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Author: Dr Roanna Mitchell
University of Kent
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6045-451X>
Twitter: @RoannaMitchell
Contact: rem.mitchell@gmail.com

Title:
Something in the Atmosphere? Michael Chekhov, Deirdre Hurst Du Prey, and a Web of Practices between Acting and Dance

Abstract

This article contextualises principles of Chekhov's technique within convergent developments in dance by bringing into focus the interesting web of connections between Chekhov's female colleagues — specifically his associate Deirdre Hurst Du Prey — and key pioneers in the field of dance and dance-mime, including Mary Wigman, Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham and Margaret Barr. Their cross-connections broaden our view on the canon of embodied theatre practice, and also open up reflection on how overlaps between acting- and dance principles may be useful for contemporary embodied theatre practice and its efforts to work across these currently (in the Western conservatoire context) quite segregated disciplines.

Keywords: Michael Chekhov; Deirdre Hurst Du Prey; Margaret Barr; Embodied Theatre; Physical Theatre; Dance; Acting.

Word count: 7035

Around every practitioner who has found his (and it is usually 'his') way into the canon of performance techniques, there is a working atmosphere, made up of people and places, that fed and enabled their work. This is also true for the Russian actor, director and teacher Michael Chekhov, who indeed was very conscious of the importance of atmosphere, both in creative process and creative product. If we read atmosphere, as Chekhov does, as the lifeblood of a creative work, 'the feeling dimension which links everything together' (Chamberlain, 2004: 53), this means that we can learn and discover more about a body of work, and its contributors, if we look at the atmosphere in which it was developed. The following discussion thus aims to do just that, contextualising principles of Chekhov's technique within convergent developments in dance by bringing into focus the interesting web of connections between Chekhov's female colleagues — specifically his associate Deirdre Hurst Du Prey — and key pioneers in the field of dance and dance-mime, including Mary Wigman, Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham and Margaret Barr. Their cross-connections broaden our view on the canon of embodied theatre practice, and also open up reflection on how overlaps between acting- and dance principles may be useful for contemporary embodied theatre practice and its efforts to work across these currently (in the Western conservatoire context) quite segregated disciplines¹.

I choose Chekhov's female collaborators as a focus because, although the development of embodied theatre practice and cross-artform developments is populated by a vast number of female practitioners (Evans, 2009: 8), its current

¹ Discussing the ampersand between theatre '&' dance, Kate Elswit notes that 'today the global circulation of performance means that this legacy of separation not only impacts the dominant paradigm in, for example, North America, but is present in other performance communities as well' (2018: 12).

canon still primarily narrates the work of male practitioners as constituting the main event (Murray and Keefe, 2016; Callery, 2014). This serves as a reminder that the body of a canon, in Foucauldian terms, is produced by and existing in discourse (Foucault, 1974); in this case a patriarchal discourse which tends to privilege linear structures, notions of the lone genius, and certain organisational priorities (see the case of Margaret Barr below). Despite this being a canon pertaining to performance and the body, its discourse is still often defined by language, where ‘dominant male experts... in authoring their ideas, made these ideas ‘theirs’ and made themselves central to the location of authority and authenticity’, thereby simultaneously deepening the silence of embodied knowledge transfer (Evans, 2009: 8). Important work has been done over the past decade to begin to address this, for instance through Cass Fleming’s study of Suzanne Bing’s embodied play practices (2013), or Ayse Tashkiran’s research on the work of female British movement directors (2016). My discussion follows in that tradition, recognising that embodied practice — like atmosphere — can rarely be ascribed to one ‘original’ source but rather ‘occurs in the interstices’ of collaboration, cross-fertilization and silent transfer of embodied knowledge (Foucault, 1977: 150). Chekhov himself underlines this in his ‘Memo to the Reader’ preceeding the main text of *To the Actor*, in which he acknowledges the limitations of communicating via ‘mere words and intellectual concepts’ (2002, iv). Rather than considering his writings as a task completed, he tells the reader ‘I need your help’, emphasising that embodied knowledge is crucial and will only emerge through practical experimentation, in this case in the space of co-operation between reader and author (2002, iv).

It is worth briefly acknowledging here that, throughout his lifetime and continuing to this day, Chekhov's work has been supported, developed and disseminated by women. In the programme for the 20th anniversary celebrations of the Michael Chekhov Association (MICHA) in 2019, Cass Fleming highlighted this matriarchal network stretching, from the early twentieth Century to today, which includes Xenia Chekhov, his second wife; Maria Knebel; Georgette Boner; Deirdre Hurst Du Prey; Beatrice Straight; Dorothy Elmhirst; Alice Crowther; Felicity Mason; Eleanor Faison; Mala Powers; Joanna Merlin; Lisa Dalton; Fern Sloan; Sarah Kane; Jessica Cerullo; and which continues to expand across the globe (Fleming, 2019). Fleming suggests, loosely drawing on Helene Cixous' (1975) notion of *écriture féminine* as a way of writing the body that 'does not rely mainly on rationality but incorporates the body's rhythms, humors, and moods' (Segarra 2010: 12), that Chekhov's play-enabling style of pedagogy and directing are 'not afraid of being more 'feminine' despite the fact that he is a man' (Fleming, 2013: X). Perhaps this may account for the number of female practitioners that were drawn to Chekhov's work. As Fleming notes:

Between them the Chekhov matriarchy have financed his theatre productions and studios, supported publications of his books (and often helped to edit his material in German and English), built the archive of his work, published his recorded lectures and autobiographies, and established workshops and studios that teach his technique and promote his work to new generations of students (Fleming, 2019).

