

REVIEW

**McCAW, Dick. *Bakhtin e teatro: diálogos com Stanislavski, Meyerhold e Grotowski* [Bakhtin and Theather: Dialogues with Stanislavski, Meyerhold and Grotowski.] Organização e edição de Jean Carlos Gonçalves e Beth Brait. Tradução de Larissa de P. Cavalcanti. São Paulo: Hucitec, 2024. 416 p. [Coleção LiCorEs, v. 8]**

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## Body, Education and Dialogical Staging: Ideas of Theatricality and Embodied Action in Bakhtin

*Did Bakhtin know the history and theory of theatrical practices? What did Bakhtin think about the theatre? In what way and by what means could Bakhtin, for whom the ideas of theatricality, visuality and embodied action were so central, approach the theatrical practice of his time?*

It is from those intriguing questions that Dick McCaw's book *Bakhtin and Theatre: Dialogues with Stanislavski, Meyerhold and Grotowski*, first published in English in 2016 by Routledge – an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group – and translated into Brazilian Portuguese by Larissa Cavalcanti, comes to the Brazilian readers. The Brazilian edition was organized by Jean Carlos Gonçalves and Beth Brait and published in 2024 by Hucitec. The book contains 416 pages and is the eighth volume of the *Linguagem, Corpo, Estética* [Language, Body, Aesthetics] *LiCorEs Collection*.<sup>1</sup>

First of all, it is worth noting the uttermost relevance of this initiative by the organizers of the *LiCorEs Collection* in translating into Brazilian Portuguese a unique, didactic and indispensable work for scholars, researchers and artists of theatre and performance, who yearn for readings drawing on the writings of three fundamental and iconic playwrights of the 20th century, as seen through the dialogical perspective of Bakhtin and the Circle.

Dick McCaw is Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Performance at Royal Holloway, University of London. He co-founded the Actors Touring Company in 1978, and the Medieval Players in 1981. He directed the International Workshop Festival from 1993 to 2001. McCaw is an author and editor of several books, including: *With an Eye for Movement* (2006), *The Laban Sourcebook* (2011), *Bakhtin and Theatre* (2016), *Training the Actor's Body* (2018), and *Rethinking the Actor's Body* (2020). He is also an invited researcher at the *Grupo de Pesquisa Laboratório de Estudos em Educação, Linguagem e Teatralidades* [Research Group Laboratory for Studies in Education, Language and Theatricality] (Labelit/UFPR/CNPq).

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<sup>1</sup> Directed by Beth Brait and Jean Carlos Gonçalves, the *LiCorEs Collection* aims to provide opportunities for the dissemination of knowledge through the production of works engaged with the most varied forms of human expression, communication and formation drawing on studies of language, body and aesthetics, and taking into account a multifaceted range of theoretical-practical possibilities that emerge in this thematic scope.

The axiomatic intent of the publication is anchored in the possibilities of unusual encounters that explore in an original and unprecedented way the relationship between the ideas of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975) about action, character and authorship with a critical eye on three specific playwrights, namely Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938), Vsevolod Meyerhold (1879-1940) and Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999).

When addressing the rhetorical questions set out in the first paragraph of this review - that is, the possible relationships between Bakhtin and the Circle and the ideas of theatricality, visuality and embodied action in the theatrical practice of his time - it is worth noting that in the chapter “*Apontamentos sobre o teatro e referência à arte do ator na obra de Bakhtin e o Círculo*” [Notes on theater and reference to the art of the actor in the work of Bakhtin and the Circle], written by Gonçalves (2019), we can find clues for understanding the possible approximations, and not a centrality, that have occupied the studies on the collective. According to Gonçalves, Bakhtin’s intention “may have always been of a more proximal than a central order, using the actor’s theater as a kind of typographic resource to broaden the reader’s understanding of the studies of the novel” (Gonçalves, 2019, p. 78).<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that, although some Bakhtinian writings mention Stanislavski, they do not make explicit references to Meyerhold or Grotowski. The web of dialogical threads between Bakhtin’s practices and theories on theatre and these three directors/pedagogues are therefore exquisitely woven by McCaw, who has revisited and updated his doctoral research (2004), under the supervision of David Wiles, and later published it in book format.

In his Preface to the Brazilian edition, the author presents Bakhtin’s most recent publications highlighting the fact that Bakhtin had a thorough and comprehensive knowledge of the history of the genre and the theater of his time. McCaw explains that in some excerpts from Bakhtin’s *Selections from Wartime Notebooks* (2017) and *The Duvakin Interviews*, 1973 (2019), for example, one can have a glimpse of Bakhtinian thought and, particularly, its connection with the theater. He also points out that two other texts needed to be included in the updated edition: the Preface to *Tolstoy’s Dramas*

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<sup>2</sup> In Portuguese: “sempre tenha sido de ordem mais avizinhada do que central, lançando mão do teatro de ator como uma espécie de recurso tipográfico para a ampliação da compreensão do leitor sobre os estudos do romance.”

