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*The Technique in microcosm: Michael Chekhov's work on the Fishers' scene*

**Jonathan Pitches**

Professor of Theatre and Performance, University of Leeds

Scholars familiar with working in the Chekhov archives in Devon will know that the presence of Deirdre Hurst du Prey lingers amongst the papers almost as tangibly as when she first started creating the extraordinary record of Chekhov's practice back in 1935. Du Prey died in 2007 at the age of one hundred and remains the single most important contributor to the Chekhov estate as a dedicated record-taker of the evolving Chekhov Technique for seven decades. But despite her passing she continues to guide and instruct researchers and practitioners through her countless long-hand annotations preserved in the now amalgamated archive, held in the Devon Records Office in Exeter though still owned by the Dartington Hall Trust<sup>1</sup>. One such annotation is the filing card left in the folder originally marked 'Fishers' and now rather more mundanely: MC/S6/3/R.

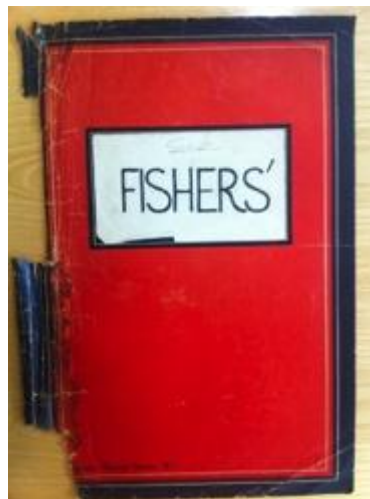


Fig 1: The original cover to the *Fishers'* scene

It reads:

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<sup>1</sup> For more details and history of the archive, see: <http://www.dartington.org/archive/display/MC>. All subsequent archival references are to the Michael Chekhov Theatre Studio Deirdre Hurst du Prey Archive in the Dartington Hall Trust archive. I am sincerely grateful to Archives Administrator, Yvonne Widger and the Trust for giving me permission to quote from this archive and to reproduce the images.

## Sketch Book for "The Fishing Scene" of 1936-37

Collection of designs for sets costumes, lighting plots, graphs showing rhythmical composition of the production etc. etc. of the scene "The Fishers". Part of student productions conceived by Michael Chekhov to provide training and experience for the student-actors, directors, playwrights, musicians, technicians, designers etc.

The description is tempting enough but around the sides of the filing card are two additional notes written, following the contours of the card, both horizontally and vertically:

Also used were Chekhov's criticism suggestions concerning the Rhythm, the Psychological Gesture etc. in the scene.

And finally, as a further and possibly later addition to the card (marked with an asterisk):

\*Used by me to illustrate Chekhov's Method – Adelphi University Summer Session Course for Graduate students June 1980. DduP.

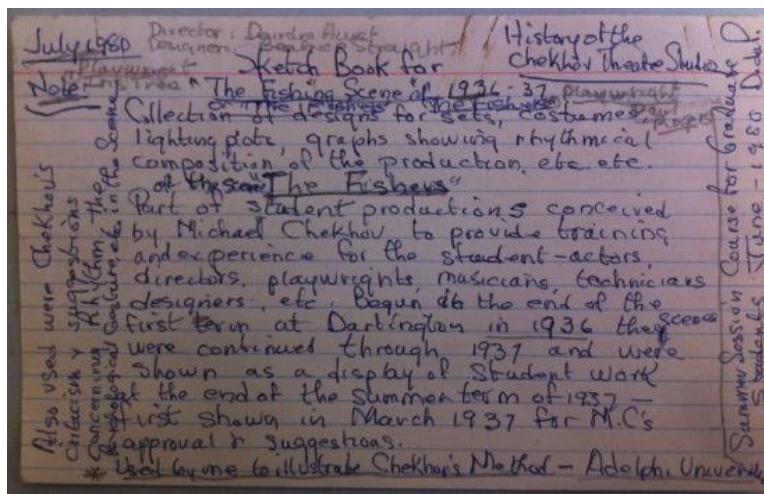


Fig 2: du Prey's filing card annotation to the *Fishers*'

For researchers coming to this folder 'cold', Du Prey's card is a gift in all sorts of ways. Firstly it places all of the folder's material in a clearly defined historical context (late 1936 - mid 1937); secondly it identifies the key Chekhovian principles the *Fishing Scene*<sup>2</sup> was meant to introduce and develop in the new students (rhythm, composition, the PG); thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it offers a personal evaluation of the significance of this little known scene in the bigger picture of Chekhov's pedagogy. Du Prey was first taught the Chekhov Technique in an intensive period with Beatrice Straight in April of 1936, before the Chekhov Theatre Studio was launched in the following September. She then took part in the new Studio's professional actor training at Dartington and, after its closure in late 1938, again in the relocated Chekhov Theatre Studio in Ridgefield Connecticut. Later she attended, recorded and transcribed Chekhov's *Lessons to the Professional Actor* from 1941 and remained working in close association with Chekhov until his death in 1955. She was, in sum, one of the most experienced Chekhov actors and teachers in the world. So, her decision to teach the *Fishing Scene* with graduate actors as an exemplar of the Chekhov approach, 25 years after Chekhov died, is not by any measure insignificant.

It is quite extraordinary, then, that the scene itself has had such little critical attention paid to it, not least because it promises to offer a new context to a host of better known aspects of Chekhov's work – laws of composition, the Psychological Gesture (PG), atmosphere and rhythm as a start. There is one short mention of the scene in du Prey's own account of the period: 'Chekhov in England and America' (Senelick 1992: 163-4)<sup>3</sup> and some, as yet unpublished, scholarly work by Tom Cornford (whose work on craft also appears in this volume). But apart from a hidden reference to the scenario in *To the Actor* (2002: 174-5), there is no considered critical analysis of the work on *Fishers'* and as such no full understanding of the pedagogical model

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<sup>2</sup> Both variants are used interchangeably here as they are on the card: *Fishing Scene* and *Fishers' Scene*.