For the purpose of this discussion I will mainly focus on Chekhov's associate at Dartington, Deirdre Hurst Du Prey, whose archive of Chekhov's work informs so much of what we know of his work in the UK at Dartington Hall (1936-1939) and beyond.

[Figure 1 near here]

Apart from her crucial work on documentation and archiving, Hurst Du Prey was one of only three people trained by Chekhov as a teacher and director.² She also passed Chekhov's technique on as a teacher in the US until late in her life, demonstrating 'a gift for translating his artistic inspirations into the sphere of education, awakening the creative spirit of generations of children and future educators' (Caracciolo, 2017: 1). Hurst Du Prey's archive notes and accounts of her life and experiences highlight the important role that dance played throughout, even though most of her career was spent teaching and working in relation to theatre (Caracciolo, 2017)³. Narrating her autobiography to Diane Caracciolo in 1998, she describes how she reacted as a little girl to the birth of her younger sister by 'jigging around', causing the nurse to say 'that one will be for being a dancer' (Caracciolo, Session 1, 1 May 1998: 8). She goes on to say: 'I have been becoming a dancer most of my life... from then on everything I did was with dance... I always wanted nothing but to dance' (Caracciolo, Session 2, 8 May 1998: 1).

It seems significant that Chekhov's right-hand woman was someone whose dance training remained ingrained in her thinking about dramatic performance, and who continued to seek approaches that united the two. Indeed, on seeing Chekhov perform for the first time she recognizes a similar sensibility in his work, describing him as a kind of 'dancing actor':

² Some of what this training entailed is now accessible through the extended version of Hurst Du Prey's original transcripts of Chekhov's 'Lessons to Teachers', published by MICHA in 2018.

³ It is worth noting that dance did remain in Hurst Du Prey's 'atmosphere': when teaching at the Adelphi Children's Centre for Creative Arts she was working alongside Bruce King of Merce Cunningham Dance Company and Dalcroze student Kitta Brown, and parallel to the dance department founded by Ruth St Denis in 1938 (Caracciolo, 2017: 6).

What was so remarkable was his performance as Khlestakov, the Inspector General — an unbelievable performance. Truly tremendous experience of an actor who moved, a dancer who was everywhere on the stage with scintillating ease and brilliance and bringing such vitality and life with every movement, everything that he did...he had performed like a ballet dancer in this rather grotesque performance. (Kindelan, 1977: 5)

Hurst Du Prey's embodied heritage and history will thus function as a key to help us read a fascinating map of cross-disciplinary overlaps and shared influences in the early twentieth century, between the ideas at the heart of Chekhov's work, and the experiments and principles that preoccupied a set of key dance practitioners at the same time.

Embodied Theatre: Dance and Theatre in dialogue

The aim of examining the intersections of practice in this article is to gain a deeper understanding of work that is created in the crossover between theatre and dance, where movement becomes a key mode of creation and expression along the sliding scale between acting and dance. As Murray and Keefe discuss extensively in *Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction* (2016), such work involves a great deal of slippage in terms of definition, as it comes under a multiplicity of namings, encompasses a range of styles, and refers to a range of performance traditions and heritages. While Murray and Keefe resort, as a solution, to the plural 'Physical Theatres' (2016: 4), in the following discussion I will make use of Phelim McDermott's term 'embodied theatre' (2007: 204). In giving this definition, McDermott refers to performance that involves 'not just an inclusion of movement, but an engagement with the "embodied imagination" (203): 'The dream is not just of a physical theatre but of an embodied theatre that combines the body, the imagination, the emotions and the voice' (204).

