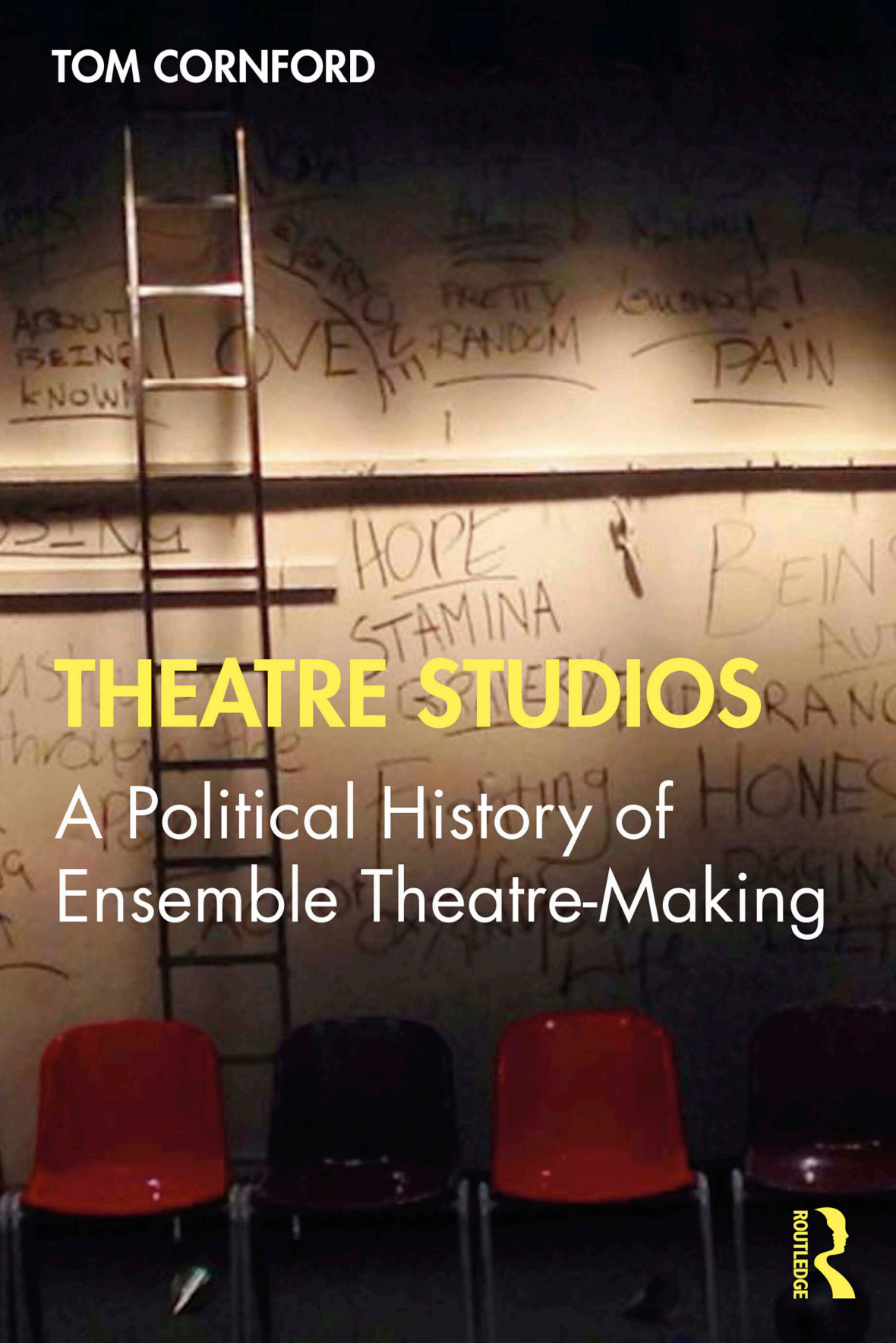
TOM CORNFORD



THEATRE STUDIOS

A Political History of Ensemble Theatre-Making

ROUTLEDGE

'This is a rigorously compelling examination of a long-neglected area of British theatrical history. With confidence and acuity Tom Cornford lays out the tangled strands of influence and achievement that constitute the Theatre Studio tradition in this country. His examination of the benefits and pitfalls of ensemble theatre-making is sharp, provocative and always surprising.'

Sean Holmes, Associate Artistic Director, Shakespeare's Globe and formerly Artistic Director of the Lyric, Hammersmith

'This book recontextualises and critiques three fundamental strands of British theatre history through the lens of the theatre studios of Michel Saint-Denis, Michael Chekhov and Joan Littlewood. It is comprehensively researched, elegantly written, robustly argued and emphatically current.'

Jonathan Pitches, Professor of Theatre and Performance at the University of Leeds

THEATRE STUDIOS

Theatre Studios explores the history of the studio model in England, first established by Konstantin Stanislavsky, Jacques Copeau and others in the early twentieth century, and later developed in the UK primarily by Michel Saint-Denis, George Devine, Michael Chekhov and Joan Littlewood, whose studios are the focus of this study.

Cornford offers in-depth accounts of the radical, collective work of these leading theatre companies of the mid-twentieth century, considering the models of ensemble theatre-making that they developed and their remnants in the newly publicly-funded UK theatre establishment of the 1960s. In the process, this book develops an approach to understanding the politics of artistic practices rooted in the work of John Dewey, Antonio Gramsci and the standpoint feminists. It concludes by considering the legacy of the studio movement for twenty-first-century theatre, partly by tracking its echoes in the work of Secret Theatre at the Lyric, Hammersmith (2013–2015).

Students and makers of theatre alike will find in this book a provocative and illuminating analysis of the politics of performance-making and a history of the theatre as a site for developing counterhegemonic, radically democratic, anti-individualist forms of cultural production.

Tom Cornford is Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Performance at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London.

THEATRE STUDIOS

A Political History of Ensemble Theatre-Making

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For Anna

CONTENTS

FIGURES

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This book has taken a very long time to write. Much of the initial research for the first two sections was undertaken for my PhD, 'The English Theatre Studios of Michael Chekhov and Michel Saint-Denis, 1935–1965', at the University of Warwick between 2008 and 2012. That project was based in the CAPITAL Centre, under the aegis of the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies, thanks to the imagination and tenacity of its then director, Carol Rutter. Without Carol's faith and generosity I would not be doing the work I do today. My PhD was supervised by Tony Howard, and I could not have hoped for a more creative, perceptive, and considerate guide. I was also mentored and supported at Warwick by Paul Prescott and Nicholas Monk, whose guidance and friendship was invaluable.

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talking to me regularly and at length about the project. The whole company likewise welcomed me without hesitation and were all generous and deeply insightful about their work, in ways that enriched this project far more than their relatively brief appearance at this book's close may suggest.

