

Liisa Byckling, Helsinki, August 2025

Dear participants of the 33th anniversary of the First International Michael Chekhov Workshop in Berlin.

A Reminiscence,

In Helsinki, in 1992, I was extremely happy to learn about the Berlin conference and the Western aspect of the Michael Chekhov training method.

By this time, research on Chekhov's work in the West had been one of my main academic interests for much of six years. I became interested in his émigré life and work for two reasons: firstly, Chekhov's comeback in Russia when the two volumes of his "Literary Heritage" were published in Moscow in 1986. Secondly, and concurrently, were my conversations with the eminent Russian theatre scholar Natalia Krymova in Moscow, which opened my eyes to the lack of research on Chekhov's work after he left Soviet Russia in 1928, never to return. The following 27 years of his life were practically unknown for obvious reasons: as an émigré, he was persona non grata who fell out of the records of his native country and could not be studied in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, his books *were* studied and his methods *were* practiced, if unofficially.

So, I started my demanding work, first, at Columbia University, New York, at the Russian Bakhmeteff Archive where I found fifty letters from Chekhov to his artist friend Mstislav Dobuzhinsky. They proved an invaluable source for his work in England and Los Angeles. At the same time, just before coming to Berlin, I had published a book of Chekhov's letters with an extended foreword and detailed commentary. My book came out in Russian in the academic series of Helsinki University.

By this time I had also published seven articles in Russian and English on several Chekhovian themes: his role in *The Government Inspector*, the Chekhov studios in the West, the production of *The Possessed* by Dostoevsky in New York, and his work in Hollywood cinema. It is easy to understand the reason I published most of my articles (and my two books) in Russian (my native language being Finnish) was because I wanted to let the Russians know about their legendary artist's practically unknown émigré period. Until recently, my articles have also appeared in German, French, Swedish and Finnish.

Before coming to Berlin, I also got to know the Moscow Chekhov Studio of Vladimir Baicher and his colleague. I had also visited the New York Chekhov Studio and interviewed the first-generation of Method teachers and former pupils of Chekhov, Felicity Mason, Deirdre Hurst du Prey and others.

The Berlin conference in 1992 was important to me for two reasons. In Forum Kreutzberg I was interested to observe some of the Western developments of the Method. I understood that, in Germany, teachers were privileged to know Chekhov's ideas better than elsewhere in Europe, with the possible exception of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, where Chekhov had previously worked, and thanks to the German translations of his articles and reminiscences.

In Berlin, a strong Russian presence was also felt which included an eminent professor of acting from Moscow as well as the young researcher Andrei Kirillov, my friend from St Petersburg. New encounters with those former Chekhov students, the Americans Mala Powers and Hurd Hatfield, were important for my further research. I interviewed both of them and, thanks to Hatfield, made contact with the Swiss artist and writer Georgette Boner who had been Chekhov's assistant and friend who, at that time, was still living in Zurich.

The Berlin conference was significant in many ways especially since it brought together Eastern and Western teachers and scholars, consolidated Chekhov's methods and spread the word in various countries. Other international workshops followed: in Rakovo, Russia, 1993; in Emerson College, Britain; in Jurmala, Latvia, 1996; and in Groznjan, Croatia. I mention those workshops I attended; there were others too.

Nowadays the Chekhov method is practiced in many acting schools and universities around the world. For example in Finland, Marjo-Riikka Makela is the Chekhov specialist at the Theatre Academy in Helsinki. Finnish students can read Chekhov's book *On the Technique of Acting* in my translation from the original Russian, published in 2017 by the Finnish Theatre Academy and with my foreword and commentary.

At this point let us return to the question of my research, which has certainly benefitted from attending those international conferences and which finally culminated in a book in Russian, **Michael Chekhov in Western Theatre and Cinema**. (Mikhail Chekhov v zapadnom teatre i kino) is my Ph.D. dissertation at Helsinki University published in St Petersburg in 2000.

Hopefully, the English version of my next book **Michael Chekhov: The Life and Work of a Theatrical Visionary**, will be published in the near future. Despite great interest in Michael Chekhov's work being expressed all over the world, no complete biography in English has hitherto been assembled. My study will seek to locate Chekhov, his philosophy, theory, and practice within the context of 20th century history, politics, and personal relationships.

Finally, I would like to thank the organizers of the First International Chekhov Conference – Jobst Langhans, Joerg Andrees, Lisa Dalton and their colleagues, for their extensive and valuable work in promoting the acting methods and theories of the great Russian actor and teacher.

I wish you a very interesting conference and all the best in your future work.

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