In the current canon describing the development of such embodied theatre practice, the dialogue with developments in dance practice remains limited. Callery's discussion of Physical Theatre, for instance, focuses mainly on practices from the 1970s onwards, through the emergence of Pina Bausch's Tanztheater and a kind of 'new dance' developing through the work of DV8 Physical Theatre (2014: 12). Murray and Keefe's discussion of the roots of embodied theatre practice meanwhile, while ambitious in scope, in terms of dance remain similarly focused on the influence of Bausch, DV8 and their heritage, and covers 'dancing bodies' mainly in relation to the influence of social and popular dance (2016: 65). However, if we want to understand embodied theatre practice as a practice that involves the 'embodied imagination' there is more to be discovered by looking to dance, reminding us that the relationship between theatre and dance is interdependent, as suggested by Elswit (2018). Cohen and Matheson's *Dance as Theatre Art* (1992) for example highlights that the debate around whether, and how, dance should act as an expression of inner life, has been returned to again and again over centuries. In 1682, Claude Ménéstrier published a treatise titled *des Ballets anciens et modernes*, where he 'asserted that the motions of the body were capable of depicting inner feelings that could be made known in no other way... Alas, he sighed, dancers would rather do pretty steps than represent something — thus setting the problem for the coming century' (1992: 38). In the mid- 1700s, dramatic choreographer Jean Georges Noverre complains of *maîtres de ballet* that 'so few of them are excellent actors and competent to depict in gesture the thoughts they wish to express' (Noverre in Cohen and Matheson, 1992: 58). He emphasises the importance of training and understanding inner sensations — 'let us study the passions. In training ourselves to feel them, the

difficulty of expressing them will vanish' (Noverre in Cohen& Matheson, p62) — in a way that resonates with Michael Chekhov's training for actors, as will be discussed below. His powerful manifesto *Lettres sur la danse et les ballets*, first published in 1760, goes on to call for an actively embodied imagination such as McDermott would refer to over 200 years later:

Your imagination, filled with the picture you wish to represent, will provide you with the proper figures, steps and gestures. Then your compositions will glow with fire and strength, they cannot but be true to nature if you are full of your subject. Bring love as well as enthusiasm to your art. To be successful in theatrical representations, the heart must be touched, the soul moved and the imagination inflamed. (Noverre in Cohen& Matheson, 1992: 64)

These questions and principles in dance were thus taken up repeatedly over the course of history, and the parallels between them and questions driving actor training — specifically Chekhov's practice — can help to illuminate the shared space between them. In Chekhov's technique a highly developed awareness of, and responsiveness to, the embodied experience of movement — including the movement sensation of thought, imagination, space and atmosphere — is the starting point and fulcrum of the performer's process. As I have discussed elsewhere, this makes his 'pedagogy of rhythm and gesture' a useful tool for those seeking more integration between 'acting' and 'actor movement', subjects traditionally taught separately in the current UK conservatoire system (Mitchell, 2020). However, while application in actor-training is comparatively well studied (see for instance Chamberlain, 2004; Ashperger, 2008; Zinder, 2009; Petit, 2010; Langman, 2014; Autant-Mathieu and Meerzon, 2015; Rushe, 2019), there is still more to explore about how and why Chekhov's technique functions in cross-over practices such as interdisciplinary work between acting and dance

(Mitchell 2020), and also lends itself to develop expressive dance practice, as evidenced for example in Susanne Bennett's research in this area (2013). The centrality of the embodied experience of movement alone might be considered reason enough to explain why this is, however, as I will explore here, this flexibility of the technique and its resonance with dance practice may have deeper roots, roots that I begin to chart with Deirdre Hurst Du Prey's career, starting with her encounter with Mary Wigman.

Mary Wigman

Born and raised in Canada in 1906, on the outskirts of Vancouver, Hurst Du Prey's formal training began in the early 1930s when she moved to the Cornish School in Seattle, which was to become an important influence and point of creative exchange in the instalment of the arts at Dartington Hall (Nicholas, 2007: 58). The Cornish School was dedicated to 'the creative spirit in education', and music, dance, drama, puppetry and visual arts were incorporated here (2007: 50). The dance curriculum included: 'Dalcroze eurythmics, Duncan-style dancing, ballet and modern dance as it was developing' (Nicholas, 2007: 50). It was here that Hurst Du Prey encountered Mary Wigman's teaching, taking us to the first example of how her dance experiences might have informed her later understanding of Chekhov's technique and pedagogical principles.

According to Santos Newhall (2009), Wigman, an expressionist dancer who was a former student of Dalcroze and Laban, was inspired by Nietzsche's statement that 'the soul is only a word for something about the body' (Nietzsche 1966: 34). Hurst Du Prey would later encounter Chekhov's belief in the concept of a 'higher-level *I*' that can be accessed by trusting and responding to one's creative

imagination (Chekhov 2002: 86), and this principle would have felt familiar from her work with Wigman: Wigman believed that the dancing, moving body was 'the vehicle to an ... enlarged sense of the soul', and that 'her inspiration stood on greater authority than her own ego' (Santos Newhall, 2009: 67, 69).

Chekhov describes his approach to movement as neither acting nor dance, but as 'pure use of the qualities of our bodies' (19 October 1937). While Hurst Du Prey never raises disagreement with this statement, her training experience with teachers such as Wigman would have taught her that similar principles around movement also existed in the field of dance. Wigman for instance notes that 'The dance begins where gymnastics leave off', observing the importance of activating the imagination and involving the inner life so that 'the dance becomes more than mere physical movement in space, and the dancer more than its mobile agent.