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In 2016, I took up a lectureship at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama with most of the research for this book complete, but still no manuscript, and probably there still would be nothing to show for those years of work were it not for the support and encouragement of Central's brilliant research community, led from the front by Maria Delgado. Particular thanks are due to Sylvan Baker, Ben Buratta, Gilli Bush-Bailey, Steve Farrier, Tony Fisher, Naomi Paxton, Amanda Stuart-Fisher, and Gareth White for keeping me, in various ways, on track as I transitioned from saying I was writing this book to actually doing so. While at Central I have also undertaken research projects in collaboration with colleagues elsewhere. The thinking and writing I have done alongside Roberta Barker, Cass Fleming, and Caridad Svich has taught me a huge amount about how to work on this book, and meetings and presentations on anti-racism and decolonising theatre and performance studies alongside Roaa Ali, Jerri Daboo, Lynette Goddard, Victor Ladron de Guevara, Royona Mitra, Prarthana Purkayastha, and Pedro de Senna have radically shifted the ground upon which all of my work stands. I have also gained both insights and inspiration from my own PhD students: thank you to Bridget Foreman, Lucy Tyler, Evi Stamatiou, Sherrill Gow, Amber O'Connell, and Gavin Thatcher for keeping me on my toes and for the privilege of helping to shape your work. Last, and most of all, I am deeply indebted to those people who have read and provided feedback on individual chapters in the closing stages: thank you to Sally Baggott, Maria Delgado, Tony Fisher, Nadine Holdsworth, and the manuscript's anonymous reviewer for their detailed feedback. With such support, mistakes and infelicities that remain are emphatically my responsibility.

With such a long period of gestation, this book has been the subject of numerous conference papers, talks and lectures. These have included a key-note presentation at the 2019 'The Makings of the Actor' conference in Athens, papers for the Performer Training, Directing and Dramaturgy, and Performance, Identity and Community working groups in the UK's Theatre and Performance Research Association; a paper for the Training/Trans-session at the American Society for Theatre Research 2016 conference, and talks at the theatre research

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The long work of producing this book has given me many opportunities to wonder why I'm doing it. The answer is simple. I write for the future, that I may make some small contribution to what will not be mine to shape. I have learned the value of that project, and to face it with hope and with humility, from my three children, Bella, Jacob, and Nute. What's more, they're really lush—thanks dudes, I love you. Lastly, by far my greatest debt is to Anna Harpin, who kissed the sun right out of the sky for me and walks beside me all the long way home. Every word of this book was first a conversation with Anna; without her, it simply would not exist.

INTRODUCTION

Ensemble theatre-making and the theatre studio tradition

In the late summer of 1965, a delegation of actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) sent a lengthy 'Memorandum on the Future Organization, Policy and Training of the Royal Shakespeare Company', to its director, Peter Hall.[1] It proposed 'a challenging rededication [of the RSC] to the craft of the theatre' following what it described as the company's 'history of high endeavour, continually compromised by expediency'. The actors suggested that the RSC could both save money and improve the quality of the company by committing to training from the ground up, and replacing walk-ons with students. These students would 'form the nucleus of an R.S.T. School, the first stage in its realization', with two voice teachers and one teacher each for movement and fencing, all of them on a permanent salary, so that training could also be 'included in the daily routine of every actor in the company'. This could be achieved, the memo suggested, by holding rehearsals from 10am until 2.30pm, followed by a one-hour break, and a training period from 3.30 until 5.30pm. Since each actor's contractual commitment could not exceed five hours per day plus performance (or half that on a matinee day), the memo suggested that one of those hours be dedicated to training. It added that, in return for this greater commitment from the acting company, it is 'not unfair that we should in turn press you to streamline your central administration of this Company'. Apart from the provision of teaching staff, this was the only concession requested from the RSC's management.

The actors' document was discussed at a meeting of the RSC's Company Committee on October 25, 1965, where the idea of training students was rejected on the grounds that 'in present circumstances, adequate training facilities could not be provided'.[2] The suggestion of a daily two-hour slot for studio work was tentatively accepted, but with the proviso that it should consist mainly

of activities to supplement rehearsals or maintain the standard of the repertoire, rather than training or experimental projects intended to develop the company and its future work. In the event, even this thoroughly compromised version of the actors' plan was not, however, enacted. The minutes of the Company Committee meeting noted that '[f]urther examination of this area was necessary to decide how many of the above activities should be included both in terms of time and money' and instructing the 'Planning Committee to discuss'. The Planning Committee's remit and membership was, inevitably, much more closely aligned with the concerns of the Company's management than was the Company Committee (in which representatives of management and the acting company were more or less numerically balanced), and the proposal was kicked into the long grass.

The context of this unsuccessful intervention was an imminent period of financial austerity at the RSC, announced in 1965 under the 'Goodwin Plan', named after its author, the company's head of publicity, John Goodwin. Hall summarised this plan privately as a reduction 'to ONE permanent company (rather larger than the normal Stratford company) which would play a slightly curtailed Stratford season, and then move to London annually to play a short 4½ month season at the Aldwych'.[3] The plan also involved reducing the activity of the RSC Studio in order to save the company an estimated £7,000 (which was a little over 1 per cent of its projected total expenditure for the year of £590,000, or 5 per cent of its annual salary bill of £132,000).[4] The plan, which allowed 'no room for experiment' and required actors to play fewer roles over longer periods and in a much higher proportion of revivals, was certainly radical but not sufficiently so to reduce projected expenditure as low as the company's projected income of £551,000. Further cuts had to be made, and a memo from Peter Hall to the Arts Council from September 1966 reported that 'studio and training activities have had to be abandoned through lack of finance'.[5]

It is the contention of this book that this episode, a non-event in the overall history of the RSC, should nonetheless be considered by theatre historians as a dog that didn't bark. Although, from the vantage point of theatre production fifty-five years later, the actors' proposal appears utopian and obviously doomed to fail, there were good reasons, at the time, for its authors to be optimistic that it might be adopted. For a start, the words 'Royal Shakespeare Company' were mainly used at the time to refer not to a brand or commercial entity, but to the company of actors. The RSC, then, *was* its actors, in a way no actor employed by the company now would consider it to be. Second, many of those actors were on very long contracts by today's standards, and were not simply represented by an Equity deputy but sat on an RSC committee. Third, both of Hall's associate directors at the time—Peter Brook and Michel Saint-Denis—were openly committed to the combination of training and experimental practice to which the actors' delegation sought formally to commit the company. In 1964, Brook had established the Royal Shakespeare Company Experimental Group

with Charles Marowitz, which went on to present a season of 'shots in the dark' (to use Brook's term) at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, before, famously, producing Adrian Mitchell's adaptation of Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade*, which opened at the Aldwych in August 1964.[6] Saint-Denis had founded the RSC Studio in 1962, and had previously been the primary force behind the Old Vic Theatre Centre (1947–52), which aimed to combine a school with two acting companies along similar lines to those proposed by the RSC actors. Furthermore, Hall's head of design, since 1964, John Bury, had learned his trade with Theatre Workshop—who had also attempted to establish a school alongside its permanent company and was defined by its commitment to training and experimentation—and the leading actor in Hall's 1965 production of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*, Paul Rogers, had trained at the Chekhov Theatre Studio at Dartington Hall, another enterprise dedicated simultaneously to training and the development of a permanent ensemble company.