(Bakhtin, 1929 *apud* Emerson & Morson, 1989), and *Additions and Changes to Rabelais* (1944). It is therefore understood that theatrical issues constitute the core foundations of his book.

In 2013, McCaw concluded that his theoretical discussion would need to concentrate on theatrical issues so that he could appropriately articulate Bakhtin's thought and theories associated with theatrical work in a dynamic and equivalent relationship. Paratextually, it is worth mentioning that, in an interview given to Jean Carlos Gonçalves and published in *Bakhtiniana. Journal of Discourse Studies* in 2021,<sup>3</sup> McCaw points to his interest in concentrating his doctoral research on the aforementioned theatrical issues. Additionally, for the writing of this book, the choice of those three dramatists who were contemporary to Bakhtin was due to the fact that they used to question themselves and each other "about the nature of the theater, about the work of the actor in the theater and their dialogues with the audience. [...] I realized that Bakhtin's writings – especially the former ones – formed the basis for these questionings" (McCaw *apud* Gonçalves, 2021, p. 4).<sup>4</sup>

McCaw's work is also thought-provoking for those in the arts of the body, who are interested in the postulates and comparisons made regarding the use of the body, corporeality, representation of roles, and issues such as distancing - or not - between person and actor, scene and life, as well as author and character. In his discussion on staging as presented by Stanislavski, Meyerhold, and Grotowski, one can see McCaw's dialogical plots and weaves when he draws on Bakhtin's premises, as if we, the readers, were witnessing an intellectual and embodied experience that transforms theoretical acts into artistic praxis, that is, specific praxis of the theatrical manner.

It is important to mention a set of sequenced publications relating to the possible connections between the Bakhtinian thought and the Russian theatrical production of his time, which have been written prior to this review of McCaw's book. The first one (2016) refers to an unprecedented initiative: a review written by Gonçalves and Cabarrão Santos, based on McCaw's original work in English, considering, with caution, that "not every

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<sup>3</sup> <https://revistas.pucsp.br/index.php/bakhtiniana/article/view/28069/20536>

<sup>4</sup> In Portuguese: "sobre a natureza do teatro, sobre o trabalho do ator no teatro e seus diálogos com o público. [...] percebia que os escritos de Bakhtin – principalmente os mais antigos – formavam a base para essas questões."

conception of character in Bakhtin can be perfectly directed to the sphere of scenic creation, with its own details and characteristics" (Gonçalves; Santos, 2016, p. 217).<sup>5</sup>

Subsequently, in 2019, Gonçalves and McCaw figured as editors of a special issue of *Bakhtiniana. Journal of Discourse Studies*, a thematic dossier entitled "*Bakhtin e as artes do espetáculo*" [Bakhtin and the Performing Arts]. In the Editorial section a reference is made to McCaw's original work, published in 2016, which had not yet been translated into Brazilian Portuguese by that time. And, prior to the publication of the work reviewed here, it is worth mentioning the publication of the book entitled *Bakhtin e as artes do corpo* [Bakhtin and the Body Arts] (2021), a collection organized by Beth Brait and Jean Gonçalves that includes a chapter "*Por uma filosofia do corpo em movimento*" [For a Philosophy of the Body in Movement] authored by Dick McCaw.

McCaw's creative perspective adopted in his book encompasses a structural choice that divides the work into three parts broken into six chapters, as follows.

In Part I – *Bakhtin e teatro* [Bakhtin and Theater] (Chapter 1), the author suggests readers to consider the section as composed of a single conglomeration of ideas or as an woven from seven short essays with an introduction and a conclusion. Here, Bakhtin's theoretical contribution is presented chronologically, bringing to the stage not only the reasoning undertaken in his early texts, but also four essays that delve into Bakhtin's best-known works, namely: his studies on Dostoevsky, the essay "Discourse in the Novel," the study on the concept of discursive space-time in narrative/chronotope and the work on Rabelais. Part I concludes with a critical compilation that addresses Bakhtin's later works.

