

Bakhtin, Theatrical Discourse and Aesthetic Education: An Interview with Dick McCaw / *Bakhtin, discurso teatral e educação estética: uma entrevista com Dick McCaw*

Jean Carlos Gonçalves*

Introduction

Dick McCaw is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is the author of many works among which *Bakhtin and Theatre: Dialogues with Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Grotowski* (MCCAW, 2016), one of the first studies published in English on the relations between Bakhtin and the Performing Arts. As stated in our review for this book, McCaw “examines the connections between the thinking of the Russian author Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) and the theatre production of directors and contemporary theatre researchers of Bakhtin’s work: Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938), Vsevelod Meyerhold (1879-1940), and Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999)” (GONÇALVES; CABARRÃO SANTOS, 2016, p.214). Such is the relevance of the book for Bakhtinian and theater scholars and researchers.

Upon the invitation to join, in the condition of foreign collaborator, the *Laboratório de Estudos em Educação Performativa, Linguagem e Teatralidades - EliTe/UFPR/CNPq* [Laboratory of Performative Education, Language and Theatricality], a group I coordinate at *Universidade Federal do Paraná* [Federal University of Paraná], Dick McCaw has not only become a member but an actual collaborator with our research on the relations between Bakhtin and theater, having taken part, especially, in editorial projects on the subject. To illustrate, I mention volume 14, issue 3 of *Bakhtiniana: Revista de Estudos do Discurso* [Bakhtiniana: Journal of Discourse Studies], dedicated to Bakhtin and the Performing Arts, for which Dick McCaw and I acted as *ad hoc* Editors. In the issue, Dick’s insight on the performing arts and on the body reflects in both the editorial

* Universidade Federal do Paraná, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação, Curitiba, Paraná, Brasil; Professor Researcher at CNPq, Proc. 310808/2020-0; <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2826-3366>; jeancarlosgoncalves@gmail.com

and the article Bakhtin's Bodies (McCaw, 2019) which resumes fundamental aspects in the Bakhtinian conception of the body.

Dick McCaw introduces us, in his texts, to ways of reading the world that combine the dialogic perspective in the field of performing arts and arts of the body with the very art of living life, a subject that was dear to Bakhtin, particularly to the more philosophical nature of his first writings. In "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (BAKHTIN, 1990) for example, we find a Bakhtin who is more interested in reflecting on the theater of his time; it is noteworthy that the actor's art is present in several passages of the text which, to a less attentive reader, or one who is not interested in the theme, can go unnoticed.¹

In September 2020, after an email exchange with Dick McCaw, regarding partnerships and projects that we are developing together, I felt the need to know more of his trajectory, his relation to the Bakhtinian theory and his expectations for studying Bakhtin in the 21st century, of which first years have proven so scary and inscrutable. The result of this coming and going of on-screen written words is an interview, much in the form of a conversation, that presents the reader with some curiosities, always filled with the scientificity that is typical of Dick McCaw, which show nuances and aspects of a researcher's life in his dialogic struggle with a fascinating thinker.



Interview

Jean Carlos Gonçalves: Dear Dick, please, tell us a little about your history with the Bakhtinian theory. How did you learn about the dialogic perspective? How did Bakhtin become part of your life and your theatrical universe?

¹ A more thorough development of the issue is found in *Apontamentos sobre teatro e referências à arte do ator na obra de Bakhtin e o Círculo* [Notes on theater and references to the actor's art in the works of Bakhtin and the Circle] (GONÇALVES, 2019), a chapter by me in *Linguagem e Conhecimento* [Language and Knowledge] (Bakhtin, Volóchinov, e Medviédev), edited by Beth Brait, Maria Helena Cruz Pistori and Pedro Farias Francelino.

Dick McCaw: My History with Bakhtin - I described my history quite well in the Preface to *Bakhtin and Theatre* (McCAW, 2016), so I will quote it here:

The connection between Bakhtin and theatre was mainly autobiographical and dates back to 1982 when I was with the Medieval Players (1981–1992) – a touring theatre company that I created with director and actor Carl Heap. Our planned production for summer 1983 was an adaptation of Rabelais’ *Gargantua* in Sir Thomas Urquhart’s salty translation. While the idea of Rabelais appealed hugely, the reality of the novel posed problems: I did not find it funny and couldn’t access its world. Carl suggested that I read a book by an eccentric Russian called Bakhtin which was a ‘rambling and repetitious read’ but might help me better understand Rabelais. He was right: *Rabelais and His World* made sense of the images and values in the novel, and gave me an appetite for Bakhtin’s work which has been enduring.

