

Title: Lessons in Productive Passivity: Boredom and Desensitization in Chekhov
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Abstract:

Once, during a rehearsal of Chekhov's "The Seagull" in the Moscow Arts Theatre, one of the main actresses burst into tears and refused to continue. When Konstantin Stanislavsky confronted her about it, the actress replied that it was psychologically impossible to perform in such a monotonous play. Exhausting in its meaningless dialogues and absence of action, the play was perceived as the epitome of boredom, both for the actors and the audience, which was told not to applaud, not to call for a final bow, and generally to be as silent and motionless as possible. By dictating the physical level of boredom in the audience, Stanislavsky aimed to ensure its emotional state. It stemmed from a belief that an inactive spectator would become more attuned to the emotions of others and would project the feelings of others onto oneself. Stanislavsky's interpretation of Chekhov, the most "boring" writer of his time, is not erroneous: in Chekhov, boredom and passivity come to be associated with compassion.

My paper deals with representations of boredom in Chekhov as indicative of emotional capacity of his characters. Drawing on affect theory and the history of emotions in Russia, I question common assumption about Chekhov's boredom as essentially hopeless and dull. Informed by Lev Shestov's essay "Creation from Nothing," in which the philosopher traces the "void" that stands behind the existence of Chekhov's characters, these accounts discuss Chekhovian boredom as existential anguish and melancholy. Instead, I suggest that Chekhov operates in a tradition, connected to the theatrical experience of boredom and inactivity as productive for invoking certain emotions in the spectator and the reader. On the example of Chekhov's late works, I will argue that activity becomes linked to desensitisation, while boredom and passivity invoke compassion. The characters who can feel boredom, are capable of feeling.