

Valleri Hohman. *Russian Culture and Theatrical Performance in America, 1891-1933*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 222 pp. \$85.00 (cloth). ISBN-13: 978-0-23011-368-8.

Valleri Hohman's volume is a useful overview of Russian participation in American performing art from 1891 to 1933 for the non-specialist, or theater historians without special knowledge of Russian language, culture and history seeking a quick introduction to the subject. However, as a work of original scholarship of interest for someone versed in Russian/Soviet art and social history, it leaves much to be desired. In the course of 145 pages (the rest of the 209-page book consists of appendices, bibliography and notes) the author spends a considerable time providing introductory context and delving into biographical details of key figures. This would be understandable in a lengthier and more extensive volume, but ends up representing an unusually large amount of her text, while on the other hand key contextual information is not clearly highlighted or prioritized. At the same time, when she gets to her more original contributions Hohman does not spend enough time explaining or substantiating some of her claims, and tackles complex subjects too briefly and fragmentarily. For those interested in the NEP era, or at least the 1920s, the book offers some intriguing episodes, but as with other sections, lacks conceptual structure and analytical incisiveness.

The book is divided into three sections: "Russians in America: The Early Years," which covers 1891 to 1908, "The Russian Invasion of the American Theatre," which covers 1909-1925, and "Revolutionary Theatre: From Russia to America," which covers 1926-1933. No clear rationale is given either for the starting point of the entire investigation – 1891 – or for the chronology and nature of these divisions. The reasons can be somewhat surmised from certain events, but the information Hohman provides could also be used to posit quite different divisions, either as alternative date periods or as thematic explorations. The first major theater company to arrive in the US from Russia was Pavel Orlenov's troupe in 1905. However, before discussing it and other Russian performers and playwrights who came to the US in 1905-1908, Hohman devotes three quarters of her first section to East European Jewish performing companies that were established in the United States. The first of these was actually organized in 1882, by Boris Thomashefsky, to considerable success. Hohman provides no explanation as to why her examination begins with 1891. It can be surmised that this may be tied either to Jacob Adler's establishment of a company in New York or the arrival in the US of Jacob Gordin, who would go on to become an important playwright in Russian Jewish circles. Together, the two men would do much to reform Yiddish theater in America, and through this work introduced some ideas of Russian theater to audiences, first within the Jewish community, but later to some extent to the English-speaking public as well. Still, it is not made clear why either of these is the appropriate starting point for an examination of Russians in American theater.

The Jewish troupes Hohman writes about in the first section performed predominantly in Yiddish and consisted of performers who had emigrated from both Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe at various times and had faint lines of communication with peers within the Russian Empire. It is true that American critics and the press in general rarely made the distinction between Jews and ethnic Russians, lumping Russian and East European Jews under the general heading “Russians,” and believing them to represent Russian culture. And it is also true that some of these performers and also their audiences were interested in Russian theatrical innovations. However, Hohman gives little attention and nuance to the Jewish performers’ own understanding of their identities, and their evolution in this regard, as well as to breaking down the press accounts and responses to these Jewish troupes. Indeed, despite spending a considerable amount of time throughout the book setting the scene in terms of political and theatrical history in both Russia and the US, the author conveys the context in a sometimes disorienting and incomplete way. For example, in the second section – “The Russian Invasion” – Hohman perfunctorily explains the state of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes at the time of their US tour in 1916, focusing on the absence of Tamara Karsavina, and the delay with the arrival of Vaslav Nijinsky, while ignoring the enormously depleted state of the troupe in general. She also overlooks the fact that by this time the Ballets Russes was not purely Russian, with music, designs and librettos by West Europeans, a troupe comprising many non-Russians, such as the British dancer Hilda Munnings (Lydia Sokolova), a number of Poles, and even temporarily hired outside stars for the U.S. tour, such as Flora Revalles.

Throughout the book, the author veers away from her own chronology to recount episodes from earlier or later periods, without making sufficiently clear the conceptual connections, thus breaking up her lines of narrative and argument. One instance of this appears early in the second section. Hohman first covers Anna Pavlova and Mikhail Mordkin’s early U.S. tours (beginning 1910), and then the Ballets Russes seasons of 1916 and 1917. Ten pages later, she discusses Gertrude Hoffman’s 1911 copycat production, *La Saison Russe*, which attempted to recreate three Ballets Russes ballets using a troupe composed of Russian-trained dancers who had parted ways with Diaghilev, Pavlova and/or Mordkin. This discontinuity is caused by the author’s decision to first discuss Otto Kahn, who patronized Pavlova and the Ballets Russes, and then introduce Morris Gest, the producer behind Hoffman’s troupe. However, it does not make sense to separate these episodes so significantly, because Pavlova and Mordkin competed with Hoffman for audiences and traded charges of inauthenticity in the press, and the pirated *Saison Russe* considerably influenced audiences’ and critics’ expectations of the Ballets Russes. In fact, Gest and Kahn later collaborated in the 1920s to bring other Russian performing companies, such as Nikita Balieff’s *Chauve Souris* and Stanislavsky’s Moscow Art Theatre (MAT), and Hohman goes into considerable detail about their working relationship. Similarly, while the second sec-

tion covers Gest's role in bringing over and marketing to American audiences first the Chauve Souris and then the MAT to the U.S. in 1922-1923, with the help and support of Kahn, only at the beginning of the third section does Hohman introduce the context of Russian/Soviet theater after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