Gradually, more and more references to Bakhtin started to creep into the talks and workshops I used to give at schools and universities to drum up support for our performances. Bakhtin’s vivid evocations of popular medieval and Renaissance culture were a sure means of gaining an audience’s attention – he so brilliantly conveyed Rabelais’ vital, vulgar, earthy, generous humour. As Bakhtin’s books began to be translated throughout the 1980s so they fed into all subsequent talks that I gave. What began as a happy accident turned into a thirty-year fascination with this Russian thinker (McCAW, 2016, p.xi).

Jean Carlos Gonçalves: We published together in 2016, in *Bakhtiniana: Revista de Estudos do Discurso*, a review of your book *Bakhtin and Theatre: Dialogues with Stanislavski, Meyerhold and Grotowski* (GONÇALVES; CABARRÃO SANTOS, 2016). When/why did you decide to write this book? Who is the intended readership for this book: Bakhtinian researchers or performing artists?

Dick McCaw: Why did I write *Bakhtin and Theatre* (McCAW, 2016)? - I mentioned



above that I used to give talks about Bakhtin to promote performances by the Medieval Players. However, at some point I started to get invited to conferences and gatherings. Then I was asked to write up a seminar I gave for theatre directors in Bucharest for a Romanian publication called *Unitext*. I think I got to about page 90 of a text called *On Laughter* and realised that I really couldn’t write about Bakhtin and his circle until I had studied their works in greater depth. I thus began a PhD in September 1997 which I successfully defended in summer 2004. I was asked whether I wanted to

publish the thesis and answered with an emphatic ‘no’. While there were some useful parts, it really didn’t hang together as an argument, and it most certainly didn’t make a meaningful connection between the writings of Bakhtin and his circle and theatre practice. I thus left the ‘Bakhtin project’ as I began training to become a Feldenkrais practitioner and to work on Laban movement with Geraldine Stephenson (who had been taught by and then with him).

I began to think again about Bakhtin and theatre in 2011 and spent two years thinking about how this thesis could become a book. In 2013 I realised that the argument had to be organised around questions of theatre. I would have loved *Questions of Theatre* as a title for the book, but it revealed too little about the argument, and didn’t feature the name Bakhtin. ‘Questions of theatre’ was the key that brought Bakhtin’s thinking and the thinking behind theatrical practice into a dynamic relation. I tightened the focus around a debate between Meyerhold, Grotowski and Stanislavsky all of whose theatre careers took place in Bakhtin’s lifetime. These three directors/pedagogues were constantly questioning themselves and each other about the nature of theatre, about the actor’s work in theatre, and their dialogue with the audience. The more I thought about the subject the more I realised that Bakhtin’s writings – especially his early thinking – provided the ground for these questions. Although he applied these questions to a philosophical conception of the novel, it became clear that they could frame the enquiry of my chosen trio of theatre directors. The result is a book which is highly selective in its use of materials: I make little reference to the well-known texts by Bakhtin and choose only certain aspects of his thinking.

The same goes for writings by and about the theatre practitioners; anything that did not help me to frame, answer and exhaust the potential of these questions of theatre had to be set aside. The book would (should?) have been bigger had I explored the dialogue about questions of theatre that was continued by Vakhtangov in Moscow, by Michael Chekhov first in Moscow, then England and the United States, and finally by Brecht in the German Democratic Republic after World War Two. Such discussion would have fitted into the frame of my argument, but it would have taken the book to an unacceptable length, so it remains a project for the future.

Jean Carlos Gonçalves: Your article Bakhtin's Bodies (McCAW, 2019) published in *Bakhtiniana: Revista de Estudos do Discurso* brings forth some of the perspectives of the Circle regarding the body and the relationship between body, philosophy, and language. In your opinion, how can the Bakhtinian theory contribute to the understanding of the body today, a hundred years after Bakhtin's first writings were published?

Dick McCaw: Bakhtin's Theory of the Body and Understanding the Body Today - Since writing the Bakhtin book I have written two books about the actor's body: *Training the Actor's Body: A Guide* (McCAW, 2018) and *Rethinking the Actor's Body: Dialogues with Neuroscience* (McCAW, 2020). These books reflect both my training as a Feldenkrais practitioner (I qualified in 2007) and my studies and teaching of Rudolf Laban's principles of movement which resulted in two edited books: in 2006 *An Eye for Movement* and in 2011, *The Laban Sourcebook*. Opportunities to think again about Bakhtin were offered by Slav Gratchev who commissioned an essay Towards a Philosophy of the Moving Body and by you, Jean, who keep asking me to think about Bakhtin!

