art of Speech*.⁵ In terms of these core texts, a spiritual path of acting was offered with a range of practical suggestions, activities and meditations for the trainee actor.

Steiner was himself a playwright of 'sacred dramas', and had commenced writing a series of mystery plays in 1909 with von Sivers. These plays, "The Portal of Initiation: A Rosicrucian Mystery" (1910), "The Soul's Probation: A Life Tableau in Dramatic Scenes" (1911), "The Guardian of the Threshold: A Series of Soul Events in Dramatic Pictures" (1912), and "The Soul's Awakening: A Drama of the Soul and Spirit" (1913) were *tableaux* intended to convey spiritual truths.⁶ Steiner describes the ideal of the actor's experience as follows:

[t]he actor's inner life of feeling has to undergo change and development, until he is able to approach the whole of his art in a religious mood. Suppose a poet is writing an ode, if he is genuinely absorbed in the mood of the ode, he won't be thinking that his pen doesn't seem to be writing very smoothly. Similarly on the stage, you should have developed such an instinctive devotion to your work that even, let me say such a simple action as knocking over a chair, you carry out with no other feeling than you are doing a spiritual deed. Not until this mood is attained will it be possible for the art of the stage to be filled and pervaded with the spirit that rightfully belongs to it. Indeed its whole future depends on that. And do not imagine the desired mood can be obtained by any sentimental exhortations; no, only by dealing with realities. And we are dealing with realities when the sounds of speech in their mysterious runing become for us Gods – Gods who form us in our speaking. This

⁴ Rudolf Steiner, *Speech and Drama*, trans. Mary Adams (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1978[1959]), pp. 24-25.

⁵ Rudolf Steiner, *Poetry and the Art of Speech* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1981).

⁶ Rudolf Steiner, *Four Mystery Dramas*, trans. R. and H. Pusch (London and New York: Rudolf Steiner Publishing and Anthroposophic Press, 2007).

should be the feeling that inspires all we do; it is also the determining sign of true art.⁷

Given that it was a path of sacrifice rather than of glory, it is unsurprising that in its pure form this way of acting has only attracted a relatively small group of adherents, though it has numbered in its ranks some extraordinary performers. Nonetheless, adherence to Anthroposophy is not a condition of taking Anthroposophical speech and drama classes; so there is always a wider audience.⁸ Later in this article, the case of Michael Chekhov will be considered. He was a professional actor who through the marriage between his theatrical experience and his encounter with Steiner came to his own method or technique, which has become part of theatre history and has significantly influenced its practice. The question then arises, how do we evaluate this daughter movement? How 'Steiner' is it, existing as it does among non-Anthroposophical practitioners of the theatrical arts? This is the final question addressed in this article.

The Theatrical Context of the Early Twentieth Century and Rudolf Steiner

To begin, it is helpful to consider the context in which Steiner was writing and the theatrical innovations of the time. Actor training emerged as a real question at the beginning of the twentieth century. Just as Theosophy was bringing insights from Eastern spirituality to the West, so also were European theatre practitioners becoming aware of Eastern theatre practice. Further, the success of the scientific worldview spurred the search for an objective, systematic study of acting, using the application of Freud's insights into human psychology. Constantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) was a central early figure in this endeavour. There was a reaction against the excesses of nineteenth century theatre, with its focus on the star performer, and its pandering to the public through the sentimentality of melodrama. It was a time of renewal, with impulses that still fructify the present. There was a return to complete productions of Shakespeare, after centuries of cuts and bowdlerisations, by the insightful director Harley Granville-Barker (1877-1946). Leading British director Peter Hall writes, "Barker is still the best commentator on Shakespeare's plays as plays."⁹ Linked to the work of Barker and his teacher, William Poel, was Elsie Fogerty's pioneering renewal of speech training for the stage. Fogerty was the founder of the Central School of Speech and Drama

⁷ Steiner, *Speech and Drama*, p. 389.

⁸ Author's experience in taking Steiner classes in Australia, England and Brazil.

⁹ Peter Hall, *Exposed by the Mask* (London: Oberon Books, 2000) p. 42.

in London, and her students emerged as some of the leading performers in early twentieth century theatre.

In France similar changes in theatrical practice were in evidence. In reaction to the acting of the Comedie Francaise which was highly stylised, Jacques Copeau (1879-1949), the founder of the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, mined a seam of physical theatre which has grown ever more bountiful as the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries progressed. He achieved this by forming an artistic colony to research how to renew the art of acting and theatre. John Rudlin sees his “real legacy in putting the playfulness back into plays and the quest for sincerity back into playing them.”¹⁰ Within this artistic stream, Michel Saint-Denis brought an emphasis on the body and the mask back into Anglophone theatre.

Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966), the son of the famed English actress Ellen Terry, revolutionised theatre design, making theatre sets that embodied the life of the play rather than presenting naturalistic copies of the everyday world. These sets strove to be inherently artistic. In contrast to the star actor managers of the nineteenth century, Craig advocated ‘total theatre’ where the director presented a complete vision of the play in every detail. Indeed Craig advocated the actor as *übermarionette*, so that she or he would not intrude on the overall aesthetic vision. Renowned English director Peter Brook describes Craig’s influence as reaching across the world, “into every theatre with any pretensions to serious work” and stressed the futuristic value of his work, saying in 1988; “today... producers and directors are only just catching up with his ideas.”¹¹

However, unlike these other breakers of new theatrical ground, Steiner, from his spiritual scientific investigations had derived a comprehensive cosmology, which underpinned his indications for the training of the actor. Still, I argue here that Steiner’s impulse of speech and drama came as part of a larger impulse of cultural and theatre renewal breaking through, as part of the spirit of the age. Steiner was mindful of the instinctive intelligence of the body and its life of gesture, and like Copeau, was keen to bring a conscious technique to acting like Stanislavsky, wanted to raise speech and acting to an art like Fogerty and Barker, and advocated total theatre like Craig.

¹⁰ John Rudlin, ‘Jacques Copeau: the quest for sincerity’, in *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, ed. Alison Hodge (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 75.

¹¹ Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point* (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 24. See Carole M. Cusack’s article in the present volume, ‘An Enlightened Life in Text and Image: G.I. Gurdjieff’s *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (1963) and Peter Brook’s “Meetings With Remarkable Men” (1979)’ for further material on Peter Brook and the spiritual qualities of acting.

As an example of total theatre, Gordon Craig's writings and work was a source of great inspiration and excitement in the biography of many of the significant exponents and interpreters of Steiner's speech and drama impulse, including Alan Harkness, Peter Bridgmont,¹² and Marie Steiner-von Sivers. This theatrical practice was often an important stepping-stone to their later encounter with Steiner's philosophy. Steiner-von Sivers wrote of Craig:

Gordon Craig was renowned for the originality of his stage settings. Even now his productions are imitated unconsciously. But it is as one who felt within himself the call of the age that he is most significant, as one who in radical form, saw the objective laws of the art of the stage to be a demand of the time. Like a cry of pain, there arises from the few writings left by Gordon Craig the call for a transformation of the art of acting. For the art of acting is indeed the quintessence of the life of the theatre. And Gordon Craig saw the ruination of the theatre in the subjectivity of the actor whose art reveals no great lines, nor forms of objective value, but where everything is left to the arbitrary will of the individual. Gordon Craig sought for this objective form, for real possibilities of formation, in the essential laws of movement of the human figure, which for him possessed something absolute, something "cosmic."¹³

What was prescient in Craig becomes a complete cosmology in Steiner, who wished to bring to the time a renewed awareness of the 'cosmic', based on clairvoyance. Central to Steiner's approach to the arts was his strong belief in the 'music of the spheres'. In his Anthroposophical writings and lectures this notion had been enriched to be not only a singing cosmos, but also a speaking cosmos, where life forces sound from the zodiac and planets. This is of great significance.

Steiner's Cosmology and Actor Training

Due to his concentration on the human development of imagination, inspiration and intuition, Steiner accorded a prime place to artistic endeavours within his system of spiritual development. These endeavours included architecture, painting and sculpture, but also the expressive capacities of the human body, speech and movement. For Steiner, language is not only a human quality, but it is a feature of the cosmos itself. From the zodiac come forces connected to consonants, and from the planets, forces connected to vowels. For instance, in the zodiac, Aries is associated with V; Aquarius with M; Capricorn with L; and

¹² Peter Bridgmont, *Liberation of the Actor* (London: Temple Lodge, 1992).

¹³ Marie Steiner-von Sivers, cited in Peter Bridgmont 'Liberation of the Actor', at <http://www.liberationofacting.com/edward-gordon-craig.php>. Accessed 25/06/2011.

with the planets, Mercury with the sound 'ee' as in bee; Jupiter with the sound 'oh' as in awe; and Venus with the sound 'ah' as in lah. Of the 'music of the spheres' Steiner writes,

