

## **Backstage West Articles**

### **To the Actor**

**Review by Rob Kendt, April 3, 2003**

In Sanford Meisner's famous axiom, acting is the "art of living truthfully in imaginary circumstances." For underrated acting guru Michael Chekhov-nephew of the Russian Dramatist and sometime student of the granddaddy of modern acting training, Stanislavski- the secret to great acting had as much to do with the imaginary as with truth. A famously brilliant and individual actor in major stage roles and, near the end of his career, in Hollywood Film roles, Chekhov has been dismissed by some as *sui generis*- a unique genius whose working methods could never be taught. This common misunderstanding of his contribution to acting training should be set straight by the new revised editions of his 1953 classic, *To the Actor* (released previously under the title *On the Technique of Acting*), which makes the case for his approach with qualities that distinguished his acting: simultaneous force and elegance, lightness and sharpness.

Indeed it's hard to understand why Chekhov's name isn't mentioned among the acting training greats, including Meisner, Strasberg, Hagen, and Adler. His ideas, without his brand name attached, have entered the acting mainstream: the Psychological Gesture and the Emotional Center are taught in many college programs, and his emphasis on mind-body connection - influenced variously by yoga and by the mystical philosophy of Rudolf Steiner-represents a powerful strain of conventional wisdom, both inside and outside the acting academy. For among the alternatives to Stanislavski's system and its legacy as handed down through the American Method, Chekhov's approach- with some exceptions-remains among the most accessible, practical and inspiring for professional actors. His life's work represented an attempt to create exercises to discipline and harness the imagination, to consciously forge habits of body and mind that would eventually become like second nature to actors.

There's some jarring jargon here-such as "will impulses" and "the law of triplicity"-and the detail and scope of many of the exercises may make it difficult for actors to make full use of the book on its own outside a class structure-obviously, his "group improvisation" exercise requires more than one person. Many of the exercises in *To the Actor* are as grittily specific as any of Uta Hagen two-minute "recreations," but those, too are often most productively practiced and honed with an audience.

One is impressed above all by Chekhov's powerful sense of shape and form; he wanted to free the actor's imagination from the "slavery" of imitative naturalism, but only so the actor could better serve the material with his own individual artistry. This isn't let-it-all hang out but a disciplined, refined aesthetic system. Like Hagen, Chekhov strove to define an acting regimen as alternately rigorous and freeing as those undertaken by trained painters, composers, and or writers.

A new appendix on applying the Psychological Gesture, by Andrei Malaev Babel, is strictly classroom stuff; there's also a characteristically incisive and rousing foreword, by Simon Callow, and a ploddingly informative chapter on Chekhov's life and work by his literary executrix, Mala Powers. This is finally not a book "only" for actors; indeed Chekhov's Chapters on "Atmosphere" and "Composition of the Performance" offer exceptionally rich insights for directors. Really, though, this distinction is moot: A

well-trained Chekhov Actor/artist is in a sense a performer/director/designer all in one.