

Title: Reality and Corporeality in Chekhov's Drama
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Abstract:

Allegedly, Chekhov once observed that a real nose attached to a portrait would not enhance but ruin the illusion. However, classical or conventional theater can be seen as based on just that kind of hybrid or compromise between the real body of the performer and the make-believe, imaginary dramatic framework. I propose to examine the evolving use of the physical aspects and the live presence of an actor in Chekhov's theater, to deepen our understanding of Chekhov's dramatic artifice.

On the whole, in Chekhov's dramatic output preceding *The Cherry Orchard* the characters' physicality seems to be taken for granted, as an intrinsic property of live performance. The occasional details of the characters' appearance either have a very broad, generic resonance (the beauty of young naïve heroines, Nina's in *The Seagull* or Irina's in *The Three Sisters*) or individual psychological implications (Astrov's silly moustache or the smell of a corpse on Solenyi's hands). Not infrequently, the aspects attributed to the characters are literary or textual rather than performative: when the audience hears that Irina has lost weight, the effect, of course, remains entirely verbal. It is therefore particularly noteworthy that in *The Cherry Orchard* Chekhov places an unprecedented emphasis on the characters' bodily properties and physical behavior, variously bringing to our attention and insisting on, the "realness" of their being. The play offers a systematic mapping of the organic and social body, from the beards that fail to grow to the hands that are inappropriately white; from the extremely fat to the extremely thin; and from the clumsy and frail to the skillful and confident. This preoccupation with corporeality indicates, I believe, a new approach to human realness and stage realism in Chekhov's last play.