[i]magine yourself out there in the Cosmos; now the planetary world is farther from you, and the twelve constellations of the Zodiac nearer. From all the heavenly bodies there is singing – speaking as they sing to you, singing as they speak; and all your perception is a listening to the speaking song, the singing speech of the world... The planetary sphere is singing to you in vowels – singing forth into the cosmic spaces; and the fixed stars permeate the song of the planetary spheres with soul from the consonants. Picture it to yourselves as vividly as you can; the sphere of the fixed stars at rest and behind it the wandering planets. Whenever a planet in its course passes a constellation of fixed stars, there bursts forth not a single note, but a whole world of sound. Then as a planet passes on, let us say from Aries to Taurus, a different world of sound rings out. But behind it there follows another planet – Mars. Mars passing through the constellation of Taurus causes a different world of sound to ring forth once more. So in the Zodiac you have a wondrous cosmic instrument of music, while from behind, the planetary Gods are playing upon this instrument.¹⁴

Working with cosmic forces such as those described previously, as opposed to those emanating from the self, encompasses a central aspect of Steiner's advice to the actor.¹⁵ Steiner's philosophy emphasised the intimate relationship between the cosmological and the anthropological, linking the human body with the physical universe. This was pivotal to the renewal of gesture and speech. Through the new art of Eurythmy (a movement art initiated in 1912), Steiner gave macrocosmic gestures for the consonants, soul gestures for the vowels, planetary gestures, and gestures for the zodiac signs. He gave forms to movement and indicated how music and poetry could be performed artistically with groups of Eurythmists, enlivening the spaces between them. These gestures for the consonants and vowels, taken from what Steiner perceived clairvoyantly, took place in the air through the ensouled breath when each vowel or consonant was spoken. In speaking for a Eurythmy performance of poetry, the speaker needs to attempt to create macrocosmic gestures in their speech so that the Eurythmist can move in harmony with it. So here we have two poles of the human striving to manifest the macrocosmic. One of these is entirely in gesture, with the arms, and moving the body in Eurythmy; and the

¹⁴ Steiner, cited in Bridgmont, 'Liberation of the Actor'.

¹⁵ Robyn Hewetson, 'Drama as a Source of Wellness', *Journal for Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner Education*, vol. 10 (January 2008), p. 6.

other is entirely in speech, when the Steiner-trained vocalist speaks for Eurythmy or presents solo performances of poetry.

However, in acting the actor lies between these poles, neither expressing him or herself totally in gesture, nor totally in speech. Also, because the actor for the most part represents the 'all too human' human being rather than cosmic forces, it is not appropriate for her or his acting gestures to be the pure macrocosmic gestures of Eurythmy. Though behind her or his speaking and gesture there still needs to be intention to work with the space, to work from periphery. Steiner describes it thus:

[i]n gesture lives the human being; there in the gesture is man himself. The gesture disappears into the speaking. When the word is intoned, then in the word man appears again, gesture speaking man. When man speaks, we find in his speaking the whole human being, – that is, if he knows how to *form* his speaking. Let us then receive, as a heritage from those times when speech was still part of the content of the Mysteries, this truth: *Man who has disappeared in the gesture, rises again in the spoken word.* The art of stage, that employs gesture, does not let man altogether disappear from the gesture. Neither does it let him wholly 'rise again' in the word. And this is what makes a dramatic performance so fascinating... (for in this way) a possibility is created for the onlooker to take share in the experience. He has to add in his fancy, in his enjoyment of the drama, what is not fully present in the word spoken on the stage.¹⁶

When introducing Steiner's lectures on *Speech and Drama* in 1924, Marie Steiner-von Sivers makes it quite clear that if one is not willing to entertain the underlying philosophy, one's experiential understanding will be minimal:

Prejudice should not be allowed to stand in our way, nor any aversion to the things of the spirit – which in the last resort is bred of fear. Provided our vision is free and unclouded, *we shall be able to recognize in the sounds of speech our divine teachers, and to know the very breath of man as cosmic substance actively at work within him.*¹⁷

The theatre practice and writings of leading theatre director Peter Brook¹⁸ enable us to judge Steiner's theatrical practice and writings on theatre and acting training with new eyes. Brook, who is a long-term student of the esoteric teacher George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1866?-1949), has transformed the theatrical landscape and made metaphysical theatre fashionable and cutting-edge. There are certain similarities between the teachings of Gurdjieff

¹⁶ Steiner, *Speech and Drama*, p. 63. (Author's emphasis).

¹⁷ Marie Steiner, 'Foreword', in Steiner, *Speech and Drama*, pp. 8-9. (Author's emphasis).

¹⁸ Peter Brook, *There Are No Secrets* (London: Methuen, 1993).

and Rudolf Steiner, in particular the cosmological significance accorded the body, and the teaching of a movement art (Steiner's Eurythmy, and Gurdjieff's 'sacred gymnastics' which were also known as Movements). Brook's ideal actor, in the words of Lorna Marshall, is one "who has moved beyond ego-driven virtuosity to a kind of psychosomatic integration that he calls 'transparency'... so that at the moment of transparency, it speaks/sings/dances them."¹⁹ Similarly, Steiner's training of the actor is a path of development to transform the habitual patterns of speech and movement into free, conscious capacities where the lower ego of the performer is sacrificed so that the higher ego can come into existence in the act of artistic shaping of speech and movement.