From then on, it represents the internal experiences of the dancer... the expression without the inner experience in the dance is valueless' (Wigman in Cohen and Matheson, 1992: 150-152).

Wigman's pedagogic approach also resonates with Chekhov's, both highlighting the performer's creative individuality: Wigman emphasized the students' creative agency by asking them to 'develop an individual way of fulfilling the movement', thereby aiming to achieve 'an enrichment of the whole person, physically and emotionally, through the practice of dance movement' (Santos Newhall, 2009: 136). As in Chekhov's explorations of Psychological Gesture, Wigman's students were asked to repeat simple movements in order to 'experience the "feeling" of the movement' and discover its possible qualities (Santos Newhall, 2009: 137).

While Hurst Du Prey describes Wigman as ‘a very dynamic person, a very nice person’ (Caracciolo, 15 May 1998, p.5), she had a very different experience with Wigman’s assistant, Laura Deja, who stayed on at the Cornish School to teach Wigman’s technique and of whom Hurst Du Prey states ‘she terrified me, simply terrified me!’ (Kindelan, 1977: 3). In her classes, Hurst Du Prey felt ‘terribly afraid of doing the wrong thing’ (1977: 3), and began to doubt herself in comparison to the younger students with more formal dance training as ‘I had studied so long by myself... I had a kind of style of my own and it wasn’t what she wanted’ (Caracciolo, 15 May 1998, p.8). Hurst Du Prey — whose mother was a teacher and who would herself go on to become a gifted pedagogue — was clearly already more interested in ways of transmitting knowledge that reject authoritarianism, pure technical precision and perfectionism, and which valued creative individuality, all of which she would later further explore with Chekhov. Finding that Deja’s teaching was ‘shattering the dream that I’d had all my life and followed so diligently’ (Kindelan, 1977: 3), Hurst Du Prey made the decision to leave the Cornish School and seek out a training that would enable rather than discourage her. It was this decision, and the unbending will of a woman who ‘was born in a forest fire, and ... never stopped burning’ that led her to move to England and study at Dartington’s School for Dance-Mime and later, with Beatrice Straight, to travel the world to seek out the teacher for Dartington’s Studio that they found in Michael Chekhov (Caracciolo, 1 May 1998, p.2).

Isadora Duncan

While we can only assume that Hurst Du Prey would have recognized the similarities between Wigman’s approach and Chekhov’s technique, her

acknowledgment of Isadora Duncan's influence on his work is explicit. It serves as an apt reminder that Duncan also had a close friendship with, and influence on, Stanislavski, a connection that dance and theatre history have often failed to mention, as discussed by Preston (2005). Hurst Du Prey was never taught by Duncan herself; however, her classes at the Cornish School did involve 'Duncan-style dancing', and she was also later taught by Louise Soelberg, a student of Duncan's sister Elisabeth, at Dartington's School of Dance-Mime (Nicholas, 2007: 50, 64).

Discussing how Chekhov's ideas around Gesture evolved, Hurst Du Prey notes that aside from the influence of Russian colleagues — such as Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, Stanislavski — who were 'deeply involved in gesture', Chekhov also had 'the experience of seeing Duncan's work, which was gesture again' (Hurst Du Prey, 1978: 4). For Chekhov, Gesture is 'the crystallized Will', the expression of a desire in movement, the statement "I wish to..." completed through dynamic expression with its own specific quality (Chekhov, 1991:109-110). Hurst Du Prey reminds us that, at its essence, his Psychological Gesture is embodied metaphor: 'It is one gesture which encompasses the particular things you are searching for' and which 'can be done inwardly, without making the physical gesture, but [...] must first be experienced as a physical movement' (Hurst Du Prey, 1978: 3,4). Chekhov believed that every thing in the world can be observed to have such a desire, from the violet that 'peeps out of its surrounding leaves (Gesture), tenderly, confidently, questioningly (Quality)' to architectural features such as the gesture and quality of a steep or sloping staircase (Chekhov, 1991: 40):

I realized that every play, every stage character, costume, set, mise-en-scene, speech (expressed through the gestures of Eurythmy) – in a word, everything that the audience sees and hears on stage can be expressed

as a living, evocative ‘gesture’ with its attendant ‘qualities’. (Chekhov: 2005: 188)

In Duncan’s writings from around 1905-1909, we see that ideas of Gesture are not only key to her philosophy of dance, but are also strikingly similar to Chekhov’s later formulations of the idea. Where Chekhov describes Gesture as ‘crystallized Will’ (Chekhov, 1991:109), Duncan defines will as “the movement of the universe concentrating in an individual” (Duncan in Preston, 2005: 279). Further, like Chekhov, she emphasizes in her talks from around 1909 that to find an understanding of how will, or desire, are expressed in movement dynamic and -quality the dancer should look to the surrounding world:

‘it is essential to draw one’s conception of [harmonious expression] from Nature herself, and to seek the human movement from the rhythm of water in motion, from the blowing of the winds on the world, in all the earth’s movements, in the motions of animals, fish, birds, reptiles, and even in primitive man, whose body still moved in harmony with Nature’ (Duncan, 1969: 78).

