



2015

Review: *Checking Out Chekhov: A Guide to the Plays for Actors, Directors, and Readers*

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Recommended Citation

Robinson, Valleri J. (2015) "Review: *Checking Out Chekhov: A Guide to the Plays for Actors, Directors, and Readers*," *Russian Language Journal*: Vol. 65: Iss. 1, Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj/vol65/iss1/13>

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Sharon Carnicke, ed., *Checking Out Chekhov: A Guide to the Plays for Actors, Directors, and Readers*. Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2013. 238 pages.

Sharon Carnicke's *Checking out Chekhov: A Guide to the Plays for Actors, Directors, and Readers* provides a succinct foundation for understanding how to read Chekhov's mature plays for theatre practitioners and students who so often encounter his work. As one of the most often produced and adapted playwrights in professional and academic theatres, Chekhov must be produced by theatre professionals that have a handle on how to think, talk, and, ultimately, produce Chekhov. While many books aimed at this audience offer interpretive readings, analytical strategies, and historical contexts for engaging with Chekhov's unique dramatic worlds, none approach Chekhov using Carnicke's astute strategy: focusing on the popular literary and dramaturgical influences on Chekhov. As she promises, Carnicke guides the novice through key background reading, emphasizing popular dramatic forms that shaped Chekhov's dramaturgy. She manages complex dramaturgical ideas and historical information with deft, fluid, animated writing, including only what is necessary to explain how Chekhov wrote plays "that are neither fully comic nor tragic, with characters who are neither heroes nor villains and who speak nonsense and philosophy with equal fluency" (221).

As a professor of Theatre and Slavic Studies at the University of Southern California and as a professional actress, Carnicke is a leading international scholar and educator, whose work on Stanislavsky has enabled a generation of theatre scholars and practitioners to reconsider their assumptions about the actor-theorist's vital experiments. In *Checking out Chekhov*, she demonstrates her multi-faceted facility with the performance, literary, historical and personal contexts in which Chekhov wrote his plays, understanding what theatre practitioners need in order to engage deeply with Chekhov. Her focus on key aspects of the literary context is significant because theatre scholars and professionals, dismissive of nineteenth century popular forms, rarely engage with the genres that enable a rich understanding of Chekhov. In addition to reintroducing a discussion of French vaudeville and melodrama in relation to Chekhov's work, Carnicke points to Maeterlinck, Gogol, and less familiar influences on Chekhov's distinctive playwriting style. In

doing so, Carnicke wrestles him from the pervasive clutches of a categorical 'realism' which has often limited the possibility of his plays in performance. As she did with Stanislavsky, Carnicke hopes to release Chekhov from persistent myths and misunderstandings that can limit his impact.

Carnicke divides the book into six chapters, with an introduction and a conclusion. She builds toward the most innovative sections of the book. In the first chapter, she reviews key elements of Chekhov's background and family life that influenced his thinking and stage representations. Growing up in Taganrog, the impact of his father and the church, early romantic and sexual pursuits, his relationship with his sister Masha, his trip to Sakhalin Island, and his background in medicine form the core elements of the biography addressed by Carnicke. This quick introduction suffices for the novice to move into more critical elements of Carnicke's analysis which focus on the literary and theatrical "soil" of his experiments. For students and theatre artists unfamiliar with Chekhov, Chapter Three, "The Devil in the Details of Chekhov's Plays" is an essential reading. Carnicke divides Chekhovian details into twelve categories that serve as an important guide for understanding the writer's mature plays. The twelve items include (1) apparent non-sequiturs in conversations and behavior, (2) apparent irrelevancies, (3) puns and word play, (4) verbal tics, meaningless phrases, and eccentric grammar, (5) fractured foreign languages, (6) grandiloquent speech and philosophizing, (7) clothing as commentary, (8) stage settings and the emotional progression of a play, (9) furniture and inanimate objects, (10) food and drink as commentary on the symptoms of heartache, (11) the pause, and (12) soundscapes and the music of the everyday. Educators will find this chapter particularly useful in the classroom.

The final chapters provide a unique comparative approach to analyzing Chekhov's work that highlight its intertextual relations to vaudeville and melodrama. In Chapter Four, Carnicke compares Chekhov's work with *A Peculiar Position* by Eugene Scribe. She expertly guides the reader through the analysis simplifying, contextualizing, and explaining broad concepts. While pointing out Chekhov's departures from Scribe, she notes that Chekhov "finds value in the shorthand techniques that Scribe used for quick characterizations" (146). In Chapter Five, Carnicke explains how Chekhov used typical melodramatic

techniques (disasters, duels, the loss of virtue, suicide) to introduce moral ambiguity, to strip away sentimentality, and to present characters who both discard their illusions and learn to face themselves without pretense (158–9). The following chapter guides readers through Stanislavsky's production of *The Seagull*, using the director's production plan and letters to the author. Of note to Chekhov scholars, in her conclusion, Carnicke introduces the full text of a little-known short play Chekhov wrote in 1883 entitled, *Na Lune (On the Moon)* to demonstrate that "Chekhov's characters are always good and bad, heroic and villainous, silly and serious and always seeking a better life. But only those who come to see life clearly as it is, who face and discard their illusions and lies, can find what they seek" (223).

Theatre educators and practitioners will find Carnicke's *Checking out Chekhov* to be useful for deepening their ability to work productively and richly on one of the most complex writers for the theatre. It has great potential to revitalize discussions of Chekhov in the classroom and the rehearsal room.

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Sophia Lubensky, *Russian-English Dictionary of Idioms. Revised Edition.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013. 955 pages.

This is the second, revised and expanded edition of the *Russian-English Dictionary of Idioms* by Sophia Lubensky. The first was published by Random House in 1995.

While the underlying lexicographic principles employed in the original edition have been preserved and the structure of the dictionary entries has remained unchanged, the second edition is different from the original edition in two important respects. First, about 550 new entries containing over 900 idioms along with their synonyms and variants have been added. This brings the total number of entries to approximately 7,500 and the total number of idioms close to 14,000. The new entries reflect the ongoing changes in the Russian language as well as the author's continuous work to remedy significant omissions. Second, a great number