Steiner wished for speech and drama to have a systematic training like that of a classical musician. Based on his understanding of the centrality of the 'word' and its living nature, he gave exercises to learn to speak artistically out of language itself. So the student begins with the epic, which is intrinsically poetic, reflecting a time when human beings thought and felt as one. Further, in the epic characters appear, and this is the first step toward playing a character in a play. So the student first comes to character inside a story or epic, then later progresses to speaking characters in a ballad. Steiner suggested that the next stage of development was a spirit figure in a play, such as the Ghost in Hamlet. Finally, the aspiring actor is ready to begin acting a character in a play. The idea is present in the Waldorf school curriculum, where the child recapitulates the evolution of humanity as he or she grows up. So in actor training the student follows the evolution of speech; in the first year epic, in the second, drama, in the third, lyric, and in the fourth year a bringing together of all the styles culminating in a major production.²⁰

Returning to Steiner's lectures on *Speech and Drama* in 1924, the work is divided into three parts with approximately seven lectures in each section. The first section, "The Forming of Speech," covers the following subjects: the forming of speech as an art, the six revelations of speech, speech as a formed gesture, how to attain style in speech and drama, Schiller's notion of the secret art of the master consisting of annihilating "matter through form," sensitive perception for sound and word instead of meaning and idea, and some practical illustrations of the forming of speech. The second section, "The Art of Production and the Art of Acting," contains entries on the moulding and sculpting of speech, style in gesture, the mystery character of dramatic art, the relationship of gesture and mime to speech, the artistic quality in drama, and

¹⁹ Lorna Marshall and David Williams, 'Peter Brook: transparency and the invisible network', in *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, p. 179.

²⁰ Personal notes from the author's experience of the Harkness Studio 1982-1986.

the stylisation, the study of the text from two perspectives; delineation of the character and whole form of the play, and the colour and light aspects of stage décor. The final section, "Stage and the Rest of Mankind," contains Steiner's thoughts on the esoteric aspect of the actor's vocation, which involves the work of the stage in terms of destiny, character and plot, the further study of the sounds of speech, which leads to speech sounds as a revelation of the "form of man," and finally the formative activity of the word.²¹

Practically, in order to take the performer from the predominantly 'head' culture of today, Steiner would have the apprentice student learn to speak Greek hexameters, for in his view this built a healthy relationship between breath and heart beat. For there are six stresses to the line, with a caesura in the middle and a breath at the end, thus making a ratio of 4:1 which corresponds to one's breath to heart-beat ratio.²² Corresponding to scales in music, Steiner gave a whole series of speech exercises to enable the performer to set the syllables free on the breath, to have good articulation, fluency, and voice placement. In contrast to mainstream training of the voice, the focus is not so much on the body and seeking for different sources of resonance, but more on the speaker's striving to work imaginatively with the surrounding air and space. Instead of going into tone, the performer uses the sounds to make audible the pictorial and musical qualities of the text. As Steiner-von Sivers put it:

[t]o live consciously in the breath, to give form to the breath, to use the breath as a chisel and with it give plastic form to the air, to feel the quivering, subtle vibrations of air and ether, to experience the overtones and the undertones, the delicate intervals within the diphthongs, through which filters the stream of the spirit – here is an artistic activity indeed, working creatively in the finest of substances. Here is a nobler task than that forced outpouring of emotion in sounds tending to become animal-like in their nature, such as we find only too frequently on the modern stage.²³

Steiner brings into play the instinctive wisdom of theatre practice by employing consonants and vowels as instruments of creation. For instance in the *Craft of Comedy*, a charming work, Athene Seyler talks of the necessity of creating a light atmosphere if one is directing or acting a comedy.²⁴ Steiner

²¹ Steiner, *Speech and Drama*, pp. 13-20.

²² Steiner, *Speech and Drama*, pp. 68-69.

²³ Marie Steiner, 'Creative Speech', authorised translation from *Das Goetheanum*, 7th March, 1926 at

http://wn.rsarchive.org/RelAuthors/SteinerM/CreSpc_index.html. Accessed 30/3/2011.

²⁴ Athene Seyler, *The Craft of Comedy* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1990), p. 5.

shows a conscious means of achieving this for the performers, by giving them a sound meditation to speak before the show. The rhythm and quality of the sounds put the actors in an appropriate light mood for comedy.²⁵ Similarly, he gives another sound meditation to invoke the mood of tragedy.