<sup>3</sup> Here du Prey describes *Fishers'* as 'a truly classic example of the use of Chekhov's method' (Senelick 1992: 163).

Chekhov was operating at Dartington in this much-discussed and formative period of his work.

It is the contention of this article that a full analysis of the *Fishers'* scene is valuable and overdue, not only to help explain du Prey's reasoning in revisiting it as an ideal model of Chekhov's Technique in 1980 but also to help review the larger project at work in Dartington and, by further extension, the development of interwar alternative pedagogies both in the UK and the United States. Whilst the latter context can only be briefly sketched here, it is evident in the concepts of inter-disciplinarity and community-building which feature very strongly in *Fishers'* and which must at least be touched upon in a wider contextual analysis, within and beyond the walls of the Dartington estate.

With this in mind, I am seeking to address the following questions with this analysis: how does an examination of the *Fishers'* scene change our understanding of the Chekhov Technique? What actual evidence is there of an *interdisciplinary* training outlined as an ideal in his Studio policy? What role did the Dartington Estate play in this training? And how does this relate to the bigger picture of alternative schooling/education in the period – both nationally and internationally? This last question will necessitate a wider frame of reference, first to consider contemporaneous theories of progressive education and secondly briefly to align Chekhov's project with institutional examples from the US: the Cornish School and Black Mountain College.

#### *The contents of MC/S6/3/R*

Du Prey's listing of the folder's content is full enough but there are in fact more items in the *Fishing* folder, which need carefully separating out and then fitting back together. In doing so, I am of course constructing one narrative with this article from the many that lie unspoken in the collection. Such a construction is in effect a smaller version of what du Prey was doing in the first archiving of Chekhov's work, and indeed, John Sanford, an archivist working with the Dartington Hall Trust archive at the time, when he oversaw the merging of the Trust papers with du Prey's in the early 2000s. It is recognized that archives are themselves a constructed version of history and

reveal different stories depending on the narrator/scholar's particular focus.<sup>4</sup> That said, the pieces in this folder cohere more readily than many, not least because of du Prey's helpful annotations and cross references within the folder and beyond – there is, for instance, another folder detailing the teaching sessions Du Prey *actually* led in 1980 in Adelphi (MS/S9 2 and 3), allowing the researcher to verify the transmission of these ideas over several decades.

The contents of *Fishers'* are as follows:

- 4 variant drafts of a script - by Iris Tree, Eleanor Faison and two by Paul Rogers<sup>5</sup>
- Performance scores created by the actors
- Floor plans for the staging
- Colour schemes for the costumes and designs by Beatrice Straight
- A lighting schema
- Michael Chekhov's formal critiques of March 8<sup>th</sup>, June 22<sup>nd</sup> and July 12<sup>th</sup> 1937
- Du Prey's directorial notes, classes and rehearsal plans from Jan 14<sup>th</sup> 1937- July 12 1937
- Various artworks and explorations of colour psychology by the ensemble
- 4 bars of music entitled 'Hebridean Death Croon'
- Evidence of the ensemble's contextual and dramaturgical research

In short, there is enough substance in this one folder to recreate or reconstruct the entire original performance, with a very clear and traceable relationship between the training process and the final performance outcome. But it is also in the relationship of this folder to other sources in the archive and to those already published where important indications of Chekhov's thinking can be found. For the purposes of this article, these other sources

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<sup>4</sup> As Gale and Featherstone (2011) argue: 'Researchers need to negotiate between truth and supposition, fact and fiction: all they can produce in effect is a *version* of history' And, later: 'archive-based researchers need to be aware of the basis of their archive's duality of "random inclusion and considered exclusion"' (pp.23-4).

<sup>5</sup> Du Prey lists only Rogers and Tree as authors on her filing card but there is a well-developed version of the *Fishers'* scene in the folder with the name E. Faison added to it in Du Prey's characteristic pencil hand.

include Chekhov's Theatre School Policy (1936), his Lecture on Colour (1937), key elements of *To the Actor* and at least two of the many graphic acting schemas he produced at the time.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Fishing Scene: origins and plot*

It is not absolutely clear from where the original scenario for the *Fishing* scene emerged, but it seems likely that Chekhov himself invented the key ideas as a stimulus to the ensemble<sup>7</sup>, a creative prompt which was then taken up as a writing task by three members of that group: Iris Tree, Eleanor Faison and Paul Rogers. Deirdre du Prey elaborates on this process in her article:

Where the theme for "The Fishers" sketch came from I do not know. Perhaps from [Chekhov's] own creative imagination, because he used no notes but gave us the most beautiful images, calling on us to follow them in our own imagination: "Flying over the play" he called it.

(Du Prey in Senelick 1992: 164)

In her detailed record of the first session (January 14<sup>th</sup> 1937) - with cast, director and designer all assembled - this process is evoked very clearly. Chekhov addresses the group:

The first thing you must do in connection with this sketch is to imagine everything that you hear. You must not listen with your brains or intellects but with your imagination – turn everything you hear into a picture....Imagine a fishing village in an imaginary place. Imagine the families living in a fishing village. Try to imagine these people and to appreciate the strange psychology of a people who have always to deal with the face of the sky, with the pictures which rise on the horizon. Each wind has a special meaning for them and they listen to its changes in a

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<sup>6</sup> 1936-8 was a pivotal period in the development of the Technique and there was a parallel commitment to rationalizing it in diagrammatic form – several 'Charts of Exploration' were created during the period and are in the archive, offering a number of variants to the one conceived by Mala Powers in the late period of Chekhov's teaching in LA (1991: xxxvi)

<sup>7</sup> Certainly there is a scenario very like *Fishers'* in *To the Actor* entitled *Seascape* (p.174-5).

special way. They know which wind is bad and which wind is not so bad – which brings tragedy, the meaning of each cloud.<sup>8</sup>