On the face of it, then, the actors' intervention came at an opportune moment for the revival of the studio tradition of theatre organisations that combined training and experimental practice, and sought to establish permanent companies, which is the subject of this book. What the actors either did not see or refused to be deterred by, however, is that although Hall's RSC—and the wider subsidised theatre establishment—was substantially indebted to the studio tradition, by 1965 that tradition was dying out. As if to reinforce the fact, that year Saint-Denis—who more than anyone else in the UK had pioneered the studio as a model of theatre-making—suffered a stroke that severely reduced his ability to work. In 1965, as John Bull has shown, the RSC, National Theatre, and English Stage Company at the Royal Court received 'the vast majority of funding for drama'.[7] When Saint-Denis died in 1971, Hall said at his funeral that these theatres, as well as the Sadler's Wells Opera, 'all owe something of their way of working to him'.[8] In fact, the emergent, subsidised establishment of the 1960s owed a wider debt to the studio tradition which had trained many of its leading artists and developed many of the approaches to theatre-making that it deployed. None of these theatres, however, either acknowledged this debt to studios or sought to emulate their practices. The English Stage Company was run by George Devine between 1955 and 1965; he had worked more closely with Saint-Denis than any other English director, but it was no more structured as a studio than was Hall's RSC. Laurence Olivier's National Theatre (NT) was based upon a more or less permanent company, but it did not pursue the studio model of grounding its practice in collective training. Far from being revived in the practices of these companies that were deeply indebted to it, the studio tradition was extinguished by them.

Theatre studios should not, however, be considered significant primarily because they contributed to the development of the subsidised UK theatre establishment that began to take the form it retains to this day during the early 1960s. They also developed techniques that were profoundly influential in

shaping the discipline of actor training. Saint-Denis' approach to training has been particularly significant in shaping the practices of English drama schools, and he was instrumental in establishing the École supérieure d'art dramatique du Théâtre National de Strasbourg (the national theatre of Strasbourg's academy of dramatic art) in 1953, the National Theatre School of Canada in 1960, and the Julliard Drama Division in 1968. Michael Chekhov did not establish drama schools in the same way, but his acting technique is now taught across the world in dedicated studios and in the curricula of more acting schools than could be mentioned here. The East 15 Acting School was founded in 1961 by Margaret Bury to provide a training rooted in the practice of Theatre Workshop, which has also been widely influential in the field of politically engaged theatre-making. Finally, theatre studios also represented practical experiments in social organisation and collective creative practice that predated the proliferation of ensemble companies in the post-1968 era, and which—as I will argue—offer important lessons for our understanding of the politics of theatre-making and its practices now. Before addressing these points of significance, however, there are basic questions to answer: what were theatre studios, where did this tradition come from, and how did it develop?

The emergence and development of theatre studios

For contemporary theatre-goers in the UK, a 'studio' means a small theatre, often described as a 'black box', probably with flexible seating, which is usually appended to one or more larger auditoria within a subsidised theatre building: the Dorfman (previously the Cottelsoe) at the National Theatre, the Other Place across the road from the RSC's Royal Shakespeare and Swan Theatres, the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, the Leeds Playhouse's Courtyard Theatre, the Birmingham Repertory Theatre's Studio, and so on. These studios generally have a remit to house more experimental productions with smaller budgets than their theatres' main houses. This phenomenon is not unique to the UK—the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis has the 200-seater Dowling Studio, for example—but in North America the word 'studio' is more widely used to mean a private space in which actors train and take classes, thanks to the worldwide renown of the Actors' Studio in Manhattan, which was founded in 1947. These two meanings of the word both emerged, however, from the same tradition, which can be traced back to Russia in 1905.

The term 'studio' seems to have been coined by the Russian actor and director Vsevolod Meyerhold to describe the small, experimental theatre which he was invited by Konstantin Stanislavsky to run, in 1905, as a satellite of the Moscow Art Theatre, of which Stanislavsky was co-director. Meyerhold had begun his career as an actor at the Art Theatre under Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and, in its 1898 opening season, had originated the role of the aspiring writer Konstantin Treplev in Stanislavsky's production of

Chekhov's *The Seagull*. That famously realistic production was so instrumental to the establishment of the Art Theatre's reputation that, when the company moved to a permanent home in 1902, an image of a seagull was sewn onto the theatre's front curtain. In the same year, however, Meyerhold left the company, having been dissatisfied with the Art Theatre's work for some time, rejecting, above all, Stanislavsky's autocratic approach to direction, which, he argued, rendered the actors more or less mechanical: 'are we to do *nothing but* act? We also want to *think* while we're acting'.[9] It would have surprised Meyerhold, at that time, to discover that Stanislavsky shared his concerns. He justified his autocratic direction to himself only on the grounds that actors 'lacking in experience and knowledge', require intervention from the director 'both to cover their faults and hand over the main responsibility for our common endeavours elsewhere'.[10] But he did not exclude his own acting from this critique. He described his struggles by analogy with a musician 'who is forced to play on a broken-down, out-of-tune instrument',[11] and was determined to develop the company's artistic capacity, writing in his notebook during 1902 that just as 'the author writes on paper', so 'the actor writes with his body on the stage'.[12] Furthermore, Stanislavsky refused to accept that actors must be 'compelled for ever and ever […] to serve and convey crude reality and nothing more' and sought to develop techniques which—like those of the painter, musician, dancer, and gymnast—would enable actors to discover the means of 'expressing the abstract, the noble, the elevated'.[13] Although Stanislavsky and Meyerhold took very different approaches to experimenting with the possibilities of performance, it is clear that in 1902—just as the Art Theatre was committing itself to the methods and style of its realistic *Seagull*—both of their explorations were leading elsewhere.