Even as Jacques Copeau brought to the body to the forefront in acting, Steiner recognised the “will lives in the limbs.”²⁶ He recommended Greek gymnastics for actor training; running, leaping, wrestling, discus and javelin throwing. Steiner advocated these to develop unconscious gesture life for the stage. For instance, spear throwing or javelin could assist the actor in speaking by breathing in a line (preparing the throw), speaking it (throwing it), and letting it go (following the spear with focus until it comes to rest). He wanted the gestures to be instinctive, spontaneous, but also have art and style and saw a modified Greek gymnastics as the best way to achieve this.²⁷

Steiner also advocated the vivid recalling of dreams as a way for actors to improve their carriage and bearing on stage, to move with art, with style.²⁸ He goes on to suggest that if the actor is to bring ‘being’ to their character then they need to follow two paths of preparation. The first reproduces again and again the formed speaking of the role like a musician would prepare a concert, and the second is to practice dreaming the part. The latter refers to bringing the consciousness that one has in recalling a dream, and then seeing the play and role unfold as an imagination.²⁹ This passage may well have been pivotal to Michael Chekhov’s focus on the imagination in his technique, discussed below.

In time a four-year full-time course in Speech and Drama, leading to a diploma accredited by the Goetheanum,³⁰ was developed. At present there is Anthroposophical theatre training in England at the Artemis School of Speech and Drama,³¹ and in America at the Speech School.³² Clearly then, a primary

²⁵ Steiner, *Speech and Drama*, p. 362.

²⁶ Steiner, *Speech and Drama*, p. 41.

²⁷ Steiner, *Speech and Drama*, p. 188.

²⁸ Steiner, *Speech and Drama*, pp. 335-336.

²⁹ Steiner, *Speech and Drama*, pp. 337-338.

³⁰ The Goetheanum is the headquarters of the Anthroposophical Society in Dornach, near Basel in Switzerland. See H. Biesantz and A. Klingborg (eds), *The Goetheanum: Rudolf Steiner's Architectural Impulse*, trans. J. Schmid (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1979).

³¹ See Christopher Garvey, ‘About Artemis’, *Artemis School of Speech and Drama* at <http://www.artemisspeechanddrama.org.uk/>. Accessed 25/06/2011.

³² See ‘The Speech School of North America’, in *Creative Speech North America* at <http://www.creativespeech.org/>. Accessed 25/06/2011.

focus of the Anthroposophical approach to actor training is on the spoken word. For Steiner, the poetic vibrancy and elemental force of early languages such as Ancient Greek and Anglo-Saxon have given way to a 'spectral' use of language for expressing emotions, intentions and thoughts where the word becomes transparent, like a pair of spectacles which are most appreciated when they are clean and invisible to the user.³³ Steiner implores the actor to restore the word to sensibility, quickening the "sleeping beauties" of words into life.³⁴

In this view, the living level of language is poetry and to speak with life, the speaker needs a feeling for sound and syllable. Even as musicians bring the inherent music of a composer's score to audible life, so Steiner envisaged the speaker bringing a poet's and dramatist's creation into imaginative creation. For example, from those trained in Steiner's approach, it is imperative to overcome the "greyness" of everyday speech and overuse of intellectual assertions and bring a sculptural, musical quality to one's utterances and seek to bring images through sound.

The Popularisation of Steiner's impulse in the United Kingdom, America and Australia

Turning now from this exposition of Steiner's indications of acting training, the highly relevant work of Michael Chekhov will be considered. Chekhov's corpus of theatrical practice has been the principal conduit for Steiner's insights on acting training in Anglophone theatre to date. Many leading actors were either trained by Chekhov (such as Gary Cooper, Marilyn Monroe, Gregory Peck, Patricia Neal, Clint Eastwood, Leslie Caron, Anthony Quinn, Ingrid Bergman, Jack Palance, Paul Rodges, Lloyd Bridges, and Yul Brynner) or adopted his technique (such as Anthony Hopkins, Jack Nicholson, and Richard Kiley).³⁵

Michael Chekhov (1891-1955), the nephew of the distinguished Russian playwright Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), was a rising Russian actor under the tutelage of Stanislavsky. He had been trained in the Stanislavsky method of concentration, naivety, imagination, communication and memory, when he found himself, due to personal circumstances, undergoing a psychological breakdown. His way forward was to embrace Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy. Steiner's model of the human being and of spiritual development enabled him

³³ Steiner, *Speech and Drama*, p. 120.

³⁴ Steiner, *Speech and Drama*, p. 175.