Both Duncan and Chekhov also recognized that the understanding of gesture will only be reached through a clear ‘Feeling of Form’. Chekhov includes this consideration in his simple exercises focusing on the Four Brothers: the Feelings of Form, Ease, Beauty and the Whole, which as Gordon notes ‘schooled the performer in special psychophysical movements, forcing him to think about his body in theatrical space as a choreographer or dancer would’ (Gordon 1991: xxviii). Duncan, meanwhile, was keen to emphasize that even in her approach, ‘with its freedom, its accordance with natural movement, there was always design too — even in Nature you find sure, even rigid design’ (1969: 79). Elements of Duncan’s work should of course be problematized in relation to the context of its time, with the rise of *Koerperkultur*, what might be seen as a fetishization of the ‘natural’ body, and the problematic racist primitivism,

ableism and essentialism this entails (Evans, 2009: 69-78). However, the principle of discovering a gestural dynamic that captures a 'poetic essence' of things may perhaps be salvaged from this criticism, if we demand that this gestural dynamic is expressed through individual interpretation.⁴ It is a principle that continues to drive embodied theatre practice, not only through Chekhov's technique but also through the French tradition developed through Suzanne Bing, Jacques Copeau, Jacques Lecoq, Monica Pagneux and others. Murray and Keefe suggest that the roots of the physical in theatre lie here, in 'the transformed mimetic actions of the actor or performer, whether clown, acrobat, priest or shaman — accepted via the active imagination and suspended disbelief of the spectator' (2016: 45).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a pedagogy of gestural dynamics, as a tool for capturing the poetic essence of things, thus stands out as one of the key shared principles among training practices between acting and dance, with the attendant requirement to acknowledge cultural and political context and be alert to the dangers of essentialising gesture (Evans, 2014). This question of gesture becomes central again when we follow Hurst Du Prey's journey to her encounter with Martha Graham. Before this, however, Hurst Du Prey began her training at Dartington's School for Dance-Mime, where her teachers included not only Duncan's student Louise Solberg, but also Margaret Barr, whose experiments in the dance-theatre crossover, as pertinent to the themes of this special issue, arguably merit greater attention than she has received to date.

⁴ Lecoq insists, for example, that when miming the poetic essence of the sea the student's individual interpretation is a crucial element: 'I choose and transpose my physical impressions. I create another sea — the sea played with this 'extra' that belongs to me and which defines my style' (2006: 69).

[Figure 2 near here.]

Margaret Barr

Margaret Barr was a choreographer and teacher of dance-drama, whose background included training at the Cornish School and with Martha Graham, and who started her own dance group in London, before being invited to become part of establishing Dartington's School of Dance-Mime in 1930. She was a teacher at the School when Hurst Du Prey arrived, and her biography as a faculty member in the School's prospectus states that she was 'teaching Dance Technique, and building with groups, a form of dance mime which springs from an imaginative conception and relates emotional ideas to movement' (Dartington School of Dance-Mime Prospectus, 1930).

As the prospectus indicates, Barr's experiments at Dartington were cross-disciplinary in nature. Nicholas notes that 'Developing as she had from the dual influences of dance and drama, Barr brought those two disciplines together, ranging in her work from pure dance to an amalgam she labelled dance-mime or dance drama' (2007: 68), and that in this work 'The dramatic idea was central and the material of the work could cross between dance, rhythmic mime and scripted dialogue' (2007: 63). Her experiments, including classes in 'on the spot' dramatic improvisation, might be considered a predecessor of contemporary physical theatre or dance theatre, as 'She could refine and pattern mundane movements and everyday experience into satisfying dance material' (2007: 75). Nicholas goes on to observe that perhaps 'her foregrounding of content would not allow her to take the abstraction process further in the direction of pure

dance' — however, arguably it might be possible that she never intended to do so (2007: 75).

We can assume that Barr's work at Dartington laid some key foundations in the students for Chekhov's future experiments, for instance through the fact that her performances were noted for their strong sense of ensemble, an aspect of performance that Chekhov would later reinforce with his students at Dartington (Fleming, 2013; Chamberlain, 2013).⁵ Barr's performances created while at Dartington were also praised for their strength of atmosphere, with critics writing of her piece *The People* (1932) that 'no one in the audience was left unmoved' (Nicholas, 2007: 79).