It's obvious from the above list of publications that I have been interested in the function and capability of the human body for the past twenty years. It may seem that my very evidence-based approach to understanding the body in action would bring me in conflict with Bakhtin's very philosophical and literary approach. We certainly have differences in our approaches to methodology and in our attitudes and to the possibility of self-experience leading to self-knowledge. Feldenkrais's whole approach is about Awareness Through Movement. Bakhtin is so good at describing bodily experience, so good at analysing the sense of the other as an image. But I think there are limitations in his thinking about how we make sense of ourselves both as moving subjects and as narrative objects. Equally, I would argue that although we can only know the other as a character, as a story, we know that they are, like me, unpredictable and unfinished 'I's. I am sure some scholars have put the thinking of the early Bakhtin alongside Buber's *Ich und Du* where he distinguishes between the intimate address, *ich und du*, and the instrumental address, *ich und es*. Bakhtin's binary is between a first and third person, Buber's is a distinction between kinds of first and second-person dialogues. I would further argue that the discovery of the mirror neuron by Rizzolatti and others gives grounds for a theory that as embodied subjects we can understand the possible feelings of others

through watching their actions. When we see another person trip and fall to the ground we gasp at their possible injury. We are hard-wired to experience fellow feelings. I have not yet had an opportunity to write about Bakhtin and neurophysiology but cannot help but wonder what Bakhtin would have made of recent discoveries in this field. I am sure he would have integrated many findings into his theory of intersubjective behaviour.

Jean Carlos Gonçalves: Do you think that the Circle effectively participated in the Russian theater scene? I mention, as an example, the experiences of Bakhtinian thinkers through the cultural excitement of Vitebsk as reported by Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh in her book *Vitebsk: The Life of Art* (SHATSKIKH, 2007). There is also information on Medvedev, who joined the “Brotherhood” of the Itinerant Theatre, edited the magazine *Teatra*, became director of repertory and the editor of the journal *Zapísski peredvijnógo teatra* [Notes of an Itinerant Theater] (MEDVEDEV; MEDVEDEVA, 2014). Can you comment on the relation between Bakhtin and the members of the Circle and the field of performing arts? Do you believe this relationship and the Bakhtinian theory itself still undergo some sort of historical erasure in theater studies?

Dick McCaw: Bakhtin Circle and the Performing Arts - Of course, this is how I came to Bakhtin in the first place. Again, if I may, I shall quote from the preface of *Bakhtin and Theatre*, because this gives an idea of how other companies have drawn on the ideas of Bakhtin:

As I learned later, the Medieval Players was not the only theatre company to be inspired by *Rabelais and His World*. Włodimierz Staniewski, director of the Polish Gardzienice Theatre Association; Georgian theatre director Robert Sturua; and Russian director Yuri Lyubimov are just three international figures who have been inspired by Bakhtin. Birgit Beumers describes how Bakhtin’s ideas offered a solution to Pushkin’s seemingly unstageable *Boris Godunov*: ‘The carnival modality eliminated barriers between actors and audiences by suggesting a common shared space and aesthetic time unbroken by conventions; theatrical and sociopolitical constraints were ignored in this small universe in favour of open address.’ Interesting as this information is – and there is a study waiting to be written which will thoroughly document Bakhtin’s considerable influence on contemporary theatre practitioners – it still did not get at the fundamental theoretical connection between his ideas and theatre practice. (McCAW, 2016, p xi).

I am not sure that I want to be the person to document his ‘considerable influence on contemporary theatre practitioners’ but I would be very interested to read such a study.