³⁵ Franc Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 33.

to get a perspective on what he termed his 'spiritual crisis'.³⁶ Chekhov began to experiment with Steiner's indications in performance and training, and by 1918 was protesting against Stanislavsky's use of emotional memory as a technique. He drew on Steiner's distinction between the 'higher' and 'lower' ego to argue against it. He felt that the use of emotional memory would bind the self further to the 'lower' ego, whereas drawing on the 'higher' ego could enable creative insights into the character's emotions.

As an actor Chekhov had several powerful experiences that directly fed into his technique. The first was grasping the character through finding its essential gesture. Chekhov relates of his experience being directed by his mentor, the Armenian-Russian director Yevgeny Vakhtangov (1883-1922) in the part of Erik XIV. Vakhtangov gave him the means to play the role of Erik by sharing his visualisation of the character as a man trapped within a circle continually trying to escape, and by giving him his physical gesture: "[s]tretching out his hands beyond the circle in hope, Erik would find nothing and leave his hands dangling in misery."³⁷ Chekhov felt that in this way the essence of the character was expressed, and that it gave him a way into a character. This became for Chekhov the technique of psychological gesture. The second insight occurred when Chekhov was playing Skid in *Artists*, under the direction of the Austrian director Max Reinhardt (1873-1943) in Berlin.³⁸ His imagination concerning the role was so powerful that he was able to question how he should play the part. Imagination was one of the steps on the path of higher development indicated by Steiner and this faculty of imagination became a major pillar in Chekhov's technique.

After being forced into exile in 1928, Chekhov by 1936 had established a full-time drama course at Dartington Hall in Devon, England. This school ran until 1939 when the outbreak of World War II forced Chekhov to move to the United States. Chekhov did not attend Steiner's lectures on speech and drama in 1924, but apparently had had private meetings with Steiner prior to this. Chamberlain notes that "[b]y this time the major components of his system were in place: imagination and concentration, higher ego, atmospheres and quantities, centres, imaginary bodies, radiance and style."³⁹ The training included classes in Eurythmy and speech (from a Steiner perspective) and

³⁶ Franc Chamberlain, 'Michael Chekhov on the Technique of Acting: Was Don Quixote True to Life?', in *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, ed. Alison Hodge (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 79-80.

³⁷ Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov*, p. 82.

³⁸ Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov*, pp. 21-22.

³⁹ Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov*, p. 92.

Chekhov sent to the Goetheanum for a teacher in these fields. The teacher sent was Alice Crowther who was later to introduce these arts to Australia.

Dennis Glenny, an Australian actor who trained with Chekhov at Dartington Hall, described the course as follows:

Michael Chekhov gave his students a deep feeling of reverence towards the theatre and the actor's vocation. He made them aware of the origin of theatre in the mysteries and the function through tragedy and comedy of leading people to self awareness. When the students came to rehearse, they changed to a special rehearsal dress, so that one put aside personal interests and was concentrated on the work to be created together. The students worked on acting exercises given by Constantin Stanislavsky with the added dimension of an Anthroposophical training in concentration and perception. When a play was to be prepared, the main episodes and climaxes were improvised again and again before the actual text of the play was taken up. When the actors had their parts, each student had an individual private session with Alice Crowther to achieve in speech technique the qualities Michael Chekhov as director wanted brought through. Regular speech and eurythmy classes with Alice Crowther, as well as modern dance, gymnastics and music with other teachers were the basic training.⁴⁰

There is considerable research on Chekhov's work in regard to the psycho-physical approach, but little, to my knowledge, of how key features of Steiner's worldview informed his actual technique.⁴¹ Chamberlain refers to the influence, but does not detail how it worked through.⁴² For instance the first chapter of *To the Actor*,⁴³ his key exposition of his technique, draws directly on Steiner's gift of eurythmy and speech. Chekhov provides exercises of extending the consciousness of the body to the periphery and centre, of learning through gesture to mould, to float, to fly and to radiate through the space.

The first exercise relates back to my first point about Steiner's indication to the actor of connecting to life or periphery forces. The following exercises come from Steiner's insights into both speech and Eurythmy in terms

⁴⁰ Dennis Glenny, 'Alice Crowther's Work in Speech and Drama', *Journal of the Anthroposophical Society of Australia*, vol. 2, no. 4, August 1981 at <http://www.mechthildharkness.net/page/The+Harkness+Studio>. Accessed 30/3/2011.

⁴¹ See for example, Phillip Zarrilli, *Psychophysical Acting* (New York: Routledge, 2009) or Bella Merlin, *Beyond Stanislavsky* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁴² Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov*, p. 15.