Three years later, Stanislavsky had begun to recognise the potentially productive relationship between his dissatisfaction and the 'new ways and techniques' that Meyerhold had begun to develop since leaving the Art Theatre.[14] He offered his former colleague a group of actors and a converted barn in Pushkino for the summer of 1905, followed, in the autumn, by a theatre on Povarskaya Street in Moscow. This was the venture to which Meyerhold gave the title 'studio': 'not a proper theatre, certainly not a school, but […] a laboratory for new ideas'.[15] It would contain elements of both theatre and school in that it would both train its actors and produce plays, but, unlike the theatre and the school, neither of these would constitute its goal. Instead, it aimed to produce 'new ideas', or, as Stanislavsky put it, 'the rejuvenation of dramatic art with new forms and techniques of staging'.[16] In the event, the combination of the coincidence of the October Revolution with the studio's return to Moscow and Stanislavsky's diminishing confidence in the abilities of Meyerhold's actors led him to cancel its work before it was shown to the public. Stanislavsky justified this decision on the grounds that it was too important to be compromised: 'to demonstrate an idea badly', he wrote, 'is to kill it'.[17] After this abrupt cull, however, the idea of the studio seems to have begun to regrow in the back of Stanislavsky's mind with renewed vigour.

After the Art Theatre's 1911/1912 *Hamlet*, conceived by Edward Gordon Craig, Stanislavsky decided that 'the actors of the Art Theatre had mastered some new inner techniques and had used them with notable success in the contemporary repertoire, but we had not found the appropriate ways and means to communicate plays of heroic stature'.[18] As a direct result, Stanislavsky decided to form the 1912 First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre.

Stanislavsky's decision to form this studio had consequences far beyond the sphere of his direct influence. Jonathan Pitches and Stefan Aquilina have demonstrated the truly global reach of the system Stanislavsky first developed comprehensively at the First Studio,[19] complementing the more widely known narrative of its legacy in the USSR and the United States, which was analysed in detail by Sharon Carnicke.[20] The First Studio—rather than the technique it produced—also served as a model for the French director Jacques Copeau, who referred to Stanislavsky as the 'father' of his Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, which was founded the following year.[21] Copeau had begun his career as a critic, but felt increasingly compelled to intervene in a theatre which he saw as lifeless and clichéd. His proposed reforms were founded upon pedagogy: 'nothing will exist', he wrote, 'as long as a school does not exist',[22] and he therefore set out to create a parallel theatre-and-school, where he aimed 'to try to give back brilliance and grandeur to this art' of the theatre,[23] by 'a radical remedy, a purgation', rendering the stage 'naked and neutral'.[24] The resulting *tréteau nu* (bare stage) was flexible (allowing the rotation of productions in a wide variety of genres) and projected beyond the proscenium arch (enabling direct contact between the stage and auditorium). It was a place for the art of the playwright to 'join with' the art of the actor.[25]

In order to develop the latter, prior to the theatre's opening in 1913, the company spent ten weeks at Copeau's country house, training intensively in gymnastics, improvisation, and reading dramatic texts.[26] At this time, Copeau had never acted, so his approach was rather intellectual, and it was left to the actor Charles Dullin to help him to find, in John Rudlin's words, a 'synthesis of the verbal and the physical'.[27] This early work at Le Limon would define key aspects of Copeau's practice. He brought, for instance, the study of texts together with the practice of improvisation, blending a consciousness of form with the ability to be spontaneous. This endeavour required both flexible and expressive bodies and alert and imaginative minds, which could create performances such as Copeau's portrayal of Molière's Scapin, described by the critic Ramon Fernandez both as a 'very lively dance' and 'a re-birth of the ideas of Molière'.[28] Copeau's work also aimed to generate an ensemble of actors who would be capable of creating new forms of performance, or, in his words, of 'a recasting of the means of expression corresponding to the thing which they proposed to express'.[29] To this end, Copeau, along with the actress Suzanne Bing, used the Vieux-Colombier school to experiment further with actor training, incorporating mime and animal exercises to enable 'intellect and poetic

invention' to be 'slipped into purely physical exercise'.[30] Copeau also used the school to experiment with alternative forms of theatre, such as Commedia dell'Arte and Japanese Nō, which was explored—apparently with notable success—in a student production of the play *Kantan*, directed by Bing.[31] These experiments were not intended to imitate or revive lost or foreign forms but to reinvent them and thereby to renew the contemporary theatre. The overall effect of Copeau's remodelling of the Vieux-Colombier stage and the training of its actors was recalled by his nephew and assistant Michel Saint-Denis, who described a symbiotic relationship between the space and performances that were 'constantly animated from within yet magnetized by the audience and the surrounding air […] body and voice translating physically the poetic contents of the play'.[32]

Stanislavsky's experiments also profoundly influenced the English theatrical polymath Harley Granville Barker. Barker visited Moscow in 1913, later recalling that 'it was when I saw the Moscow people interpreting Chekhov that I fully realized what I had been struggling towards and that I saw how much actors could add to a play'.[33] The following year, Barker had a similar revelation on seeing Copeau's *Twelfth Night*, which he announced was better played than by any company in England.[34] When Barker and Stanislavsky met, they devised a scheme for English actors to go and work in Stanislavsky's studio as apprentices, which would begin with Barker 'send[ing] over two pupils', though the outbreak of hostilities in Europe the following year prevented this.[35] Nonetheless, Barker's experience of both Stanislavsky and Copeau's work shaped a theoretical model of practice that he elaborated in his 1922 book *The Exemplary Theatre*, which proposes 'a playhouse company for whom performances will not be the one and only goal […] a theatre as school, part of an institution intended for the study of dramatic art and only incidentally for its exhibition'.[36] Barker was unlike both Stanislavsky and Copeau in that he never established a studio to explore these ideas in practice. In the 1904–7 Barker-Vedrenne seasons at the Court Theatre, he had come close, working with a single company over a series of plays with considerable success. The critic Desmond MacCarthy recalled that the company's acting was of a uniquely high standard:

> At the Court the acting pleased from the first. People began to say that the English could act after all, and that London must be full of intelligent actors, of whom nobody had ever heard. Yet, strange to say, these actors, when they appeared in other plays on other boards, seemed to sink back to normal insignificance.[37]

MacCarthy concluded that 'the Court Theatre has been practically the only theatre where it has been worth the actor's while to play a small part, and where the playwright's intentions have been absolutely respected'.[38] This combined dedication to the arts of playwriting and acting connected Barker's work to Stanislavsky and Copeau's, as did his commitment to rooting his practice in

training. In his *Exemplary Theatre*, Barker wrote that the acting company would 'remain students, fellow-students with their juniors […] but students also in their own occupation of the theatre as playhouse'.[39] Barker believed that this approach was the surest means by which the art of the theatre could be developed: 'the matured actor's best chance of developing his art and observing its progress', he wrote, 'lies less in the performances he gives than in his opportunities for study, and especially for the co-operative study […] involved in the rehearsing of a play'.[40] Such study depended upon collaboration, Barker wrote, because the material of performance is, in itself, collaborative: 'the text of a play is a score awaiting performance, and the performance and its preparation are, almost from the beginning, a work of collaboration'.[41]

Theatre studios were seen, in the first three decades of the twentieth century, as a means of extending theatre artists' understanding of such collaborations and their collective skill in developing them. In spite of their roots in three very different cultures, Stanislavsky, Copeau, and Barker had a great deal in common: their approach to making theatre emphasised the creativity of the actor, the crucial function of collective training for the process of theatre-making, and the importance of experimentation with alternative styles and traditions in order to reinvigorate the contemporary theatre. The implicit politics of their work also intersected because their commitment to collaboration and to a process of continually revising their work through experimentation entailed some willingness to displace their own authority and to make at least theoretical concessions to more egalitarian and democratic approaches than those of their peers. Such commitments were often extremely limited or compromised, but they remained implicit to the idea of the studio, even when they were not borne out in practice, a tension that can be seen throughout the case studies explored in this book.