If ever there were doubts as to the importance of imagination in Chekhov's practice, this first set of instructions surely puts them to rest. Chekhov speaks here in the register of a hypnotist, seeding evocative images and atmospheres to create the scene and repeating the mantra 'imagine' 6 times in the first three sentences. He goes on to sketch the key components of the tragedy: a set of villagers are waiting on the shore for the return of their husbands, sons and lovers (a young bride waiting for her groom); they are looking out to sea after a terrible storm and anticipating the return of the boats. Also present is a strange figure of foreboding - a witch, an outcast or a seer of sorts – who, in Chekhov's words, is 'the condensed embodiment of the tragic life of the village'.<sup>9</sup> She is both a comfort and a concern for the villagers. Soon those gathered see the arrival of something in the distance, but it is only one boat, not the fleet they had hoped to see and the villagers are immediately divided – one is elated to see her husband, the sole survivor of the storm, the others are left to consider the profundity of their grief as their loved ones will not be returning. 'This is one big wave of tragedy', Chekhov concludes, before explaining the task in hand:

We must elaborate this sketch and work it out. How can this be done? You must organise yourselves. The actors must be interested in every moment, the preparation of the costumes and sets etc. The director, author and designer must create the sketch in a new way. You must all love the sketch and love each other and do everything yourselves.<sup>10</sup>

Thus the scene study of the Fishing scene was launched with Deirdre Hurst du Prey as director, Beatrice Straight as designer and not one but three authors. For the purpose of this article, I will focus on Paul Rogers script-based response to Chekhov's stimulus for his is the most clearly connected to

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<sup>8</sup> Fishing scene notes by Deirdre Hurst du Prey, January 14<sup>th</sup> 1937 (MC/S6/3/R).

<sup>9</sup> (January 14<sup>th</sup> 1937)

<sup>10</sup> (January 14<sup>th</sup> 1937)



the work undertaken and documented by du Prey in terms of the cast, character names and actions<sup>11</sup>. There are two versions of Rogers' script but the longer one (seven pages as opposed to two and a half pages) is clearly the most developed and tallies directly with du Prey's cast list, recorded separately:

Eleanor [Faison] – Jezebel Lobb  
Beatrice [Straight] – Bess Lobb  
Felicity [Mason] – Laura Greer  
Paula [Morel] - Manda Britt  
Esme [Hubbard] – Pam, an Orphan  
Gretel [Schreiber]– Kate Ray  
Gabriel – Gorf Ray  
Jocelyn [Wynne] – Anne Greer  
John [Schoepperle] Mark Greer  
Mrs Elmhirst – Aunt Jenny Greer<sup>12</sup>

The mysterious witch-like figure - Mother Gillard - is not listed but does appear in the script itself, though without any words<sup>13</sup>.

Rogers' text is spare and elliptical<sup>14</sup>. Indeed it is reminiscent of the stichomythia used in Greek tragedy, with no single speaker ever taking much more than a solitary line to express themselves:

Anne: Listen to the breakers.  
Kate: They are fishers' funeral bells.

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<sup>11</sup> From the documents available, Iris Tree and Eleanor Faison's work does not appear to have been the ensemble's core text, even if they offered complementary responses to the same scenario by Chekhov. Tree's script for instance has a set of alternative character names, which are not referenced in Deirdre Hurst du Prey's rehearsal plans.

<sup>12</sup> The cast list follows the second version of Roger's script in the folder but there is no date on the paper. I have not been able to trace the student named Gabriel who does not appear on any of the formal student listings in the archive, for 1936-7 or 1937-8.

<sup>13</sup> This is in stark contrast to Eleanor Faison's response to the scenario, where Gillard, (or MG) features as the dramatic pivot of the entire scene.

<sup>14</sup> Fascinatingly, Rogers' allusive style predates Harold Pinter's by some twenty years. Little did Rogers know, then, that he would be starring in the premiere of the latter's *Homecoming* for the RSC in 1965.

Bess: Bells are holy sounds....The sea is possessed with devils.

Manda: Curse girl and you'll bring Mother Gillard on us.

Pam: Mother Gillard! Oh.....The witch. (whisper)

Kate: Sssh be quiet!<sup>15</sup>

The group then quarrel over whether Mother Gillard's intentions are good or bad, recalling her presence at the last great shipwreck when Jezebel's husband was drowned, before they sight a boat 'rounding the headland' and nearing the rocks. As it bobs and tilts in the stormy waters, it comes into focus and the dreadful truth is made clear. Mark, the one man alive, needs saving and is thrown a rope by Manda. He is pulled ashore in a delirium, frantically questioned by the relatives of the men on the other boat, only to confirm that they are 'gone':

Laura: Gone?

Aunt J: All of them?

Mark: All.

With no more than ten minutes of stage action and just a smattering of lines with precious little indication of character depth, the *Fishing* scene nevertheless formed a substantive part of the second term's work for the student actors at the Chekhov Theatre Studio and provided a locus for several interconnecting areas of skills development and training. It formed part of a series of scene studies at this time – including work on a Latvian fairy tale (The Golden Steed), a Polish tragedy adapted by Chekhov entitled *Balladina*, scenes from *Don Quixote*, *Peer Gynt* and *Joan of Arc* and a piece simply called *Salamanca*.<sup>16</sup> Work on all of these was presented to Chekhov on March 8<sup>th</sup>, but only a few records exist of the other pieces – including some designs for the *Golden Steed* and *Balladina*. The *Fishers'* folder, then, is next to unique, comprising concrete evidence of how Chekhov conceived his ensemble training in relation to his use of discrete scene studies. Indeed, I

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<sup>15</sup> *Fishers'* Scene Text by Paul Rogers (Variant 2) p.2. (MC/S6/3/R). Ellipses are in the original.