⁴³ Michael Chekhov, *To the Actor* (Sydney: Harper & Row, 1953).

of the elements of earth, water, air and fire. The earth or impact sounds (Steiner's term) are D, T, B, P, G, K, M, and N, and this quality of movement is what Chekhov desires in 'moulding the space'. The water or wave sound is L, and this connects to the floating gestures. The air vibrating sound is R and this relates to flying gestures. Finally the fire or blown sounds are H, CH, J, SCH, S, F, W (though often W is used with L as a water sound) and connected to the radiating gestures. Chekhov used Steiner's conception of the deeper esoteric knowledge of the sound nature of man and the universe to create exercises accessible to those without that background, and tailored the exercises for specific acting training. Similarly, with his technique of atmospheres, Chekhov draws on Steiner's ideas about the nature of the soul and moods to speak with confidence of atmospheres as objective soul realities, which will influence individuals coming into them, and which can be created to convey a scene or part thereof. However, again Steiner's indications for the actor are that these atmospheres be generated through actors consciously working with 'sounds', either consonants or vowels.

Thus although Chekhov was the first figure in the history of theatre to produce a workbook for the actor,⁴⁴ and was clearly influenced by Steiner, there are significant divergences in the indications. Indeed Chekhov only reached a mass public in America when much of his spiritual explanations and references to Steiner were removed.⁴⁵ Today this has been rectified after Mala Power's re-editing of the 1942 manuscript in 1991, which has been republished by HarperCollins as *On the Technique of Acting* (1991). Also, Chekhov had never undertaken Steiner speech training himself and did not consider himself qualified to speak about the actor's voice, but nonetheless was quite clear that Rudolf Steiner's speech training was the method of his school.⁴⁶ This was not a problem when he was running his school in England with a specialist Eurythmy and speech teacher like Alice Crowther, but later when he was working alone in Hollywood it meant that the speech aspect was neglected. This has led to a daughter movement of Anthroposophy, the Chekhov method, throughout the world in which for the most part core elements of Steiner's speech and drama impulse are marginal or missing.

Still, the three distinguished women teachers who brought Steiner's speech and drama impulse to Australia, Alice Crowther, Mechtild Harkness and later Dawn Langman, were not only leading exponents of Steiner's speech

⁴⁴ Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov*, p. 35.

⁴⁵ Mel Gordon, 'Introduction', in *On the Technique of Acting*, Michael Chekhov, ed. Mel Gordon (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), p. xxiii.

⁴⁶ Michael Chekhov, *Lessons for the Professional Actor* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1985), pp. 25-26.

drama impulse, but also of the Chekhov method. Mechtild Harkness achieved world eminence as a performer of the Chekhov method. Together with her husband Alan Harkness, an Australian actor who had pioneered an artistic experimental theatre studio, the Ab Intra Studio in Adelaide in the 1930s, Mechtild Harkness toured Europe doing "Great Moments from Shakespeare" to critical acclaim. As Alan was a principal teacher of the method under Chekhov, they were able work up their performance to great effect using the Chekhov technique.

After her husband's tragic death, Mechtild Harkness went to the Goetheanum to complete her Anthroposophical speech training with Erna Grund,⁴⁷ one of the greatest actors on the Goetheanum stage and the teacher of Alice Crowther.⁴⁸ Harkness had already completed Eurythmy training and been trained in opera. There she acted and directed, eventually coming out to Australia to take over Alice Crowther's work after her death. Harkness became one of the leading teachers and performers in the Steiner speech movement and, although respectful of the Chekhov technique, her work and teaching was no longer based on it. She worked in the tradition of Marie Steiner-von Sivers with the creative word as the central focus.⁴⁹

Mechtild Harkness set up her own school of Speech and Drama in Australia, and toured again to critical acclaim with a one women show of Antigone. She also left her mark in the realm of professional theatre in Australia:

⁴⁷ To penetrate the depths of Steiner's training of the actor the heritage of Erna Grund, a leading actor of the Goetheanum stage, needs to be fathomed. Australia has been blessed to have had three theatre practitioners and teachers who have trained with her and developed Steiner's speech and drama impulse: Alice Crowther, Mechtild Harkness and Annika Anderdotter. Anderdotter, who was also a student and co-teacher at the Harkness Studio with Mechtild Harkness, and who is still teaching in Sydney, is therefore a unique figure in Steiner's impulse and one whose technique and knowledge would be most worthy of research to understand Steiner's training of the actor.

⁴⁸ Hans Pusch, *A New Kind of Actor* (New York: Mercury Press, 1998) pp. 229-230.

⁴⁹ It was always quite clear as a student at the Harkness Studio that Mechtild's approach was not Chekhov, but a Speech and Drama training of Rudolf and Marie Steiner. Neil Anderson, from *Classes with Mechtild Harkness* in 1982-1986, and later confirmed in private conversations with Annika Anderdotter (her former co-teacher and student) in 2011. See also

<http://www.mechthildharkness.net/page/The+Harkness+Studio>. Accessed 30/3/2011.