While Gest and Kahn's later collaborations were in the realm of dramatic theater rather than dance, Hohman fails to examine the theatrical aspects of the dance troupes and how these may have influenced American theater or been received by audiences. She makes no effort to connect the critical and audience understanding of the ballet and dramatic performance. Nor does Hohman give detailed enough attention to situating the various flavors of "Russian" troupes in the context of what else was occurring on the American stage, which could shed better light on critical and audience responses. For example, she does not examine the various Russian dance companies against the backdrop of the Denishawn ensemble and school of dance, although their tours were sometimes concurrent. Neither does she really discuss the Jewish theater troupes of the 1890s and 1900s in the context of the major productions and companies of the American dramatic theater in that time. Consequently, since Hohman relies considerably on press responses, it is difficult to evaluate reviewers' reference points and expectations.

Hohman's sources are primarily press reactions and performer/producer memoirs, both of which offer highly subjective responses that she does not carefully contextualize. Given how Hohman herself describes the amount of misinformation in press accounts, such as the invented episodes of Pavel Orlevnev's and Feodor Chaliapin's biographies, it is difficult to judge whether the press responses cited are truly representative of audience reactions as well as those of other American performers, and what prejudices may have influenced the particular critic. By contrast, a 2010 article by Hanna Järvinen did an admirable job of breaking down and juxtaposing press and audience responses, as well as participant and later accounts of the 1916/17 tours, in order to completely recast the hegemonic narrative of the Ballets Russes' experiences in the US.¹ Admittedly, Järvinen focused on only two closely following tours of one troupe, while Hohman tackled a much larger period and topic. Still, in addition to a more balanced examination of the press sources, it would have been useful to have more information from contemporaneous archival sources such as diaries and letters of Russian performers, their American peers, as well as lay audiences, documenting the immediate impressions and experiences of actors, dancers, and their viewers. In fact, in the second and third sections Hohman claims repeatedly that particular Russian or Soviet troupes had an influence on their American colleagues. It would have been informative and enormously interesting to have more information and specif-

1. Hanna Järvinen, "Failed Impressions: Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in America," *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2010): 76-108.

ic examples of how precisely that influence occurred, especially firsthand contemporaneous accounts.

As with her exploration of Jewish troupes in America in the first section, Hohman's examination of the links between the Russian and American theater following the October Revolution in the third section is complicated by loose terminology and lack of conceptual structure. While the chapter is really about the arrival of Soviet performance styles and innovations in the US, mostly via Russian/Soviet Jewish troupes and performers, it is titled, "Revolutionary Theatre: From Russia to America." Hohman spends almost the entire chapter examining the visit of a Soviet Hebrew language troupe, the Habima Theatre, and Russian/Soviet Jewish participation in traditional American Yiddish theaters as well as workers' theaters, especially the Artef. The Habima had been founded during the Russian Empire, but rose to prominence after the Bolshevik Revolution, becoming closely linked to the Moscow Arts Theatre and led by Evgenii Vakhtangov. Again, issues of ethnic, religious as well as national identity are glossed over, the terms "Soviet" and "Russian" are freely interchanged, and Jewish émigrés from the Russian empire grouped with Jewish émigrés from the Soviet Union. Also, too little attention is given to non-Jewish Soviet influence and presence, to understanding why the Habima and the other exponents of Soviet theater traveled to the U.S. and reached American audiences while other companies and individuals did not, and how the ideas of the latter may have still been brought over.

The appendices consist of the endnotes for the three sections, a bibliography and a list of representative U.S. performances featuring the work of authors, actors, choreographers, dancers, directors and designers from the Russian empire. For the latter it is not made clear how the artists and productions were chosen as "representative." For example, given the amount of space and attention assigned to Jacob Adler's and Jacob Gordin's work in the first section of the book, it is strange that neither features in the list. In some cases the list omits what could be argued to be more important productions involving the individuals in question than those selected for inclusion. While listing several productions designed by Alexandre Benois, including the 1946 *Raymonda* for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, Hohman omits to mention his designs for the troupe's 1940 production of *The Nutcracker*. This was the first *Nutcracker* to be presented in America, and one that continued to be in the company's repertoire (always with Benois designs) until 1962. Given the overwhelming place *The Nutcracker* has come to occupy in American ballet repertoire, this is a notable oversight. Furthermore, the list includes very few performances outside of New York, and when it does mention that a production or company went on tour, no information is given about the key venues outside of New York. This makes it very hard to understand the real reach and impact of these performances and productions.

Hohman writes engagingly, and recounts many fascinating episodes in the history of Russian performance in the U.S. during the period she covers. For example, she does a good job of painting a multi-faceted portrait of the pro-

ducer Morris Gest, whose role in bringing over important performers and theatrical ideas has historically been under-recognized. The author's accounts of the Habima Theatre's American experiences and the birth within the Yiddish theater of the Artef workers' art theater are also intriguing and important. One has a sense that she has found or connected some very interesting material, but this information is not sufficiently clearly structured and analyzed. At the end of this volume the reader does not come out with a cogent understanding of the evolution of what it meant to be "Russian" on the American stage, and how that influenced American performance. In fact, it almost seems that it would have been more apt to title the entire book something like *Jewish Participation in Russian Culture and Theatrical Performance in America, 1891-1933*.

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