In spite of the close parallels between their work, Stanislavsky, Copeau, and Barker only seem to have all met once. In December 1922, the Moscow Art Theatre company was performing in Paris, en route to New York. On the night of December 21, Stanislavsky was given a reception at the Vieux-Colombier by Copeau, which was also attended by Barker. Afterwards, over dinner in a nearby restaurant, the three men discussed the possibility of creating an international theatre studio, an idea which received 'unanimous approval'.[42] Stanislavsky and Copeau had already corresponded on this subject, and Stanislavsky had hoped that it 'would unite all the most interesting workers in the world of theatre'.[43] Like Barker and Stanislavsky's planned exchange of student actors a decade earlier, however, this idea for an international studio would become the victim of geopolitics: the Treaty on the Creation of the USSR was signed just over a week after Stanislavsky, Barker, and Copeau met, and the division of the communist East from the capitalist West which would dominate international relations for the next seventy years began.

At a more modest level, however, international studios were formed from the three strands of the experimental theatre-making tradition represented by these

men. In 1912, one of the first of the Moscow Art Theatre's actors to sign up for the First Studio was Michael Chekhov, where he began what he later called 'prying behind the curtain of the Creative Process'.[44] Only six years later, in 1918, Chekhov opened a studio of his own in Moscow, where he taught a version of his teacher's system. By 1924, however, when Chekhov became the director of the Second Moscow Art Theatre (as the First Studio had become), he was already developing approaches of his own: 'I was able to develop my methods of acting and directing and formulate them into a definite technique', he wrote.[45] The ideas that formed the basis of Chekhov's technique at this time proved quickly, however, to be unacceptable to the authorities. Whereas the Soviet government insisted upon the materialist doctrine of socialist realism, Chekhov was exploring the spiritual ideas of Rudolf Steiner and the Anthroposophists.[46] He was therefore identified as part of the General Political Agency's (a forerunner of the KGB) campaign against exponents of religious ideology, received a letter from Narkrompos (the ministry governing education and culture) telling him to stop spreading his ideas, and was threatened with arrest.[47] As a consequence, Chekhov left Russia speedily in 1928 and went into self-imposed exile in Europe. Writing to his former colleagues at the Second Moscow Art Theatre from Germany in 1928, he declared that

> [i]t is impossible for me to stay in the theatre just as an actor who merely plays a number of roles […] Only *the idea of a new theatre in general, a new theatre art* can fascinate me and stimulate my creative work.[48]

Consequently, in 1930 Chekhov was directing again, first creating a production of *Twelfth Night* with the Jewish Habima Theatre[49] and then working on *Hamlet* with a group of Russian emigré actors. By the end of 1930, he was in Paris, where the following year he formed Le Théâtre Tchekoff and an associated school of acting with his friend and colleague Georgette Boner. The Paris initiative collapsed in 1932 due to a lack of funds, and Chekhov travelled to Riga, Latvia, and Kaunas, Lithuania, where he acted, directed, and taught in leading theatres, until a military coup in Latvia in the spring of 1934 forced him to leave. In 1935, Chekhov was playing the part of Khlestakov in *The Inspector General* on Broadway when he was introduced to the then aspiring actress Beatrice Straight, whose mother and stepfather, Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst, had established Dartington Hall in Devon as an experimental centre for agriculture, education, scientific research, and the arts and crafts. At Straight's request, Chekhov was invited to form a studio at Dartington, which opened in 1936.

At almost exactly the same time as Chekhov arrived in Devon, Copeau's nephew, Michel Saint-Denis, moved to London from France. Saint-Denis had worked as his uncle's general secretary at the Vieux-Colombier, rising through a series of responsibilities (box office management, administration, publicity) to become a stage manager and then a rehearsal assistant. He also had his debuts

both as an actor (Curio in a 1922 revival of *Twelfth Night*) and as a director (with a 1923 student production of *Amahl et la lettre du roi* (Amahl and the King's Letter)).[50] It was Copeau's sudden disbanding of the Vieux-Colombier in 1924, however, that gave Saint-Denis his opportunity to establish himself as more than just an assistant. Immediately after closing his theatre and school, Copeau took a group of young actors with him to Burgundy, where he proposed to undertake a 'conscientious examination of the principles of their craft'.[51] They created characters and scenarios from training exercises, and whereas they had—until this point—seen the script as a kind of diagrammatic representation of performance, waiting to be revived by the actors, now scripts were evolved from performances improvised by actors in the studio.[52] This group became known as 'Les Copiaus' ('the little Copeaus' or 'children of Copeau') by the locals and functioned much more as a collective, with Saint-Denis as their artistic director when Copeau was absent (as he frequently was). Eventually, in 1929, Copeau broke the company up, and the ensemble reformed under the leadership of Saint-Denis as La Compagnie des Quinze (the company of fifteen). Les Quinze trained, made theatre, and toured together—finding particular success in London—until 1934, when the departures of some original members of the group and their perennial financial difficulties began to take their toll. Faced with these difficulties, Saint-Denis attempted to capitalise on the past successes of Les Quinze in England by seeking funding there. When he realised that he would not be able to accumulate enough money to maintain the company, but that there was significant interest in London in his work as an individual, he decided to disband Les Quinze and move to England, where he developed plans to open the London Theatre Studio in 1936.

At the same time as Chekhov and Saint-Denis were arriving in England, Joan Littlewood was turning twenty-one and living in Manchester with the performer and writer Ewan MacColl, with whom she had formed Theatre of Action in 1934. The next year, they created Theatre Union, a politically radical company that was deeply indebted to the expressionist aesthetics of Meyerhold's post-revolutionary period and to Stanislavsky's acting technique, both of which Littlewood and MacColl had discovered through reading and then by teaching their techniques to their fellow actors. Later, Littlewood would also observe classes at Rudolf Laban's Art of Movement Studio in Manchester. Therefore, although she could not claim to have had direct involvement in the studio movement as did Saint-Denis or Chekhov, Littlewood was no less formed by it, and was a more avid student of its practices than either Saint-Denis or Chekhov could claim to be.