[a]t the request of Robin Lovejoy, Mechthild became voice coach for the Old Tote Theatre and continued in this work for four years until Robin Lovejoy resigned as artistic director. John Bell, Ruth Cracknell, Drew Forsythe, John Gaden, Rod Haddrick, Ron Falk, Damien Parker, Dinah Shearing and many others were among the actors who worked with Mechthild during this time, and some later returned for private tuition.⁵⁰

The distinguished Australian actress Ruth Cracknell (1925-2002) also describes working with Harkness during a rehearsal of “Oedipus the King,” directed by leading British director Tyrone Guthrie:

[s]ome to-ing and fro-ing and a few months later I found myself in a large barn in Dural, northwest of Sydney, in the freezing cold, tossing a small beanbag at Ron, who tossed it back. And thus we spent a morning, under the eagle eye of Mechthild Harkness, who was charged with making sure our breathing and voices were in top condition. It seemed a slightly pointless activity, but I went along with it and made the appropriate noises. It was good exercise, and bizarre activity has never alarmed me.⁵¹

Returning to Michael Chekhov, it is certain that the Chekhov training is established in the world as one of the key means of acting training,⁵² and clearly Chekhov benefited from his contact with Anthroposophy. But since those trained in Chekhov need not acknowledge the spiritual worldview of Steiner or Steiner's path of inner development and his speech impulse, this way may well in time grow weaker and blur into the general secular techniques of the theatre of the day. However, this is not the opinion of Franc Chamberlain, who argues for the importance of performing the exercises of Chekhov, and not whether the pupil has a spiritual background or knowledge of Anthroposophy. He contends that spiritual practices are embedded in the exercises, and is happy with a marginalisation of Steiner and Anthroposophy in teaching Chekhov.⁵³ Having had direct experience of the potential of the Steiner drama impulse

⁵⁰ Leslie Ford and Helen Greer, ‘The Harkness Studio – Its Growth and Work in Creative Speech and Drama’ at

<http://www.mechthildharkness.net/page/The+Harkness+Studio>. Accessed 30/3/2011.

⁵¹ Ruth Cracknell, *A Biased Memoir* (Ringwood: Viking, 1997), p. 159.

⁵² See Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov*, p. 1.

For Chekhov training see the Michael Chekhov Association (MICA) at <http://www.michaelchekhov.org/micha.htm> (USA), and the Michael Chekhov Centre (UK) at <http://www.michaelchekhov.org.uk/>. Accessed 21/06/2011.

⁵³ Franc Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov: Pedagogy, Spirituality and the Occult* at <http://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/04/chamberlain04.shtml>. Accessed 21/06/11.

through studying under Mechtild Harkness in Sydney, and later under Peter and Barbara Bridgmont in London, I do not take this view. Certainly theory without practice will not yield much practically in theatre, but if a technique is to be kept alive it needs to be informed by theory. Knowledge coming from an initiate like Steiner is worthy of detailed study.⁵⁴

Conclusion

It is conceivably possible to re-enliven and reclaim the Anthroposophical element within the Chekhov movement, and to teach the Chekhov method in tandem with Steiner's speech and drama impulse. Two significant figures in this regard are Sarah Kane and Dawn Langman. The former co-founded the Michael Chekhov Centre in the UK in 1995, and is a graduate of Rudolf Steiner's Creative Speech and in Michael Chekhov's approach to acting and theatre, which she studied in Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Kane is now a freelance teacher in Europe and the United States. Dawn Langman ran a full time actor training programme in Australia, the School of the Living Word, and achieved wide recognition through performing in and co-adapting Euripides' 'Trojan Women' for the State Theatre Company of South Australia in 2004.

To conclude, largely through the scholarship of Franc Chamberlain, Rudolf Steiner's impact on twentieth century theatre in the English speaking world has made its presence felt through academic research on the contribution to the twentieth century actor training of Michael Chekhov. However rich though that vein is, this article demonstrates that Rudolf Steiner's contribution to modern theatrical practice cannot be limited to that trajectory alone, but constitutes a rich area for investigation in its own right.

⁵⁴ I remember discussing Chekhov with Mechtild Harkness when I was a student at the Harkness Studio in the 1980s. She spoke with wonder of his capacity to transform himself into character, saying he was truly magical in the way that he could alter the space around him. She also attested that she and her husband Alan had achieved world-class standards in theatre through the Chekhov method in their touring, but she was also quite clear that was not her approach now. Neil Anderson, private conversations with Mechtild Harkness in 1985.