In the context of Barr's career at Dartington, we see a clear instance of the way in which organisational structures and priorities, and their power dynamics, influence the scope of a canon. Minutes of a meeting of staff and students of the School for Dance Mime in November 1932 show conflicting ideas about whether the school should produce professional dancers and offer accreditation, or should preserve its process-focused experimental nature, including an emphasis on social responsibility and inclusion of amateur performers (Notes on Students' Meeting, 26 Nov 1932, 26 Nov 1932). The latter was a key part of Barr's role, who at Leonard Elmhirst's request set aside some of her other artistic work to teach classes in nearby villages in order to 'heal rifts between 'upper management' and Estate's manual workers' (Nicholas, 68). The minutes culminate in 'the all-important question of 'What is considered the Aim and Purpose of the Dance-School?' (Notes on Students' Meeting, 26 Nov 1932), and

⁵ Critic John Martin noted that Barr's *The People* was 'a model of ensemble playing' (Nicholas, 2007: 79).

by 1934 it had been agreed that the School would close, to be replaced with Kurt Jooss and Sigurd Leeder's School of Dance, alongside Chekhov's Studio, both prioritising the aim of professional training. As a consequence, and despite the fact that work at the School for Dance-Mime had been described in 1932 as 'perhaps the most significant dance movement in the country' by *New York Times* critic John Martin (Lester, 2014), Barr was effectively marginalised. Though her performance creations had been compared to Kurt Jooss's (Nicholas, 2007: 77; Lester, 2014), she was invited to work under Jooss and run the outreach work at Dartington, a role which she refused.

However, Barr would continue to break new ground in her work after leaving Dartington: The programme note for a performance at the Arts Theatre Club in 1935 sees Barr credited as 'Director of Movement' (Arts Theatre Club Programme, 1935). This credit may be one of the first recorded uses of the term, given 31 years before, as Tashkiran notes in her discussion of British Movement Directors, 'Someone (Claude Chagrin), even gets a credit for "movement"' for the National Theatre's *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (Tashkiran in Evans & Kemp, 229). The programme consists of a concert of 10 works. Two of these are music only; in the notes for the others it is not always clear to what degree dance and drama were in interplay. The works that most obviously suggest dramatic movement rather than dance are Number 5, 'The Three Sisters', with music by Edmund Rubbra, described as 'The reaction of three women of different characters— The Prostitute, The Spinster and The Young Girl — to the circumstances of war; and Number 8: 'Factory — A dramatic improvisation'. The latter is the only piece of the evening not set to music, and is described as 'Rhythmic movement and realism combined to create the atmosphere of daily work' (Arts Theatre Club

Programme, 1935).⁶ The themes here clearly resonate with the pre-Second World War interest in the relationship between physical movement and labour, which we also find in the work of practitioners such as Laban and Decroux (Evans, 2009: 16-36).

[Figures 3 and 4 near here]

Barr continued creating theatrical dance works that became more overtly political, examining contemporary economical and social conditions. She would also later go on to work in a munitions factory in Auckland, become one of the few women in the late 1940s to gain a yacht-master's certificate, found her own company in Australia, and then worked for seventeen years as the inaugural Head of Movement at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) in Australia (Lester, 2014).

Barr's training with Martha Graham in 1927-28 would prove a key influence on her life's work (Nicholas, 2007: 61). At this point, Graham's focus on contraction and release began to emerge, though not yet formalized: 'Graham would have been working for the full involvement of the spine — an internalized sensing of its curving and extension — as a development of breathing exercises' (Nicholas, 2007: 61). As Nicholas notes, 'Perhaps Barr took something of the Graham dynamics, the emphasis on the breath and spine, with her to England.' (2007: 62). Further, as Lester observes, although Barr's period working with Graham lasted only 18 months, 'Barr later stated that she had the greatest influence of

⁶ The evening appears to be an ensemble effort: the programme note credits first the 'Group', and then goes on to credit some individuals for particular aspects, including Margaret Barr as Director for Movement and Teda De Moor as assistant.

any person on her life' (Lester, 2014). In this, as the next section will show, Barr was somewhat of a kindred spirit with Hurst Du Prey.

Martha Graham

During Hurst Du Prey's search for a practice in which she could feel at home — in the period between the closing of Dartington's School for Dance-Mime and the opening of Chekhov's Studio — she met, and worked with, Martha Graham in New York. Hurst Du Prey recalls that 'it wasn't until I met Martha Graham and got to know her well that I really began to feel that I knew something that I would like to do' (Kindelan, 1977: 6).

Although Hurst Du Prey found herself 'too old to take on the discipline of Martha Graham' as a member of her company, she did perform as leader of the chorus under Graham's direction in Archibald MacLeish's play *Panic* on Broadway in 1935 (Kindelan, 1977: 6). She acknowledges this as 'a great moment for me', and connects the praise she received for her performance to her love of gesture:

'Evidently I was able to bring some quality and it all ties in with my love of gesture and love of poetry' (Kindelan, 1977: 7).

