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Review Of "Stanislavsky And Female Actors: Women In Stanislavsky's Life And Art" By M. Ignatieva

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Review

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Maria Ignatieva. *Stanislavsky and Female Actors: Women in Stanislavsky's Life and Art*. Lanham, MD: UP of America, 2008. Bibliography. Index. xx + 140 pp. \$23.00 (paper).

In the preface to her book Maria Ignatieva writes: "I intend to throw a new light upon [Stanislavsky's] life and personality, and to examine the real Stanislavsky, the man and the artist, during the most important stages of his life and creativity" (xiv). She claims that her book offers "the most complete examination to date of the great actor and director's work with his female contemporaries" (xiv). Ignatieva examines Stanislavsky's biography obliquely, tracing his life and career through the voices of women important to his life. In fact, as Ignatieva acknowledges, the book is more about the women in Stanislavsky's life than about the artist himself: "mostly this book pays tribute to the female actors, whose lives and work in their tight collaboration with Stanislavsky made his artistic endeavors possible" (xvii). Ignatieva deftly fulfills her claims in her work, and in addition to shedding light upon the figure of Stanislavsky himself and the women in his life, the book also offers insight into the history of the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavsky's system as it was practiced, and other significant figures of the time, including Anton Chekhov and Maksim Gorky.

Ignatieva collected her material from a variety of sources, both published and unpublished. Excerpts from the unpublished sources are in print here for the first time, and most excerpts from sources previously published in Russian have been translated into English by the author for the first time. These include correspondence, critical reviews, biographies, notebooks, diaries, rehearsal journals, and memoirs. She notes that she conducted her research at various archives in Russia, primarily at the Moscow Art Theatre Museum (xv).

Ignatieva organizes the book into six chapters, each devoted to a particular relationship in Stanislavsky's life. She arranges the chapters chronologically according to the beginning of the relationships in question, allowing the reader to experience parts of Stanislavsky's biography from multiple perspectives. In lieu of an introduction, the book offers two forewords and a preface, and closes with an epilogue.

Chapter 1 concerns Stanislavsky's "two mothers": his biological mother, Elizaveta Vassilievna, and his "artistic" mother, Glikeria Fedotova. It also functions as an introduction, providing background information about Stanislavsky's family life. Although his early biography is relevant to understanding his love for the theater, the background material on his family appears to have been included by the author primarily as a sop to feminist scholars, among whom Stanislavsky has recently fallen into disfavor (xvii). To counter Stanislavsky's critics, Ignatieva offers a cultural explanation for his sexist and tyrannical manner, arguing that his patriarchal values are a result of his upbringing in the Moscow merchant class and his mother's eccentric personality. The author's rehabilitative aim is made explicit in the epilogue, where Ignatieva writes, "In moments of inspiration, he often insulted his female co-workers. This book neither advocates such behavior, nor judges it, but attempts to portray it within the greater context of Stanislavsky's artistic achievements" (130). This foray into the defense of Stanislavsky represents Ignatieva's only engagement with broader academic criticism on Stanislavsky's work; otherwise she holds fast to her biographical aim. The remainder of Chapter 1 concerns Stanislavsky's "artistic mother" Glikeria Fedotova. It briefly outlines their working relationship and argues that Fedotova "facilitated his development into a professional actor, director, and educator" (9).

Chapter 2 traces Stanislavsky's relationship with Maria Lilina, his wife and a Moscow Art Theatre actress. In a very personal manner the chapter details a relationship fraught with tension, torn between family life and commitments to the theater. It also provides a wealth of material about Lilina's groundbreaking performances at the Moscow Art Theatre, their critical reception, and her eventual mastery and propagation of Stanislavsky's system.

Chapter 3 deals with the legendary actress and revolutionary Maria Andreyeva. Ignatieva provides an engaging narrative about the Moscow atmosphere during the years just preceding and including the revolutionary events of 1905, as well as insight into the role of Andreyeva's common law husband, Maxim Gorky, in the development of the Moscow Art Theatre.

Chapter 4 is devoted to Olga Knipper, one of the Moscow Art Theatre's greatest actors and the wife of Anton Chekhov. Much attention is devoted to Knipper's technique as an actor as well as the history of her relationship with Chekhov. In fact, this chapter offers little about Stanislavsky apart from recounting his occasionally tyrannical direction of Olga and their critically acclaimed "duets" on the stage.

Chapter 5 is focused on Olga Gzovskaia, a protégée of Stanislavsky, whom the director used as a guinea pig for his System, but who simply "proved the limitations of not only the System, but also of [Stanislavsky's] personal directorial and pedagogical power" (117). Additionally, it provides a glimpse into the politics of the theater, notably, into the conflicts between Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko.

Chapter 6 concerns Irina Rozanova, Stanislavsky's protégée and "last female student-actor" (120). The author herself uncovered much of the information on this actress. This chapter provides a wealth of detail on Stanislavsky's system in its later incarnation.

Ignatieva's authorial presence is minimal. She deftly arranges her selected material into a coherent and cohesive narrative, resulting in a work that is informative, engaging, and delightful to read. The book functions both as a valuable resource for the scholar of Russian theater and as a cogent and thoroughly accessible introduction to the life of Stanislavsky, his female actresses, and the formation of the Moscow Art Theatre.

Regrettably, it must be duly noted that the book is seriously marred by insufficient proofreading and editing: typographical errors occur very frequently; the punctuation of citations is inconsistent and often incorrect; Ignatieva's writing suffers from the occasional Russianism; and the English translations are at times stilted. Fortunately, these errors do not interfere with the reading or comprehension of this otherwise fine work.

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Boris Asafyev. *Symphonic Etudes: Portraits of Russian Operas and Ballets*. Ed. and trans. David Haas. London, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008. Bibliography. Index. xxviii + 319 pp. Paper.

Pauline Fairclough and David Fanning, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Shostakovich*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008. Bibliography. Index. xv + 397 pp. \$99.95 (cloth).

Although dedicated to cultural issues of prior decades, these two studies come at a time of particular relevance for Russian audiences. In spring 2009 Moscow was host to the Eurovision Song Contest for the very first time; a lot of people took notice. To be more precise, more than 122 million people watched, a remarkable figure and a 16% increase over last year. Broadcast to 45 nations as a television signal and watched online worldwide, Eurovision enjoyed an average audience share of 43%; in other words, almost half of all people watching television on a Saturday night had chosen the same broadcast. Russian state-run TV was keen both to promote itself to European neighbors and to *convince* itself that lofty cultural values could still be displayed in a venue designed more for imperial sport than for artistic finesse. A number of inferiority complexes went head to head.

Trying somehow to marry grace and gladiatorial fisticuffs, state television wheeled out the Igor Moiseev Ensemble, which flew with admirable poise through chocolate-box variations on a number of national dances. European neighbors were simultaneously flattered by moneyed interpretations of their penniless, impassioned forefathers and impressed by the level of local expertise. Kitsch and *kul'tura* occupied the same space in a series of whirlwind vignettes. Other local, lovable stereotypes, such as vodka, bears, and the KGB (*why?*), were evoked in the