<sup>16</sup> Again, it is from one of du Prey's annotations, that these details can be garnered, a piece of paper marked 'March 8, 1937 Programme', loose in the *Fishers'* folder.

would argue that a concentrated analysis of *Fishers'* fills an important gap in the existing picture of the Dartington curriculum.

*The Fishing scene in the context of School policy*

That gap is explicitly evident in Chekhov's School Policy<sup>17</sup> first drafted in early 1936 and which ultimately formed the basis of the tiny published prospectus, used to recruit students in Europe and the US.<sup>18</sup> The original draft establishes the overarching philosophy of the Chekhov Studio – a spiritually inflected 'theatre of the future' – before going on to outline the 'THREE YEAR COURSE' as Chekhov conceived it at the time. Nine components are listed under that title:

1. A system of exercises to develop: Attention, Imagination, Speech and Body
2. Dramatic Etudes and Improvisation
3. External Preparation of Productions
4. Laws of Composition, Harmony and Rhythm
5. Short Lectures on The History of Art, The Theater and Playwriting
6. Talks on the Significance of Art in General and the Theater in Particular
7. Experimental Work
8. Appearances before a Selected Audience
9. ...Public Appearance on the stage of the Theater<sup>19</sup>

Chekhov articulates his ideas on Attention and Imagination in several of his later publications (1991, 1992, 2002); he gives guidance on the use of extended improvised études in *To the Actor* and dedicates a chapter to Laws of Composition in the same publication (2002: 162-182 and 93-102). It is, in addition, relatively well known that his long-term collaborator, Georgette Boner, with whom he briefly founded a school in Berlin in 1931, delivered the

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<sup>17</sup> This should not of course be confused with the Dartington Hall School, which opened its doors to pupils in September 1926.

<sup>18</sup> Produced as a marketing tool, and measuring just 5" x 4", the prospectus is entitled: Chekhov Theatre Studio and Dartington Hall, with sections on the Studio, the Drama Course and on the Student accommodation at Redworth House. I am lucky enough to own an original copy, thanks to the generosity of a colleague from Rose Bruford.

<sup>19</sup> Theatre School Policy (1936), pp. 5-9 (T/ADR/1/D/1).

short lecture series on theatre history referred to here.<sup>20</sup> But the nature and context of Chekhov's Experimental Work (point 7) in the period has never before been discussed. So, does this area of the policy and the related external work on productions help expand our understanding of Chekhov's curriculum in Dartington?

The purpose of Experimental Work was twofold:

To bring together, in practical form, all the elements of instruction in the school, to produce miniature 'Productions' of a new type under the guidance of a director.

And

To give expression to the original artistic ideas of the students, functioning as actors, directors, playwrights, composers, scene painters, costume designers, in so far as these ideas express the conception of the new theatre which the school is endeavoring to create.<sup>21</sup>

Experimental work, therefore, the nature of which is no better illustrated than in the Fishing scene, was thought of as a synthesizing mechanism to draw a number of the threads of the Chekhov Technique together. Indeed, of the eight other elements identified in the general list of principles above, as many as seven were part of the Experimental work done as part of the scene study; it was only the public presentation of production work that was not addressed by *Fishers*. That fact, coupled with the second point that students were to operate in multiple roles crossing art and design, dramaturgy, music and performance, help us to understand why du Prey highlighted this work as so relevant to her teaching in the 1980s classes in Adelphi. The *Fishers'* scene was a kind of technique in microcosm, developing many of the interrelated

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<sup>20</sup> The lectures were on: The Theatre as a Building, Iphigenia, About the Marionette Theatre, Style, Commedia Dell'Arte and Characters of the Commedia Dell'Arte. They are housed in the Devon Records archive (Ref MC/S4/6/A). See also du Prey (1992: 163).

<sup>21</sup> Theatre School Policy (1936), p. 8 (T/ADR/1/D/1).

skills Chekhov was later to describe as necessary for a 'chain reaction' of inspiration (1991: xxxvii). At the philosophical centre of this approach was the idea that the actor would be the site where 'complete harmony of all the elements of expression'<sup>22</sup> was located. Quite how such aspirational inter-disciplinarity operated in practice is obviously a key question, to which I will now turn.

### *Scoring a role and colour psychology*

Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to take some examples from the *Fishing* scene archive and to examine how the actors were encouraged to 'harmonise all the elements'. This is most evident in the extensive work undergone on scoring a role by Du Prey's cast, at the instigation of Chekhov in his notes to the first showing of *Fishers* on March 8th:

Make a graph like that for the Golden Steed. Experiment with tempo in definite small pieces. Tempo will always change the quality and through tempo you will find some new qualities for each piece you have chosen.<sup>23</sup>

In a direct response to this suggestion Deirdre du Prey constructed her own score of the play, modeled appropriately on the form of a wave and with clear indications of the tempo decisions she envisaged. This diagram tracks the dramatic progression of Rogers' script - from left to right and then back again - starting with Hope (as the figures await the boats) and ending with Hopelessness after they see that just 'one man' returns. It indicates the extent to which ideas of legato and staccato, so central to later Chekhov, are already at play at this time and it shows how du Prey was looking for bold contrasts in tempi to mark the emotional shifts of the piece.

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<sup>22</sup> Theatre School Policy (1936), p. 3 (T/ADR/1/D/1).

<sup>23</sup> Suggestions from Mr Chekhov on planning a rehearsal plan for a play, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1937, p.5. (MC/S6/3/R).