The area that I have yet to explore is how Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope relates to the time and space of theatre. One of the abiding images I have of *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (BAKHTIN, 1984) is that of the threshold space – the importance of the doorway and the stairway. This not only makes such sense of Dostoevsky’s novels but links with Bakhtin’s delight in the image of the two-faced Janus, one of whose faces looks out from the threshold to the world beyond the house while the other looks into its domestic interior. Entries and exits are so crucial and so different in the various genres of theatre. Think of the ‘flourishes’ in Elizabethan theatre where one group of actors enters as the other leaves – this has been compared to diastolic and systolic action of the heart. (One can see this at work in productions at London’s Globe Theatre.) Or think of how farces work with exits and entries. And then, there is the time of upstage and downstage space. I would argue that the further from the audience you get the more likely the acting style is to become formal, and the movement arranged into tableaux.² The German theatre scholar Robert Weimann has studied this phenomenon in his book *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition* (WEIMANN, 1987) (a big influence on my thinking in the Medieval Players). Again, I am thinking of the medieval and the Elizabethan stage (and the stage of the Spanish Calderon). The pageant wagon had the formal tableau while the work in the street was for more informal exchange, the place of the lower-status characters, vices, and devils. Think of direct audience address and asides from the front of the stage. Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope offers us much food for thought and research in the field of performance. From his earliest writings Bakhtin is sensitive to the fact that all existence is in space and time, its fourth dimension.

In the essay that you commissioned – “Bakhtin’s Bodies” (MCCAWE, 2019) – I began to explore some of the actual images around the grotesque conception of the body. I dream of editing a picture book which shows the wealth of visual imagery that is associated with his conception of the grotesque body. I fear that some academics think that Bakhtin is exaggerating or making up this realm of the popular imagination. It is rich, vulgar, and more widespread than even Bakhtin imagined. The problem with such a book

² *Tableau vivant*, plural: *tableaux vivants*. French expression that defines a model of staging based on a static pictorial piece. It became famous in the 19th century with the invention of photography.

would be the expense and the labour in getting the necessary permissions to reproduce these images. But one can dream...

Finally, I feel that I didn't make enough of Bakhtin's concept of dialogue when discussing the dialogues between Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Grotowski in *Bakhtin and Theatre* (McCAW, 2016). Their words were mutually inflected. At the height of the cultural revolution in the early to mid-1920s, Meyerhold would not have a bad word said about his old master Stanislavsky. He might himself criticise his old teacher in letters and addresses, but nobody else was permitted to do so. Whenever Stanislavsky would inveigh against 'theatricality' or 'modernism', you know that he was thinking about his former student. Grotowski maintained a dialogue about the nature of what Stanislavsky called 'physical action' throughout his working life. He didn't agree with all of the old master's answers but he knew that the original questions were the right ones. To understand the work of these three directors/pedagogues I think one has to take account of what Bakhtin called the 'dialogising background' to their utterances in writing, in interview and in correspondence.

Jean Carlos Gonçalves: How can the lasting success of the Bakhtinian theory be explained in a world with so many perspectives and insights on the human condition, social relationships and language itself? Why do we insist on studying Bakhtin in the 21st century?

Dick McCaw: Bakhtin's Theory and the Human Condition - The more I learn about Bakhtin, the more I love the man. Gratchev's (GRATCHEV; MARINOVA, 2019) translation of the dialogues with Duvakin reveal a side to Bakhtin that only deepened my respect and affection for the man. I don't like cats but the fact that his addresses to his cat during the interviews have been transcribed make me warm to both him and his pet.

When I was a student at Cambridge between 1974 and 1978 French Structuralism, particularly the writings of Roland Barthes, was the new thing. I took its challenge very much to heart and took a year out from my courses to read all of Barthes in French. While I still admire Barthes elegance as a writer (especially his later writings) and the flair of his argument, I was left with a profound problem about how we make choices, how we relate to each other. I didn't find that the structuralists had an answer to these very

fundamental existential questions. It wasn't until I came across Bakhtin and other members of their circle that I was offered an understanding of language as a form of address in real time and space between actual speakers and not simply a structural phenomenon. This made a huge difference to my world outlook. I subscribe entirely to this historical/social conception of human dialogue. It is messy but this characterises all dynamic processes.

Yes, I have problems with Bakhtin, but with the publication of his wartime notes and the Duvakin Interviews (GRATCHEV; MARINOVA, 2019) we are seeing a thinker who insisted on the importance of process in our acts of meaning-making. He affirms the on-goingness of our acts of meaning-making with carnival laughter just as he eloquently bemoans the false-seriousness that attempts to close down this process. These darker tones in his recently published notes come from the same place as his carnival joyfulness in Rabelais and his World (BAKHTIN, 1984). Bakhtin has always decried agelasts, those who, like the un-laughing and petulant Trump, haven't the generosity and breadth of mind to see beyond their own personal interests. In his wartime notes Bakhtin talks about love as the motivation for dialogue. The world would be such a happier, so much more productive a place, were it love that motivated us in our words and actions.

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Question in Portuguese translated to English by Larissa de Pinho Cavalcanti – laracvanti@gmail.com

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