Hurst Du Prey's archive contains a series of draft letters from herself to Martha Graham, written in the Spring of 1974 aged 68, in which she pays homage to Graham's work and recalls the experience of dancing in *Panic*:

I have never forgotten the experience of being part of the creative work that you did with us right on the stage, nor the gesture which you gave to me for the line "And the fear shall be lost, and the loneliness." In that gesture I felt I was reaching eternity or encompassing the universe, and there have been many occasions in the years since that I have made that gesture and spoken that line in order to re-capture that sense of exaltation. It seemed preparation for the work with Michael Chekhov, for whom gesture was [...] the bodily speech of the actor. (10 April 1974)

In another draft of the same letter she remarks that this moment ‘taught me for all time the power of the archetypal gesture’ (8 May 1974). Though it is unclear whether any version of Hurst Du Prey’s letter was ever sent to Graham, the drafts show that she was keen to communicate to her the connection between her work and Chekhov’s: ‘It was in that same March that Beatrice Straight and I began our long association with Michael Chekhov — only recently I finished working on a book containing his lessons on the technique of acting, in which the psychological gesture plays such a major role’ (14 May, 1974).

As Hurst Du Prey emphasises here, the shared ground between Graham and Chekhov can thus, again, be found in the understanding of Gesture as central to the performers’ craft. A very visceral and direct connection to the archetypal psychological gestures of Opening and Closing can be found in Graham’s work on contraction and release, which is the foundation of her approach in its use of ‘the pulsation of life, which is [...] the pulsation of breath’ (Graham, 1991: 46).

Further, placing this archetypal gesture at the heart of her technique seems to express Chekhov’s ethos of constantly giving and receiving, which he speaks about most eloquently in relation to atmosphere and the movement quality of radiating (2002). For Graham it is essential that the dancer ‘make the gesture, the effort, the real effort to communicate with another human being’ (1991: 7), and also extends this concept to language, noting that ‘for me the spoken word can be used almost as a gesture’ (2002: 2734). She shares with Chekhov the principle that inner gesture is a crucial part of any expression through the body ‘because from a certain point of view we do nothing but psychological gesture in our speech, costumes, colours, radiations, lighting, etc. Then, if we are able to awaken that, we are able to awaken our souls’ (Chekhov, 7 February 1938).

Further connections between Graham and Chekhov's work can be found in a concern for rhythm, and in the importance placed on attentiveness to inner sensation. Regarding rhythm, Hurst Du Prey notes that for Chekhov 'Up to the very end of his work, rhythm was all important to him. The rhythm of an idea, the rhythm of a concept, the rhythm of the whole... gesture and rhythm, so close. The living force' (1978: 14-15). Graham's emphasis on the importance of rhythm shines through in her discussion of spontaneity as a question of 'perfect timing', as she writes: 'spontaneity is essentially dependent on energy, upon the strength necessary to perfect timing. It is the result of perfect timing to the Now' (Graham in Cohen and Matheson, 1992: 136).

Regarding the role of inner sensation, Graham discusses this in 1941 by observing that attention to feedback from the nervous system is crucial for the artist's full engagement in their work: 'The puritanical concept of life has always ignored the fact that the nervous system and the body as well as the mind are involved in experience, and art cannot be experienced except by one's entire being' (Graham in Cohen and Matheson, 1992: 137). Chekhov uses different language, but arguably is discussing the same phenomenon when he writes that the first and foremost requirement for the actor is to develop harmony between body and psychology through '*extreme sensitivity of the body to the psychological creative impulses*' (2002: 2, emphasis in original). This, he notes, 'cannot be achieved by strictly physical exercises. The psychology itself must take part in such a development' (2002: 2) — a sentiment shared by Graham when she writes that 'A program of physical activity which involves only, first, exercises for strength, and second, a means of emotional catharsis through so-called "self expression dancing," will never produce a complete human being' (Graham in

Cohen and Matheson, 1992: 137). While Chekhov's language tends, as usual, toward the intangible, the 'psychophysical exercises' — which he concludes are thus necessary to train the actor — require concentration and attention to what, in a more materialistic view, are effectively changes in the nervous system: inner sensations (2002: 4)⁷. It is likely that he would have agreed with Graham that the 'acquirement of nervous, physical, and emotional concentration is the one element possessed to the highest degree by the truly great dancers of the world' (Graham in Cohen and Matheson, 1992: 137).

Conclusion

In tracing the lines of Deirdre Hurst Du Prey's embodied practices, we discover more about what was in the atmosphere around Chekhov's work at Dartington and beyond, thereby revealing overlaps and shared principles between Chekhov's technique and a number of dance-practices. There are better-known encounters between Chekhov and dance practitioners — such as the influence of Uday Shankar's performance at the opening of the Dartington Studio (Daboo, 2015: 282), the teaching exchange with the Jooss-Leeder School of Dance and especially Laban's collaborator Lisa Ullmann (Cornford, 2012: 98; Autant-Mathieu and Meerzon, 2015: 16, Mitchell 2020), and the likely meeting of Chekhov and Laban during their simultaneous residence at Dartington in 1938

⁷ The importance of language raised here, regarding when and whether performers will respond better to references to human biology and anatomy or more metaphorical or spiritual terminology, merits further investigation, especially in the context of cross-disciplinary work and inclusive practice. Gelsey Kirkland's approach described below is another example of searching for such appropriate language.