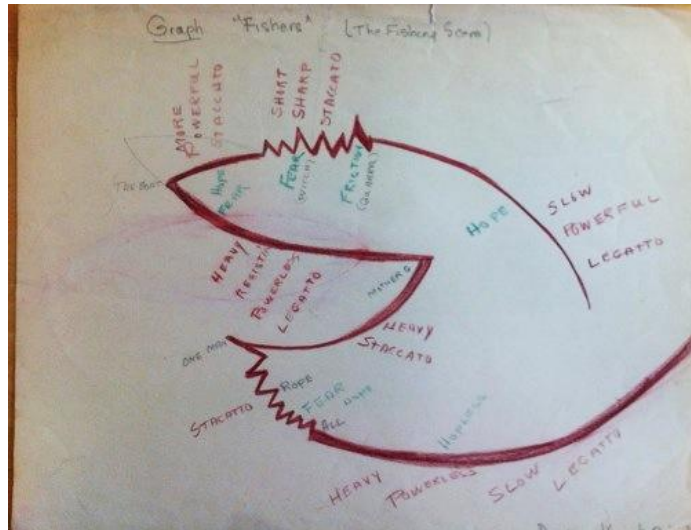


Fig 3. Deirdre Hurst Du Prey's score for *Fishers'*

But this was just the beginning of the experiments with scoring. The folder of *Fishers'* has nearly fifteen different scores, varying from almost entirely abstract explorations of colour composition (Felicity Mason and Beatrice Straight's for instance) to the carefully modeled dramaturgical score of Paul Rogers – clearly exploring his own playwriting experiments in visual form. These scores and the other associated art works in the folder indicate the extent to which pictorial shape, colour and texture were being exploited as techniques for bypassing the potentially dry intellectual processes of play analysis and as tools for stimulating the imagination.

It is already known (Sharp 2002, Daboo 2012 and Cornford 2013) that Chekhov was drawing on a wide teaching staff from several departments in Dartington to develop his actors: the artist Mark Tobey, the sculptor Willi Soukop, a pupil of Bernard Leach<sup>24</sup>, Laban's assistant and partner, Lisa Ullmann, the pianist Patrick Harvey, Alice Crowther, the Eurythmy expert who concentrated on voice training.<sup>25</sup> But what is less known is the extent to which this interdisciplinary input impacted on the students' own practice. One trivial but memorable indication of this is on page one of Rogers' script: a large green paint splash in the corner of the paper, made perhaps in one of the

<sup>24</sup> I am indebted to Tom Cornford for pointing out to me Soukop's connection to Chekhov. Soukop trained Chekhov's actors in techniques of sculpting and moulding with clay.

<sup>25</sup> Of these, only Crowther is mentioned directly in Du Prey's rehearsal plans but the influence of this range of disciplines is very clear in the scoring experiments of the cast.

sessions when they were experimenting with painting their own scores and when du Prey was consulting the typescript. This is typical of the unexpected 'evidence' archival materials often throw up, evidence which could never be captured in an online catalogue:

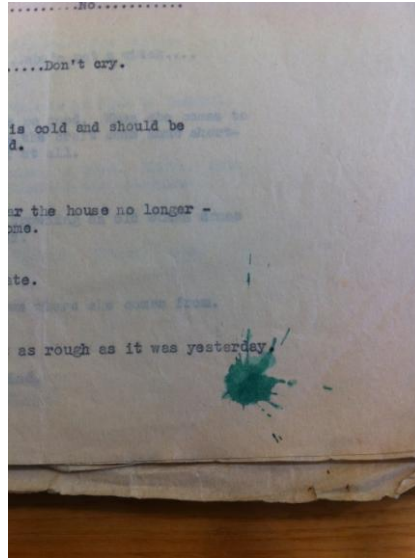


Fig 4. Detail of the Rogers' script showing the paint

Two more substantive examples from the many performance scores in the folder will serve to indicate the range of experimentation of the Fishers' cast, and its connection with Chekhov's interdisciplinary thinking.

Paul Rogers' score is less interested in colour – just red and black ink are used – and more aimed at finding the underlying compositional principles of the scene study. Divided into three 'movements', he tracks the development of *Fishers* from curtain rise on the left of the score to curtain fall on the right. The piece begins in pause and ends in a pause, but his notes below the lines of development suggest: 'Gradual increase in tempo. Contrast in dynamic. Metamorphosis from hope to reality'. This increase in tempo is signaled by two straight vectors rising from left to right – each with an element associated with a character or two: in red, 'Land (Ann and other characters)' and in black, 'Sea (Jezebel: Mother Gillard). Finally, above these rising straight lines is a curved trajectory, also rising, but punctuated with red crosses at the transition moments *between* movements. These transitions are identified with short lines from the script – 'Manda: "Curse Girl", Gorf: "Look", Bess, "No". Not

surprisingly these words are direct references to Rogers' own script, with the last line of Bess's concluding the Fishing scene itself.