Part II – *Bakhtin e Stanislavski* [Bakhtin and Stanislavski] (Chapters 2-4) - opens with an introduction, and discusses notions and premises about time and space in the novel and in the theater, in addition to comparisons between Bakhtin and Stanislavski in the areas of psychophysical acting and character construction on/for the stage. Broken into three chapters that complement each other, it is worth mentioning that one of the highlights is McCaw's rigorous discussion attempting to demonstrate, unequivocally, the various contrasts between Bakhtin and Stanislavski in their considerations about body and mind: psychophysical and/or experienced/embodied acting approaches. McCaw

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<sup>5</sup> In Portuguese: "nem toda acepção de personagem em Bakhtin pode ser perfeitamente direcionada à esfera da criação cênica, com suas minudências e características próprias."

follows Bakhtin's ideas when showing an interest centered on the body by suggesting that it is not the body itself that interests him, but the experience and image of the body that performs actions.

Part III – *Meyerhold e Grotowski* [Meyerhold and Grotowski] (Chapters 5-6) – presents two chapters that are harmoniously integrated into the propositions of a supposed revolution on stage, from a Meyerhold's perspective (chapter 5) and Grotowski's postulates (chapter 6), by questioning the social myth and the present reality of the audience beyond the theater. In this section, the thoughts of both playwrights are brought to the stage to extract from there, also, their ambiguous relationships with Stanislavski's theater.

And as the curtains/pages close towards a conclusion of the book, McCaw returns to the questions posed at the beginning of his writings in order to formulate provisional and non-concrete answers. The theories that anchor Bakhtin's thoughts on theater guide us in reading McCaw's book based on a thorough critical analysis of theatrical practice. Thus, Bakhtin's theorizing and the Circle, gathered in a fundamental dialogue with the theories of the three playwrights/pedagogues here discussed, are interwoven as speculative parts about the knowledge (in)scribed by a body/character in the theater scene. This book, therefore, is the result of an unusual encounter between Bakhtin and Theater through the attentive and passionate gaze of Dick McCaw.

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## Research Data and Other Materials Availability

The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

## Reviews

Due to the commitment assumed by *Bakhtiniana. Revista de Estudos do Discurso* [*Bakhtiniana. Journal of Discourse Studies*] to Open Science, this journal only publishes reviews that have been authorized by all involved.

### Review I

The review presents an academic work of immense value for theater and language studies, in particular those grounded on the dialogic perspective of discourse. As mentioned in note number 2, the reviewed work - McCaw, Dick. *Bakhtin e Teatro: diálogos com Stanislavski, Meyerhold and Grotowski* - expands the set of seven previous works of the *LiCorEs* (Language, Body, Aesthetics) *Collection*, published by Hucitec.

The title – *Bakhtin e Teatro: diálogos com Stanislavski, Meyerhold and Grotowski* – clearly expresses not only the themes developed, but also some theoretical concepts that are central to the reviewed work, such as that of dialogic action, and presents a point of view on Bakhtin's appropriation of theatre and its practices through the term “ideas.”

The review article is clearly a text that fulfills the criteria of the review genre most widely accepted by the academic community. Its immediate content – title, authorship, number of pages, organizers, publisher – is described, and in this case, with the difference of indicating the translation into Portuguese of a work originally published in English in 2016, in addition to a brief exposition of the subject in the first paragraph. The text begins with the originality of the translation and reinforces it in what follows. In the 2nd paragraph there is a correction needed, because, as indicated on the front cover of the book, the order in which the work was organized and edited is “Jean Carlos Gonçalves and Beth Brait.”

In the first paragraph, readers cannot clearly understand whether the comment presented is from the reviewer, on the theme(s) of Bakhtin's studies, or from the author of the book. In the first case, I argue with excerpts from a chapter of a book published in 2019 – “Apontamentos sobre o teatro e referência à arte do ator na obra de Bakhtin e o Círculo” (Notes on theater and reference to the art of the actor in Bakhtin's work and the Circle) as opposed to the expression “focused on ideas of theatricality,” which may suggest the centrality of the Russian author's interest:

“Although theater had not been the central topic of discussion in his scientific production, there are indications, in the Circle's works to which we have access, that its members were frequently seen in the Russian theater scene” (p. 75).

[...] when using them, as we will see later, Bakhtin's intention has always been more proximal than central, using actor's theater as a kind of typographic resource to broaden the reader's understanding of the studies of the novel (Gonçalves, 2019, p. 78).

In order that the process is not subjected to a possible weakening, I draw attention to the context in which the aforementioned Brazilian translation is based in Bakhtinian studies in dialogue with theater studies.

It is important to note that the work reviewed here represents a point in a timeline constructed from previously established approaches and dialogues. In 2016, Jean Carlos Gonçalves, in co-authorship with Marcelo Cabarrão Santos, reviewed the original work in English (McCaw, Dick. *Bakhtin and Theatre: Dialogues with Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Grotowski*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016. 264 p.) considering it “an unprecedented initiative” in establishing connections between Bakhtinian thought and the theatrical production of the Russian playwrights, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and

Grotowski. Their review highlights the caution needed when applying Bakhtinian theory to issues related to “the ethics and aesthetics of character, that is, not every meaning of character in Bakhtin can be perfectly directed to the sphere of scenic creation, with its specific details and characteristics (Gonçalves; Santos, 2016, p. 217).

