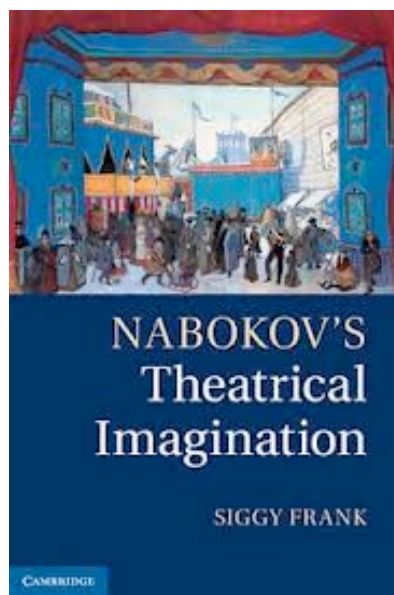


**Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination**, by Siggy Frank. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012; ISBN 9781107015456, x+217 pp. Bibliography. Index.



The author commences her so far most elaborate exploration of Vladimir Nabokov's theatrically inclined work with his all too familiar denouncement, 'by nature I am no dramatist' (p. 1). This stance is presented, however, not in order to agree with the acclaimed as well as often deprecated Russian novelist, playwright and theoretician, but in order to assertively reveal quite the opposite.

The well-researched and successful argument chapter by chapter proves wrong the critics of Nabokov's attempts to conceive a popular drama – often seen as failed. In addition to that, his innate theatricality is revealed to permeate his novels, too. Frank employs a simple structure by splitting her argument into two consecutive parts, the second, main, part in effect promising to discuss the issues that arise in the first. The first two chapters, 'Trying Theatre: Nabokov's Playwriting' and 'Theatre on Trial: Nabokov's Dramaturgy', focus on the background of Nabokov's circumstances as a Russian émigré in Germany and France. While this disposition at times appears to be forced by Frank onto just about every aspect of the writer's literary tendencies, it progressively becomes apparent that Nabokov indeed never stopped sourcing the effects of being part of an émigré community for his novels and plays; his recurrent manipulation of different realities and illusions is characteristic of the fragmented nature of émigré freedom. In discussing the culture clash that the writer experienced while in England, Frank underlines Nabokov's sudden and natural need to adjust

his own *role* in the following summing up of the statements featured in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*:

[Nabokov] thought of his initial joining of [Cambridge] college life with its many unwritten rules and dress codes as 'indulging in some weird theatricals'. The difficulties he experienced with becoming part of this 'mild masquerade' of Englishness sharpened his sense of himself as Russian. He set out 'trying to become a Russian writer' (p. 22).

In the first chapter, Frank successfully establishes Nabokov's binary links with English and Russian literary traditions, of which several names (such as Gogol, Chekhov and Shakespeare) reappear consistently and relevantly throughout the book. At the same time, Nabokov's dire financial situation is revealed to be the very reason he took up writing plays (a medium which, Frank explains, due to the possibilities of royalties from staging provided the novelist with a chance to earn money). Frank is clear on the fact that Nabokov intended for his plays to be staged for the émigré community. She explains the techniques and subject matters in Nabokov's dramas, such as the political underscore in *The Man from the USSR*, as a way to reach a specific audience, therefore explaining the reason why his plays 'seem to lack the transnational appeal of his other works' (p. 46).

Nabokov's relationship with theatre becomes more problematic in the next chapter, in which Frank reveals in detail to what extent the conflicted playwright not only saw playwriting primarily as a way to make money, given a limited audience, but also treated theatre in a 'hierarchical' way, as inferior to the written text:

The world is a drama text, life is one of its possible performances, an idea which is in slight variation present in Nabokov's thinking from the very beginning: 'We are translators of God's creation, his little plagiarists and imitators, we dress up what we wrote, as a charmed commentator sometimes gives an extra grace to a line of genius' (from Nabokov's letter to his wife Vera; p. 56).

Again, Frank explains Nabokov's negative view towards the fleeting nature of a theatrical performance, and the writer's overall strict autocratic authorial position, as a sign of Nabokov's insecurities. Those stem from émigré life, where the loss of one's culture and

language looms. This important aspect of Nabokov's creativity prepares the reader for the discussion of two themes, theatre as disillusionment and theatre as a dream that, according to Frank, 'pervade' his plays. In the third chapter, 'Thresholds and Transgressions', where the plays *The Man from the USSR*, *The Event* and the novel *Invitation to a Beheading* are discussed, Frank shows both her intention and ability to go beyond the obvious genre and subject associations, and reveal Nabokov's truly theatrical method. Here the concentration lies on the 'fictionality of [Nabokov's] worlds in explicitly theatrical contexts', where praise in particular goes to the illustration of his empowering theatricality in the latter novel:

The reader's participation becomes almost palpably real in the turning of the pages towards Cincinnatus's execution. Through the shattering of the illusion, theatre is defined negatively against something which it is not. By drawing attention to the fact that the illusion in theatre is never perfect, that another reality is always visible through the chinks in the (fourth) wall, Nabokov focuses on one of the essential characteristics of theatre (p. 99).

It is in these conclusive remarks that the main problem of theatre as a medium, challenged by Nabokov's theatrical methods, is outlined. At the same time, however, Frank manages to illustrate how the author so much in conflict with the imperfect nature of theatrical reality (as opposed to a superior, limitless imagination-based action of reading a text) has himself been toying with the inner realities of his prose novels, underlining precisely the effect of shattered realities on Nabokov's protagonists and his readers' understanding of his books. In the following chapter, 'Theatre Dreams', Frank continues to explore how Nabokov's other two plays, *The Tragedy of Mr Morn* and *The Waltz Invention*, again in relation to *Invitation to a Beheading*, are structured around the relationship between opposing realities, in effect producing 'tension between different perceptions and depictions of the world' (p. 112). Advancing a detailed examination of Nabokov's methods even further, this chapter reveals his simple and honest homages to the greats of the drama, Shakespeare and Chekhov. Their structural and thematic influences on the writer are discussed under the appropriate heading of 'Shakespeare's Ghost', in the last part of the book.

To conclude, certainly not all the questions, posited in the introductory chapters, are answered by the final summing up, especially on the subject of the conflicting views towards

theatre Nabokov maintains in his theories and in his plays. Nevertheless, Frank elaborately discusses Nabokov's personal and artistic circumstances and incisively explains just how highly theatrical his methods are. While the book successfully presents the stance of other essays and articles on Nabokov's theatricality, Frank's own thorough research and ideas make *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination* the most complete work on the subject to date.

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