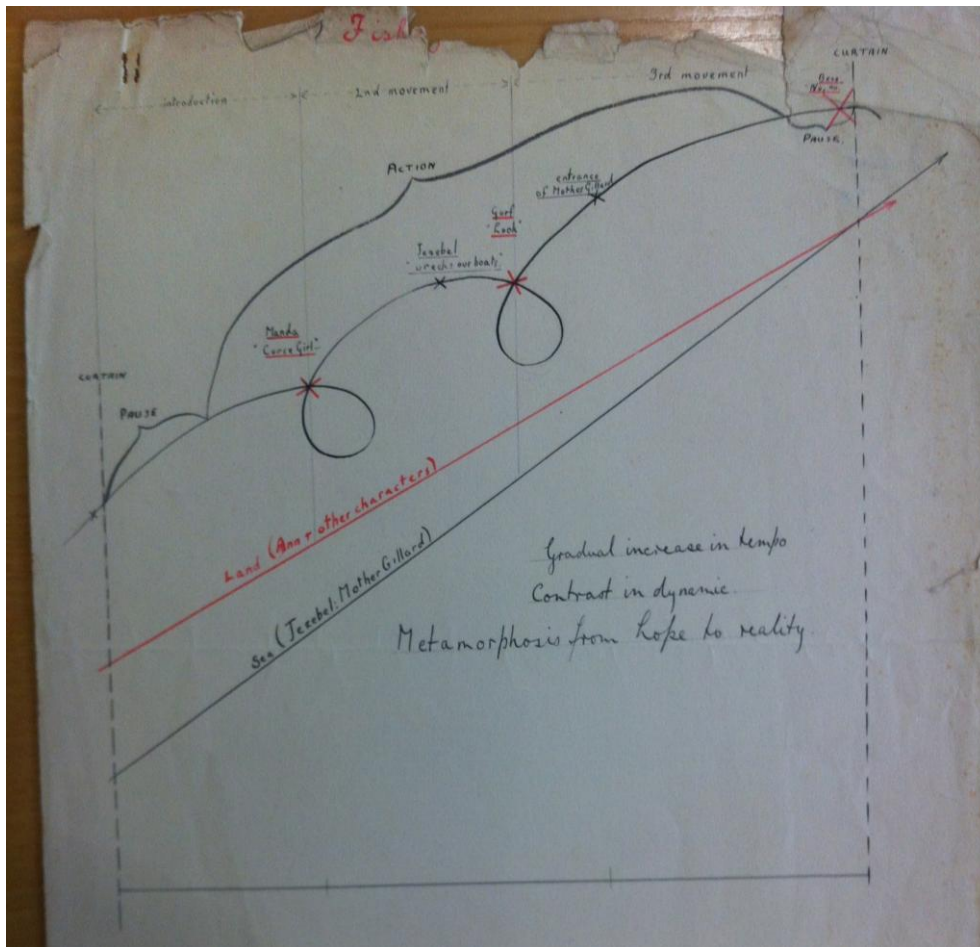


Fig 5. Rogers' score for

There are several things to note here. First, is the clear triadic compositional scheme Rogers is using – three *movements*, not simply three parts – which relates to Chekhov's fascination for what he later called the 'law of triplicity':

Every play, no matter how complicated and involved its construction, follows this process and is therefore divisible into these three sections [the plot generates, unfolds and concludes] (2002: 94).

That fundamental compositional principle, applied to *King Lear* in *To the Actor*, was first published in diagrammatic form in the Russian version of this book in 1946 and reprinted in the Harper Row publication (1953: 113). But



with these scores we can see its application ten years before there was any published schema of composition.

Second, and relatedly, is the search for rhythmic contrast in the piece – the score attempts to determine an emotional rhythm which transforms as we progress through the script. This ebb and flow, marked by Rogers' spiraling line, is what Chekhov later described as 'rhythmical waves' that can 'make the performance pulsatingly beautiful and expressive' (2002: 119). But again in this context, over fifteen years before the publication of *To the Actor*, they indicate the extent to which Chekhov had already conceived his laws of composition in the Experimental Work at Dartington. This is confirmed by his criticism of March 28<sup>th</sup>:

You must show the beginning and the end as having absolutely different qualities. If you find these three parts – the beginning the middle and the end – your play will come to life because these three parts are the bones or the skeleton of the play, the scaffold or the spine.<sup>26</sup>

Rogers in his score is applying this advice to the letter and indicating where in the script the three movements are to begin and end.

Third, we see in the score a desire to establish the central conflict and to express this in elemental terms – not a battle between good and evil but between Land and Water. This evokes both the movement qualities Chekhov worked on with his students – molding (earth), floating (water), flying (air) and radiating (fire) – but also his work on Psychological gesture, which threads through all the notes on *Fishers*'. Du Prey's exercise with the cast on May 20<sup>th</sup> helps explain this relationship.

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<sup>26</sup> Criticism of March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1937, p4. (MC/S6/3/R). Later in a Rehearsal plan of du Prey's from April 25<sup>th</sup> she indicates how the message has got through to her as director: '9. Establish and show on the chart, the three major sections... 11. Find the different tempos in the 3 main divisions – the tempo of the beginning must differ absolutely from the tempo at the end.'

Explore the reaction of the land and sea by means of psychological gesture.

1. You are being held down to the land but your centre is streaming out to the sea. (The time is endless, the activity intense, the space limitless and the quality powerful) or 2. Being driven forward by an invisible force. Or 3. Cleaving an invisible power.<sup>27</sup>

Only identified as a specific concept in the previous year (du Prey dates it as 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1936), the Psychological Gesture was already a key creative principle for Chekhov by the beginning of rehearsals in 1937 and the meeting point of several other fundamentals of the Technique, including, here, the imaginary centre and qualities of action. Interesting, too, is the four-fold set of sub-concepts cited – Time, Space, Activity and Quality for these are listed on one of the first attempts to schematize the Technique as a whole on a ‘Chart of Exploration: by Means of the Method’ constructed in 1937.<sup>28</sup> Only ‘Quality’ as a term remained by the time Mala Powers recorded the Chart of Inspired Acting in 1949 (1991: xxxvii).

Beatrice Straight’s approach to scoring a role was far less concerned with matters of composition, not least because she did not need the dramatic overview of the piece that Paul Rogers had to adopt as playwright. But her painterly explorations of her role are worth noting here as they connect with influences Chekhov was attempting to make sense of far beyond the staff team at Dartington. There are two striking pieces of work from Straight on her role, in addition to her costume designs. One records her ‘character’s line’ and is a tempestuous mix of purple and red, with three prominent peaks of activity, which are part wave and part fire. Again these are cross-referenced to moments in the play: ‘Felicity Anger’, ‘the Boat Sighted’, ‘Mother G.’ and ‘John Landed’ (playing Mark, the sole survivor). The other, dated April 24<sup>th</sup>, is perhaps more interesting as it includes a list of musical effects to be utilized (‘beating on wood with deep distant nearing thunder’), a haphazard looking

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<sup>27</sup> Fishing Scene Rehearsals, May 20<sup>th</sup> 1937. (MC/S6/3/R).

<sup>28</sup> The chart is housed at MC/S8/12.

line of development or 'Movement' and an attempt at capturing the *colour* of her character.