Later, in 2019, a partnership between Gonçalves and McCaw materialized in a successful *ad hoc* editorial of a special issue of *Bakhtiniana. Journal of Discourse Studies*, v. 14, n.3. – “Bakhtin and the performing arts.” The editorial by the two researchers refers to McCaw’s work published in 2016, at the time without translation in Brazil. I corroborate the emphasis on visibility of this history with the following excerpt:

“The construction of a field of knowledge, however, is related to voices that resonate over time and, in a certain way, outline the discursive projection of authors and intellectuals interested in a given theme, which, in turn, delimits and/or expands possibilities of its understanding in a process sometimes responsible for making visible, and at other times, erasing reflections that are found in the “great time” and in different “spheres” of communication” (Gonçalves; McCaw, 2016, p. 5).

In the purpose of identifying the “voices that resonate over time” I reinforce the need to expand the history of relationships that began with the reviewer’s apt mention, duly referenced in the text, of Jean Gonçalves’ interview with Dick McCaw published in 2021. It is worth noting that all this academic production is written bilingually, both in Brazilian Portuguese and English, expanding the scope of the dialogue between Bakhtin’s (and the Circle’s) work and theatricality. In parallel with the last publication in a periodical, I recall the book *Bakhtin and the Arts of the Body*, a collection of five texts organized by Beth Brait and Jean Gonçalves in 2021, whose chapter “For a Philosophy of the Body in Movement” is authored by Dick McCaw.

In this article review, I aimed to highlight the discursive web that led to the publication of the Brazilian translation of a book by the English author, which is the object of the review under analysis. In a text that reveals a careful choice of words and textual refinement, I pointed out a suggestion for rewriting (in blue) and a correction (in red). Therefore, the author of the review is requested to consider the suggested amendments to the text and evaluate their relevance in order to subsequently return it to the Journal. References: BRAIT, B.; GONÇALVES, J. C. Bakhtin e as Artes do Corpo. São Paulo: Hucitec, 2021. 214 p.; GONÇALVES, J. C., & SANTOS, M. C. (2016). MCCAW, Dick. Bakhtin and Theatre: Dialogues with Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Grotowski [Bakhtin e o teatro: diálogos com Stanislavsky, Meyerhold e Grotowski]. Abingdon: Routledge, 2015. 264 p. Bakhtiniana. Revista de Estudos do Discurso, 11(3), Port. 213–218 / Eng. 2016. Recuperado de <https://revistas.pucsp.br/index.php/bakhtiniana/article/view/28069>; GONÇALVES, J. C. Apontamentos sobre o teatro e referências à arte do ator na obra de Bakhtin e o Círculo. In: BRAIT, B.; PISTORI, M. H. C.; FRANCELINO, P. F.. (Orgs.). Linguagem e conhecimento (Bakhtin, Volóchinov, Medviédev). Campinas: Pontes Editores, 2019, pp. 73-96; GONÇALVES, J. C.; MCCAW, D. Bakhtin e as artes do espetáculo. Bakhtiniana. Revista de Estudos do Discurso, 14 (3), Port. 5-14/ Eng. 2019. Recuperado de <https://revistas.pucsp.br/index.php/bakhtiniana/issue/view/2223> .

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## Review II

The article consists of a review of an important contribution to international Bakhtin studies that has been published in Brazil, the book entitled *Bakhtin e Teatro: diálogos com Stanislavski, Meyerhold and Grotowski*, by Dick McCaw, a leading British researcher in the area of Performing Arts and a professor in the Department of Theater at Royal Holloway College, University of London. The review article addresses the aforementioned publication in a clear and coherent manner, pointing out throughout its five pages the objectives of the book, its genesis in McCaw's doctoral research, the way in which the great dramatists-pedagogues, namely C. S. Stanislavski, V. Meyerhold and J. Grotowski, were inserted into the debate with Bakhtin's writings about theater and literature, and the reverberations of Bakhtinian thought in the field of theatrical practice. The author comments on the three distinct parts of the book and their respective six chapters in a synthetic way, highlighting the relevance and originality of the essay within Bakhtinian and theatrical studies. This review brings great news for those who study the work of M. Bakhtin and the Circle, as well as for scholars and practitioners of the Performing Arts in Brazil. I recommend the publication of this book review, suggesting only a careful editing of the text by the author in order to correct a few typing mistakes.

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