**BOOK REVIEW**

**The Director’s Prism: ETA Hoffmann and the Russian theatrical avant-garde, by Dassia N. Posner, Northwestern University Press, 2016, (Paperback), ISBN 978-0-81013355-6**

The year 2016 was a year for texts that support a re-evaluation of Russian theatre practitioners. Nikolai Demidov’s work was published in English, allowing for a deeper understanding of Russian acting methodologies and Dassia N. Posner’s publication is of equal value in relation to directing practice. This text is not another “how to” book on directing but, as Posner herself states, aides in the lifting of a veil of assumption around seminal directors. In this case, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Tairov, and Sergei Eisenstein.

For budding students of directing, particularly in a UK context, certain myths circulate. Firstly, that some of the strongest acting relates to the pursuit of truthful performances. Secondly, that the Russian tradition is mainly based on social(ist) realism. Thirdly, that Russian theatre has mainly concentrated on achieving verisimilitude through writers such as Chekhov, Ostrovsky et al. At least that’s what my undergraduates tell me on their arrival. Now I also have Posner’s text to use as stimulus.

This text myth-busts much of the above. Yet, there’s certainly no paucity of texts on Meyerhold or Eisenstein, so what’s new here? *The Director’s Prism* takes as its starting point the works of E.T.A. Hoffmann and his influence (from his stories as well as his treatises on theatre from 1818 onwards) on these three directors. Yet, the work is much more than that. Take the sections on Hoffmann’s influence away and this book would still have meaning and add new knowledge. Posner encourages us, like the directors that she examines, to see the role of theatricality in theatre. She creates an alternative lens through which we can examine how directors interpret text. Posner introduces the idea that the director is a prism, who can bend the text and reveal something new about it. Or, that in refracting the text, there is a sense of play, and that “for the audience, to refract is to generate rather than receive meaning” (2016, 29). As a director, the prism lens through which Posner shines a directorial light is both useful and meaningful: it also enables a clear frame in which we are able to re-examine these practitioners.

Each director is presented usefully using a “Prologue- Interlude-Epilogue” structure, which allows the reader to gain vital context from the prologue before delving deep into the main case studies, or “Interludes.” Posner’s first director under the microscope is Meyerhold. It is refreshing to re-experience Meyerhold not as an actor-trainer, but that of director and iconoclast. Posner foregrounds his use of theatricality, including the use of puppets and Kabuki theatre. This is often where Hoffmann’s explicit influence disappears: in the detail of the director’s lives and case studies. This text is certainly wider than Hoffmann and perhaps freer for it at times.

Alexander Tairov is next up for Posner. There is a paucity of writings on Tairov as a director in English texts, so this chapter is a much welcome addition. Concentrating on Tairov’s insistence that the actor is central to theatre making and that theatre should be theatrical, Posner draws on how Tairov was influenced by commedia and mime-drama. The Interlude concerning his production based on Hoffmann’s *Princess Brambilla* was of particular interest to me. It concentrates on how Hoffmann’s philosophies on theatre are explored via Tairov’s production. Using research from the prompt books and the archived production designs allow us to sense the piece and sniff its theatricality, which used circus, pantomime and, to quote Posner, “theatrical fireworks.”

Eisenstein’s film career is richly documented, so re-packaging his early and extensive theatre work is refreshing to read. In his use of the grotesque and that of juxtaposition and plurality in theatre, it is easy to see how his film aesthetic has its roots in earlier theatre explorations. I was drawn to Posner’s notion that Eisenstein didn’t move from theatre to film but “through” it. The reader is helped enormously via production case studies (including work that was never staged such as *The Tales of Hoffmann*) to view Eisenstein as a theatre practitioner, who directed through design. Striking throughout this chapter is the notion that scenography should, for Eisenstein, be a metaphor for the emotion of the scene. Useful, therefore, as a chapter for design as well as directing students.

Posner’s ability to draw on a variety of sources including promptbooks, diaries, reviews, government documents, and letters lies at the heart of the book’s strength. Indeed, the superb illustrations of photographs and drawings (along with an appendix that includes script-structures) allows the reader to imaginatively engage in the productions outlined. The author’s pedigree ensures that the text is extremely readable and speaks to academics, practitioners and students alike. In a time where our assumptions are shifting in relation to Russian theatre practice, *The Director’s Prism* should be recommended reading for all.

**Robert Marsden**

**Staffordshire University**

**r.j.marsden@staffs.ac.uk**

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