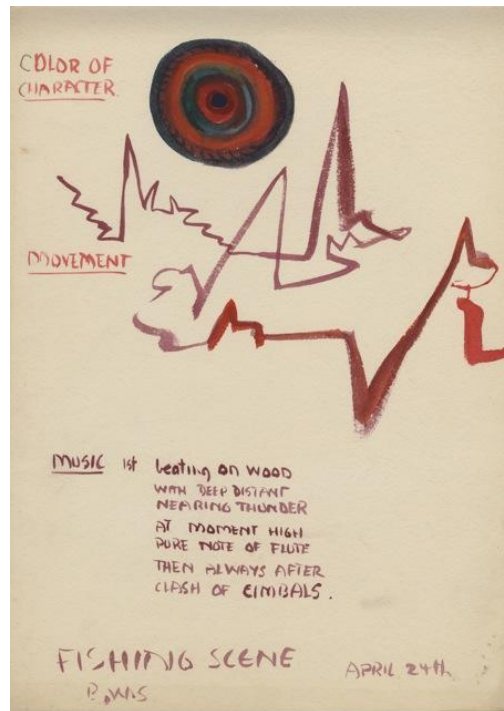


Fig 6: Beatrice Straight's score for *Fishers'*

This attempt to ascribe a colour to her character – Bess Lobb in Rogers' script – is significant on at least two levels. Generally speaking it indicates the extent to which the actors were looking for intuitive and imaginative models of character stimulus – recalling Chekhov's warning from the outset not to listen to the play with the brain or intellect. But more specifically this colour map of the character is a literal application of the colour theory Chekhov was drawing on from Goethe and Steiner. I have discussed this before (Pitches 2006), mapping Chekhov's thoughts on colour directly to Goethe's own proclamations. But the evidence here is more grounded in the practice of the students. Beatrice Straight's colour map appears as a vortex of orange, blue and deep red - colours which according to Chekhov's colour lecture in 1940, are in conflict: 'Red is something which is aggressive, which attacks us...Blue makes quite a different gesture, according to Goethe and Steiner. It make us more thoughtful, more devotional – quite the opposite to red<sup>29</sup>'. Is Beatrice

<sup>29</sup> The Psychology of Colors, February 20<sup>th</sup> 1940.

here trying to capture the dramatic tension in her own character, one who is not centrally implicated in the loss of the men and who mediates between the key players?

In a sense it doesn't matter what a colour reading of Straight's character map yields in precise terms. I am citing it here more to evoke the explorations undertaken by the cast of *Fishers'* and informed by the other disciplines, which existed in Dartington (in this case Music and Fine Art). Chekhov was using this scene (and the others he worked on at the time) as a centre-point for the exploration of the Technique. This examination of *Fishers* helps position it as a metonym for the whole technique as it was formulated at Dartington, with the PG at the centre of this exploration. As du Prey explained over fifty years later in a lecture at Harvard in 1991:

Beginning in the 2nd term in January 1937, Chekhov announced that we were to be divided into groups which were given a scene which would be performed at the end of the term. The purpose was to involve the "points" of the method as "grounds" for our rehearsals. Much use was made of the psychological gesture, the 1st reference to which was on November 23, 1936.<sup>30</sup>

These 'points', as she calls them, are very much in evidence in the performer scores and more generally in the demands made on the cast to work as a creative ensemble on the tragic scenario set by Chekhov.

#### *The wider view: Dartington and inter-war progressive education*

My final aim with this article is to place this Chekhovian experimental work in the context of inter-war progressive education, asking to what extent Chekhov's approach intuitively aligned with movements in the UK and in the United States towards alternative models of pedagogy. Such an aim of course could merit an article (or book) in itself and I may rightly be accused here of extrapolating too quickly from the very unique set-up at Dartington to the

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<sup>30</sup> From a speech made at Harvard by du Prey on the 100 year anniversary of Chekhov's birth. (MC/S9/2)

national and international picture. But there is merit in at least touching on these potential connections to further interrogate the question of significance raised by du Prey's filing card and choice to teach *Fishers'* at a Graduate School in America in 1980.

One clear indication of the bigger picture as Dorothy Elmhirst<sup>31</sup> conceived it was the Cornish School, now the Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, Washington. Founded in 1914, the Cornish school was 'an example and an inspiration' (Young 1982: 221) according to Dorothy, who had been visited by its founder, Nellie Cornish on several occasions, and it is easy to see why when one considers its holistic philosophy of education:

The [Cornish] School believes that an actor, for example, will be a better actor if his background includes Music, the Dance, and the Graphic Arts in addition to the technical knowledge involved in writing, producing or acting plays.

(Young 1982: 221)

Indeed Mark Tobey who later worked with Chekhov's actors as I have already noted, was plucked from Seattle by Dorothy Elmhirst in 1931 and had had a close association with the Cornish school for some years before that<sup>32</sup>. This template for a rounded arts education pursued by Nellie Cornish aligned closely with the vision the Elmhirsts had for the Arts in general at Dartington but it is also strongly reminiscent of the work Chekhov was pursuing with the *Fishing* scene: musical and movement principles explored through the graphic arts and the 'technical' aspects of playwriting and acting.

Beyond Dartington and in the wider context of the progressive education movement, which flourished between the wars, there was an analogous adoption of methods of synthesized - as opposed to atomized - methods of teaching and learning. Hilda Taba, an educational psychologist writing at this

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<sup>31</sup> The co-founder of the Dartington Hall project, along with her husband Leonard.

<sup>32</sup> It is worthy of note that Deirdre du Prey attended the Cornish school herself, before moving to the UK and joining Chekhov.

time identified several factors that in her words: 'have united to turn acceptance away from th[e] atomistic effort to treat of life' (1932: xv), including Freud, John Dewey and the Gestalt movement. She goes on to lament the state of content-led education as she saw it:

One of these restrictive factors [in curriculum development] is the tendency to deliver ready-made products of thought rather than inspire a development of processes by which such products are arrived at.