(McCaw, 2005). However, the network discussed in this article may serve to highlight the importance that the work of, and interactions between, a further set of key female practitioners played in shaping the context within which Chekhov developed his ideas. This has implications for how we understand the past, which in turn may change how we develop embodied theatre and dance practice in the future.

Looking to the past, we can glean from the above a more fulsome understanding of the development of embodied theatre practice for the way it has been in dialogue with dance practice. While this dialogue has of course been acknowledged, its presence in the canon is often concentrated on the influence of Rudolf Laban, the developments made by Pina Bausch, and the more contemporary examples associated with the term Physical Theatre, such as DV8's dance heritage. In part this may be because connections such as the ones I have drawn in this article are not easily traced, and require us to look beyond the 'key players' of embodied theatre's canon, to the ideas and embodied knowledge that their collaborators brought to the development, archiving and dissemination of their work. However, as I hope to have shown here, such consideration of the broader atmosphere surrounding the accepted canon is worthwhile, as it can lead to a re-understanding of contemporary practice. In this instance it illuminates how, and why, Chekhov's technique offers useful entry points to working with the same technique with actors, dancers, and performers whose practice slides along the scale between those two professions.

The way in which this takes place can of course take many different forms; I want to conclude with just one example. In her book *The Shape of Love* (1990) ballerina Gelsey Kirkland describes a lesson with young dancers in which she is

trying to explain how, in the role of Juliet, to express the sentiment 'I love you' to Romeo, while simply sitting on a chair. Over a number of pages she recounts her dialogue with the students, in which she painstakingly tries to illuminate the inner gesture of turning out the heart to say 'I love you, Romeo':

I created an illusion, didn't I? After all, I was only sitting in this chair...
So what was I turning out if I wasn't turning out my legs?... I turned out my heart, and I turned it out again and again, notch by notch, breath by breath.
(Kirkland, 1990: 151).

Kirkland here is asking the dancers to remember a physical experience of opening that is familiar to them — turnout — in order to find what it might feel like to open, to 'turn out', the heart. Her instinct to tie this expressive work to a physical movement that is so familiar, indeed intrinsic, to her students' experience of themselves as dancers, means that the 'acting' work she is doing with them is firmly grounded in their developing professional dancer's identity. We can recognize the resonance between Kirkland's process here, and Chekhov's Psychological Gesture as 'one gesture which encompasses the particular things you are searching for' and which 'can be done inwardly, without making the physical gesture, but [...] must first be experienced as a physical movement' (Hurst Du Prey, 1978: 3,4).

Reimagining such a lesson in the contemporary context, it is easy to see how the technique of psychological gesture could provide a useful shorthand to achieve what Kirkland is trying to explain. For Chekhov, psychological gesture pertains to the fact that we always express our will, our wanting, our desire, through gestures that involve the whole psychophysical organism, including the imagination. Those gestures are essentially directions in space: they are about the direction in which energy moves in space when I, for example, expand,

contract, push away, pull towards. A psychophysical training element such as Chekhov's technique of psychological gesture, which awakens the dancer's attention to this sensation of energetic movement (movement of the 'inner life'), can thus capitalise from the fact that working with directions in space, along with quality of movement, is already an integral part of the dancer's expertise.⁸ As a consequence, a dancer who has been introduced to the archetypal psychological gesture of 'opening', for instance', may then easily and quickly draw on this understanding to develop the 'acting' gesture of an 'opening of the heart' that Kirkland was looking for.

Rather than imposing the craft of acting on the dancer or vice versa, this example shows that the two can be in fruitful dialogue through their shared principles, and can develop out of each other, as Hurst Du Prey observes when she writes to Martha Graham that the gesture work as part of her chorus 'seemed a preparation for the work with Michael Chekhov' (April 10, 1974). This seems an important realisation in a contemporary performance context where, while interdisciplinary work is popular, formal training is still quite separate.⁹ It offers avenues for future explorations in training and rehearsal room practice and thus reminds us that, while atmosphere is characterised by being intangible, attending to what was in the atmosphere around the established canon can have very tangible, practical implications for how we approach training and rehearsal for embodied theatre and dance practice in the future.

⁸ Bennett gives a detailed example of such work with dancers on the energetic movement of psychological gesture (2013: 172).

⁹ Elswit for instance notes that 'the practices have at times been artificially divided by scholarly departments or by the institutional idiosyncracies of professional performing arts programming' (Elswit, 2018: 13)

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