The studios led by these three directors are the subject of this book, which is deeply indebted to the many academic accounts of their work, too numerous to mention here. This study builds upon its forerunners to create an account not of these artists, but of the organisations they led—further iterations of the international studio tradition that had faltered with the failure of Stanislavsky,

Copeau, and Barker's 1922 plan to bear fruit. The examples I have chosen are not the only ones from this period in England. The Group Theatre, founded in 1932 by Rupert Doone and Robert Medley, was likewise committed to the experimental development, through training, of new theatre forms, but it did not pursue the structural model of the studio in the ways that the organisations led by Saint-Denis, Chekhov, and Littlewood did. Likewise, in the post-war period, Stephen Joseph's Studio Theatre Company has much in common with the studio tradition, but did not thoroughly develop a model of practice that combined training and experimentation. The studio theatres now commonly to be found within the buildings of the subsidised theatre establishment might, in fact, be considered in part the result of what seems to have been Joseph's strategic decision to translate some of the actor-centred, experimental, and democratising practices associated with studios into the architectural form of the theatre-in-the-round. This book also does not offer any consideration of the numerous projects which can be seen to have emerged in the wake of the tradition it explores, such as the RSC's Theatregoround project, which was created in 1966 and combined educational and experimental theatre-making; the Royal Court's Young People's Theatre, also created in 1966 and the forerunner of its Young Writers' Programme; and the National Theatre Studio, which was founded in 1984. *Theatre Studios* has not, in short, been conceived as a comprehensive study of experimental, ensemble theatre-making even in England, where all of its case studies are based, but as a detailed analysis of three parallel examples of a particular kind of organisation that formed part of that wider tradition. It is therefore to the question of the relationships between theatre studios and the broader histories of ensemble theatre-making that I will now turn.

Theatre studios and ensemble theatre-making

The history of theatre studios based in England is offered here not only as an alternative history to that of the gradual emergence, in the UK, of a mainstream, subsidised, and self-consciously artistic theatre in the mid-twentieth century. It is also intended to contribute to wider histories of the theatre ensemble. 'Ensemble', in French, is both an adverb and a noun. It is, therefore, both a way doing something and an entity: a group of people working together. It is, as Duška Radosavljević observes, a term used 'more frequently' in music than theatre, and musical ensembles are often—though not always—leaderless.[53] Musical ensembles are also usually distinguished by playing music written for a group rather than an accompanied soloist—the words 'trio' or 'quartet', for example, denote both the music and the ensemble which plays it. In the theatre, the idea of an ensemble is a phenomenon of what could be seen as the long twentieth century. It began to emerge in the latter part of the nineteenth century and has continued into the twenty-first, albeit principally among artists whose roots remain in the twentieth. Initially, an ensemble

described a group that resisted the entrenched hierarchies that tended to characterise companies led by actor-managers, which were often organised in an ad hoc manner. That is not to say, however, that these early ensembles were democratically structured. In fact the ensemble emerged, paradoxically, at the same time as what we might consider its opposite: the figure of the authoritarian director. Early directors fulfilled principally administrative functions, but gradually assumed artistic responsibilities. Totemic among those who rose to a position of artistic recognition was Ludwig Chronegk (1837–91), who was employed to direct the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen's touring company, which was widely influential, not least in shaping Stanislavsky's early artistic vision. As Michael Booth observes, the Duke 'laid great stress on ensemble', requiring his actors to commit to '[l]engthy rehearsal periods' and to agree to play a wide spectrum of roles, in both size and significance.[54] As a result of these policies, the Duke's company was relatively consistent and skilled, and Chronegk was therefore able to achieve stagings that became internationally renowned for their realistic effect, combining the movement of large crowds with detailed portrayals of individual characters.

In the late nineteenth century, Chronegk's stagings offered an example of the possibilities of an approach to theatre production that emphasised the company as a totality rather than as a background for the performances of leading actors, that troubled conventional hierarchies, that valued the creative process of rehearsal, that invested in the training of artists, and that committed to experimentation rather than pursuing tried and tested formulas. In various combinations, these commitments would all shape the practices of ensembles in the twentieth century, as both Radosavljević and John Britton have shown.[55] In Britton's terse formulation, ensembles were characterised by their attention to: 'Organisational structure. Longevity. Prior training. Common purpose'.[56] These features of ensembles have shifted in significance and interpretation substantially over time, so that it is a problem endemic to their study that, as Kathryn Mederos Syssoyeva puts it, 'it is polyphony, not consensus, that is the norm'.[57] It is, for example, obvious but crucial to observe that leftist groups such as Bertolt Brecht and Helene Weigel's Berliner Ensemble (founded in 1949) or the Living Theatre (founded in the States in 1947 by the actress Judith Malina and the painter and poet Julian Beck) developed a very different approach to the organisational structure of their companies compared to, for example, Stanislavsky. We should also not assume that the fairly close political alignment of these two ensembles led them to adopt similar structures; what David Barnett describes as Brecht's 'strategic withdrawal from openly directing the actors in favour of input from the cast as a whole' did not go nearly so far as the Living Theatre's attempt, in Marianne DeKoven's words, to rid themselves of 'all traditional theatrical structures that establish hierarchies of separated functions and entities: play, playwright, producer, director, actors, crew, performance'.[58] Furthermore, even these accounts cannot necessarily be taken at face value.

Practices are rarely easily filed into stable and singular categories, but shift and blur quickly into paradox and contradiction, terms which recur frequently within academic studies of ensembles.[59]

Scholarly accounts of the history and practice of ensemble theatre have responded to this challenge mainly by embracing it. They have often gathered what Syssoyeva describes as a 'montage of […] different perspectives and experiences',[60] as in hers and Scott Proudfit's collections *A History of Collective Creation*,[61] *Collective Creation in Contemporary Performance*, and *Women, Collective Creation and Devised Performance*.[62] The self-selective principle followed by such studies, which analyse the various practices of companies who define themselves collectively, rather than applying external criteria to their case studies, is also Radosavljević and Britton's approach in *The Contemporary Ensemble* and *Encountering Ensemble* respectively. Radosavljević notes, for example, that her interviewees were selected primarily because of their capacity to speak 'not only on behalf of themselves as individuals, but on behalf of an artistic entity which depends upon the contribution of other—often long-term—collaborators as constituent parts'.[63] This book differs from these wider histories of ensemble theatre in part because the studio is a more clearly defined entity, comprising, as we have seen, commitments to ongoing and collective training, to sustaining a long-term company, and to experimental forms of practice. The three case studies gathered in this book therefore have the benefit of clear comparability: the differences between them are not simply a consequence of differences of emphasis in the terms with which they defined themselves, or of historical or geographical differences. Instead, they represent a spectrum of possibilities within the same model of practice as it was developed in broadly the same historical circumstances.