(Taba 1932: 237)

Interestingly, her model of pedagogy designed to address this threat of mechanization, was to teach through carefully selected *perspectives* as opposed to separate disciplines:

Thus the lines of cleavage with different subject matter would not be sharply drawn, and the subject matter used for achieving this aim would be drawn from various fields, depending, on the one hand, on what serves to clarify certain principles and, on the other, on what is most significant to the learners.

(Taba 1932: 230)

It was an approach that Chekhov intuitively adopted in his scene studies, where the *process* of investigation was valued significantly above the final outcome and the scene study itself became the *site* of practice, crossing disciplines, to explore his core principles – those identified by du Prey in her annotated filing card, for instance: Rhythm and the Psychological Gesture.

Similar ideas to Taba's were expressed by W.M. Ryburn in his book: *The Progressive School* (1938), published just a year after Chekhov was running his scene study of *Fishing*:

Besides freedom for independent thought and action, the child needs an environment rich both in materials and ideas...In this way formal work will no longer be divorced from creative activity, but will find its

proper place as part of the technique of acquiring new knowledge and expression, new thoughts and ideas.

(Ryburn 1938: 59)

Ryburn, too, concluded that a progressive teaching model was one that integrated rather than separated the component parts of learning. He coined the term: the Project Method (1938: 135-159) for such an approach where 'all the subjects that the child is doing arise out of the purposive activity, and the purpose acts as the correlating agent' (1938: 158).<sup>33</sup>

These core progressive principles – synthetic learning, inter-disciplinarity, process-led, experiential training of the 'whole' person – are evident also in the arts college movement beyond Dartington. Mention has been made of Cornish already but Black Mountain College, founded in 1933, is another key reference point. Described by Collier and Harrison, as a 'Utopian dream, born out of the depression and the Rise of Fascism' (Harris et al 2005: 5), Black Mountain College (BMC) had many similarities with the Dartington project, as one of its founding figures, John Rice made clear:

Our central and consistent effort now is to teach method, not content; to emphasise process, not results.

(Harris et al 2005: 5)

In keeping with progressive principles in both the UK and the US, BMC focused as much on the community life of the students as it did on the curricula – which considered the arts of Dance, Fine Art, Poetry, Music, Woodwork, Textiles and Drama as equal to that of the other subjects such as the sciences (Harris 1987: 7). Teaching according to Mary Harris was to be for the 'whole person: head, heart and hand' (2005: 11) and this included a work programme of farm-related activity, construction or college chores. The similarities with Dartington are very strong and its impact and influence since

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<sup>33</sup> One example of this in his book combines: Arithmetic, Writing, Reading, Drawing, Hygiene, Rural Reconstruction, History, Geography and Manual Work in the project of building a room (1938: 144).

its founding in the 1930s are also evocative of the legacy Dartington has left in this country. Cage, Cunningham, Albers, Einstein, Gropius, Buckminster-Fuller are all associated with the history of BMC – testament in itself to its radical inter-disciplinarity.

### *Conclusion*

Clearly, then, the aspirations of the Elmhirsts for Dartington are to be seen in the wider context of a flourishing progressive education movement and a culture of interdisciplinary arts training evident in both the US and the UK. Dorothy took her inspiration from Nellie Cornish in the States but perhaps more influential for Leonard Elmhirst was Rabindranath Tagore's school in Bengal, Santiniketan, founded in 1901 on a synthesis of 'community...Nature, the arts and the spiritual' (Nicholas 2007: 30)<sup>34</sup>. In turn, the Elmhirsts developed an atmosphere of creativity and support that allowed visiting professionals, such as Chekhov, to develop their own models of holistic education and training.

This close reading of *Fishers*' I believe tells us several things about a particularly rich period of education and training between the wars. Firstly, at a local level, it gives us concrete evidence of how developed Chekhov's ideas were in several areas of his practice - the laws of composition, in rhythm, atmosphere, colour psychology and, of course, the PG. At the same time it gives us a worked-out and comprehensively documented model of how Chekhov sought to teach those ideas through the singular perspective of the scene study, explaining and evidencing what he meant by Experimental Work. Secondly, it allows us to see a new inter-connectedness between the ideas housed in the archive and those which emerged in later publications: there is a fascinating coherence between the actors' scores, for instance, and the later chapter on composition in *To the Actor*, to restate one example. There are lost ideas from the archival papers as well, concepts which were dropped or

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<sup>34</sup> 'Like the progressive school that the Elmhirsts would open later at Dartington [Santiniketan] was for the moneyed classes, but one where learning should be accomplished through motivating the interests of the child' (Nicholas 2007: 30).



downgraded in later published schemas – including the quadrant of Space, Time, Activity, Quality. These broken lines of development give us an equally important view of the evolution of the Technique. Thirdly, we can see in the *Fishers'* folder evidence of previously unrecognized skills exhibited by members of the ensemble – Paul Rogers' as a prototype Pinter, writing nearly forty years before he played Max in *The Homecoming*, du Prey as novice director, taking some sharp criticisms from Chekhov, and Beatrice Straight as a colorist and designer of some considerable ability.

But on a larger scale, this examination reveals how *Fishers*, a microcosm of the Chekhov technique itself, also operates as a model of the wider developments in progressive education in the mid-late 1930s, echoing some of the core principles of that movement and evidencing them in tangible terms. This is of particular importance for it brings Chekhov's work not just out of the archive but out of the margins of interwar theatre practice in the UK; out of the shadow, one might say, of Michel St Denis and the thriving professional theatre scene in London which seemed to be either unaware or deeply suspicious of his teaching (Daboo 2012: 68). In fact, rather than being peripheral and 'alien', Chekhov's practice and his ongoing pursuit of a 'Theatre of the Future' was aligned with several parallel and pivotal movements in training and education philosophy, both in Europe and in the United States.

Perhaps that is a clue to why Deirdre Hurst du Prey penned that filing card introduction to the folder and remained so committed to the pedagogy contained within it.

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