Studios constitute one strand in what Syssoyeva identifies loosely as the first wave of ensemble theatre in 'the first half of the twentieth century, […] arising from an often contradictory array of impulses: aesthetic, political, and social', and often from 'a directorial/choreographic sensibility' that saw the theatre as a site for works of collective art, requiring collaboration between multiple disciplines.[64] This vision was characteristically modernist as was the fondness of studios for producing artistic manifestoes and their interest in the reinvention of traditional, popular forms of theatre. The frequency with which studios chose to spend time in the countryside, developing their craft, was likewise not so much a rejection of modernity as a commitment to an alternative version of it that was as dependent upon industrialisation as it was resistant to some of what studio members saw as that process's destructive effects. Stanislavsky and Meyerhold's 1905 studio, for example, was, according to Jean Benedetti, 'subsidized almost entirely by Stanislavsky', to the tune of 'over 20,000 roubles', money which was available thanks to Stanislavsky's family's cotton mill.[65] Even when the Art Theatre's projects were not directly supported by their wealthy co-director, they were dependent upon income from his class, whose numbers

were swelling in cities thanks to industrialisation. Both Copeau and Stanislavsky's companies also depended upon income from touring, which was only possible because of international railway and shipping networks that were likewise generated by industrialised economies. The growth of these networks and the industrial cities which they connected also left rural economies increasingly depleted, leaving spaces like the barn at Mamontovka used by Stanislavsky's 1905 studio, and the rural sites in Kanev and Evpatoriya where the First Studio spent its summers, as well as the rural properties acquired for Les Copiaus and the Compagnie des Quinze, and Dartington Hall and Ormesby Hall—that housed two of the studios explored in this book—available for conversion and re-use. Even in its apparent resistance to modernity, then, the impulse to create studios was characteristically and structurally modern.

Because of these complex and paradoxical features of the studio phenomenon, this book adopts a fundamentally materialist approach to analysing its subject. Again, Stanislavsky's studios offer an example. The 'spirit' of the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre was sustained, as Bryan Brown has shown, by two key concepts: the *kruzhok* (circle) and *obshchina* (commune).[66] *Kruzhki* developed in the 1830s as spaces for discursive resistance to Tsarist rule and consisted of 'informal domestic gatherings' of strictly limited groups.[67] These gave rise to *obshchina*, a form of rural social organisation based on shared work, which was the model for the First Studio, according to Stanislavsky's principal collaborator, Leopold Sulerzhitsky, who sought to establish, as he wrote, 'a theatre-*obshchina* with its common governance, with its great tasks of a theatre-temple, […] with common labour, with equal participation in profits'.[68] Evidently this vision underpinned many of the studio's practices, devised—as Brown notes—to 'reinforce and perpetuate' its spiritual goal.[69] A materialist analysis also exposes, however, that the studio was not, in fact, owned and governed in common, but remained under its parent organisation's purview. Studio members were therefore expected to serve two masters: the Art Theatre as their employer, and the studio as their temple. The studio was not, therefore, only a circle, closed to outsiders and dedicated to developing and sustaining bonds between its members. It was also bound to the larger project of the Art Theatre, and to resolving what Stanislavsky saw as a crisis in its production processes: namely, the capacity of its actors to respond to the aesthetic demands of their director's vision. Thus, Sulerzhitsky's attempt to establish the studio as a form of commune was also unavoidably tethered to the external interests of his and the other studio's members' employer.

It does not follow, however, from a materialist analysis of this situation that the First Studio's practices should be considered simply hypocritical or fundamentally compromised by the wider relations of power that encompassed it. A materialist approach does, however, insist that analysing a studio and its practices should not involve their excision from wider social relations and historical and material contexts. Practices of training and rehearsal are inevitably shaped by

societies and their institutions and organisations, and by the material realities and cultural contexts in which their participants exist. This is, if anything, even more significant for examining the work of an ensemble than it is in the case of companies that are openly committed to conventional, hierarchical models of practice, because ensembles are more likely to generate simultaneous but conflicting models of interaction. This book therefore seeks to analyse its case studies as organisations, rather than through the biographical lens offered by the lives of their assumed leaders, or the methodological framing of the techniques they developed. This is the sense in which *Theatre Studios* offers a 'political history'. It is not a history of the politics of the artists whose work is its subject, nor is it—primarily—a political analysis of the performances they produced, though it does sometimes offer politically inflected readings of them. Rather, it seeks, first and foremost, to analyse the political relations of theatre-making processes: the ways in which those processes structured and were structured by power relations that were both intrinsic to the rehearsal room (such as the relationships between directors and actors) and extrinsic to it (most notably—in this study—relations shaped by gender). Theatre-making processes are therefore considered, by this book, in two senses. First, the term refers to the totality of ways in which theatre productions are created—not only rehearsal processes, but those of writing and editing, and design and fabrication, for example. Secondly, it is used to mean the creation of theatre organisations. Consideration of the theatre-making process in its entirety is of particular significance for understanding the studio tradition, which sought a more expansive conception of it than was possible within the constraints of conventional production. As the critic Kenneth Tynan wrote in praise of Joan Littlewood in 1967: '[o]thers write plays, direct them, or act in them; she alone "makes theatre"'.[70] It is an important contention of this book that Littlewood—and other studio practitioners—were able to generate this aesthetic effect because they also 'made theatre' in my second sense: they created theatre organisations and thus re-shaped the social and material relations and cultural norms of theatre production.

The term 'theatre-making' has recently begun to be used in a further sense, as the critic Lyn Gardner noted in a 2010 interview with Duška Radosavljevič about ensemble practice, which she saw particularly in 'devised work and the work of what I would call the theatre-makers rather than actors'.[71] Radosavljevič has elaborated upon Gardner's meaning by emphasising the implicitly collaborative nature of such practices. In 'theatre-making', she argues, 'the creative process seems to be more important than the formal division of labour' and 'the work's relationship with the audience seems to be more important than any previously pursued hierarchies of text and performance', meaning that 'an all-inclusive collaborative process' takes the place of a model of production featuring 'clearly delineated, playwrights, directors, designers, producers and actors'.[72] Radosavljevič identifies Tim Crouch, who worked initially as an actor before beginning to write, direct, and often perform his own work, as an example of a 'theatre-maker' and observes that 'although he is not associated with an

ensemble as such, he […] works with permanent collaborators'.[73] In an interview with the actor Patrick O'Kane, Crouch offered a telling account of the 'clearly delineated' process to which Radosavljevič opposes the practices of 'theatre-making':

> I never felt that I was anything other than a three-dimensional being who was needed to flesh out the stage space. […] The writer and director would […] have their meetings and their discussions—discussions that I was desperate to be involved in, that I had lots of thoughts and ideas about—and at no point did I ever feel my input would have been welcome. […] It was our job to physically manifest the ideas that had been tussled over by the director and the writer. […] That was the creative team and it's interesting how that phraseology is used; the creative team does not include the actor.[74]

Crouch's critique exposes the extent to which the conventional hierarchies of theatre production are founded upon the assumptions of dualism, both of mind and body and—relatedly—text and performance. As, for the dualist, the mind is the arena in which the actions of the body are conceived and the position from which they are directed, so in conventional theatre production the pages of scripts and directors' books are the site of the conception and direction of performances.

Ric Knowles has analysed the translation of this hierarchy into 'temporal terms', characterised by production schedules

> that move from creative and conceptual beginnings involving a *creative* team of producers, directors and designers, through to drawings and embodiments on the part of theatrical *craftspeople*, before moving on to the final stage and level that is understood as technical application by *workers*.[75]

Syssoyeva notes that 'notions of collective creation' in theatre tend to 'emerge in response to some prior mode of theatre-making felt […] to be aesthetically, interpersonally and/or politically constraining, oppressive or in some manner unethical', and this process and the perceived constraints of the model of production analysed by Knowles have served as a common reference point for theatre studios to react against.[76] The history of theatre-making offered by this book is therefore, in a sense, also a pre-history of this more recent use of the term to describe an early twenty-first-century iteration of what Stanislavsky and subsequent studio practitioners called 'the actor as artist'.[77] It does not, however, follow from studios' opposition to conventionally delineated models of production that they were concerned, as Knowles' analysis is, with the 'ideologically coded' nature of this process.[78] We will see that Theatre Workshop certainly was engaged with this political question, but the London Theatre Studio and

the Old Vic Theatre Centre, for example, were much more concerned with developing the technical capacity of 'theatrical craftspeople' than in liberating them from their subservience to the creative and conceptual vision of their superiors. The Chekhov Theatre Studio fell somewhere between these two examples in that it was much more concerned than the latter with the liberation of craftspeople such as actors, whom Chekhov pointedly described as 'creative artists', but sought that liberation within a spiritual and ethical framework that was, for the most part, ideologically conservative.[79]

Whether or not they were concerned with reforming theatre-making at an ideological level, however, all studios sought to trouble the model of what Lev Dodin refers to as 'production line theatre',[80] and did so, at the most fundamental level, by spatialising its temporal sequence. This was, in part, a literal process, in that studios brought the various creative practices of theatre-making under one roof, but it was also figurative and conceptual. Space, as Doreen Massey observes, is the 'dimension of a dynamic, simultaneous multiplicity', and this is the dimension within which studios conceived of their practices.[81] Most obviously, they viewed training as an ongoing commitment, interacting with creative work, rather than a precondition to be completed in advance of professional practice. Studios likewise rejected the assumption that writing should precede production and experimented with adaptation and other creative processes rooted in improvisation like those that would come to be called 'devising', in which performances, scenography and text are produced interactively and—if not always simultaneously—then certainly in overlapping timescales. When working on extant texts, studios typically placed great emphasis on the contemporaneous and interactive nature of their creative processes, rather than marshalling them into an order of priority. Finally, studios' commitment to experimentation required, in theory at least, that they spatialise even the temporal sequence of their own development, by continually subjecting its discoveries to renewed interrogation. The Polish director Jerzy Grotowski discussed the establishment in 1959 of the Teatr Laboratorium in Opole, Poland, in these terms, writing that it was shaped by the 'ideal' of Stanislavsky's 'systematic renewal of the methods of observation, and his dialectical relationship to his own earlier work'.[82] Grotowski's commitment to Stanislavsky, therefore, was not to Stanislavsky's technique, but to 'the technique of creating your own technique', which refuses to consign the past to the past, but keeps it in the room, and subjects it, continually, to the rigours of the present.[83]

Studios, therefore, represent an example of theatre-making's attempt to engage what Massey calls

> the challenge of our constitutive inter-relatedness—and thus our collective implication in the outcomes of that inter-relatedness; the radical contemporaneity of an ongoing multiplicity of others, human and non-human; and the ongoing and ever-specific project of the practices through which that sociability is to be configured.[84]

This book attempts to rise to the subsequent challenge of generating an adequate account of the constitutively inter-related practices that configured the sociabilities of theatre studios by drawing throughout—both explicitly and implicitly—on anthropologist Tim Ingold's related concepts of 'life-lines' and the 'meshworks' they create. For Ingold, life is lived 'along lines',[85] which become knotted and entangled in a 'meshwork', 'where many lines of becoming are drawn tightly together'.[86] Studios are conceived here, accordingly, as entanglements between human and non-human existences—parts which are not 'elementary components' but 'movements', which produce the entanglement by which a studio is —always only temporarily—bound together.[87] Thus, Ingold's model provides us with spatial conception of time, in which a studio appears like a basket or rope woven from the life-lines of its members. When viewed at a distance, the studio will therefore appear as an entity, but when considered in detail, it will reveal itself to be an occurrence, manifested by the interweaving of its relational processes.

Remnants, practices, models: the organisation of this book

This book is divided into three sections, each dedicated to a case study from the studio tradition in England between 1935 and 1965. The first section focuses on the London Theatre Studio (1936–9) and the Old Vic Theatre Centre (1947–52), both led by Michel Saint-Denis and George Devine. The second explores the Chekhov Theatre Studio at Dartington Hall (1936–8), led by Michael Chekhov, which then transferred to Ridgefield, Connecticut, and travelled within the United States until its closure in 1942. The final section concentrates on Theatre Workshop, led by Joan Littlewood, Ewan MacColl, and Gerry Raffles, which was founded in 1945 and gradually dissipated across the 1960s. The focus of this study, then, is from 1935—when Saint-Denis and Chekhov both arrived in the UK—to 1965—when Peter Hall dismissed his actors' proposal to re-shape the RSC into a studio. At this time, the practices associated with studios were taken up variously by the new theatre establishment, the growing drama school sector, and the 'fringe' and 'alternative' theatre companies that began to emerge, particularly after 1968.[88] The case studies chosen span the full period of theatre studios' prominence in the UK, and include their most influential incarnations for theatre-making in Britain: the studios led by Michel Saint-Denis and Joan Littlewood. Both Saint-Denis and Littlewood's work has been well documented in memoirs and interviews with their collaborators, in archival materials, and in scholarship, offering rich scope for its re-evaluation. Chekhov's work is now best known within the discipline of actor training, where it has been extensively explored. By contrast, his brief period of residence in the UK means that he is rarely considered significant in the context of British theatre history. While that position is certainly justified, Chekhov's work is extremely significant for this study because of the unique level of insight we have into the daily practices of