Food for Craft
5 new books break the stage arts down into doable steps
BY WENDY SMITH

DIRECTING PLAYS, DIRECTING PEOPLE: A COLLABORATIVE ART
By Mary B. Robinson, foreword by Cynthia Nixon.
Smith and Kraus, Hanover, NH, 2013. 188 pp., $17.95 paper.

IN REHEARSAL: IN THE WORLD, IN THE ROOM, AND ON YOUR OWN
266 pp., $31.95 paper.

PAGE TO STAGE: THE CRAFT OF ADAPTATION
By Vincent Murphy. University of Michigan Press,
Ann Arbor, MI, 2013. 192 pp., $28.95 paper.

SHAKESPEARE FOR AMERICAN ACTORS AND DIRECTORS
By Aaron Frankel. Limelight Editions, Montclair, NJ,

TEACHING THE ACTOR CRAFT
By Jon Jory. Smith and Kraus, Hanover, NH, 2013. 246 pp., $19.95 paper.

Two fundamental facts are reaffirmed in an array of recent books that deal with the theatrical crafts of directing, adaptation and acting. The first of these verities is that the approach systematized more than a century ago by Stanislavsky remains the bedrock in which virtually all American theatre artists ground their work. The second (one so basic that it hardly requires stating) is that theatre is by its nature essentially collaborative, dependent in its very structure on teamwork and interaction.

Stanislavsky’s enduring influence can be tracked by the usage of terms like “given circumstances” and “beats,” which appear regularly in all five books under consideration here—and not just in the three actor-centered titles. Mary Robinson confides in Directing Plays, Directing People that she completes her early directorial preparation by condensing her thoughts on the play into a one-sentence “spine”—a Stanislavsky concept introduced into American theatre by Harold Clurman—and that she considers such words as needs, objectives, intentions and actions to be “the language of rehearsal.” In Page to Stage, Vincent Murphy includes Stanislavsky’s notions of through-lines and objectives among his guiding principles for developing a script from a literary source. You don’t need to consult your copy of An Actor Prepares in advance of reading these books—the terminology is clear in context—but the authors all assume a basic familiarity and agreement with Stanislavsky’s ideas about how to bring a play to life in performance.

As for theatre’s collaborative essence, that elemental theme is underscored by Robinson and In Rehearsal’s Gary Sloan in the way their texts are organized, and both authors reinforce the point by quoting liberally from interviews with other theatre professionals to supplement their own insights. Sloan comes off as ingeniously charming as he consults with costume, set and lighting designers to get their answers to the question, “How is it any of [the actor’s] business what the designers do?” Robinson’s dissection of the production process from the director’s point of view is enhanced by her inclusion of multiple perspectives, as when she finds that many actors, rather than viewing tech rehearsals as a nightmare to be endured, actually “relish the chance to be left alone for a while” while she works with the designers and stage crew.

Murphy offers a wonderfully rich example in Page to Stage of collaboration in action in an account of three productions of Enough, his adaptation of a Samuel Beckett short story. The play evolved from a one-woman show to a three-actor piece, then back to a solo piece, over the course of 12 years, as it was shaped by the contributions of designers, construction crews and actors at theatre companies in Boston, Atlanta and the Netherlands.

Even the two books focused narrowly on acting technique stress interaction and exchange, Aaron Frankel reminds us in Shakespeare for American Actors and Directors that soliloquies are “secrets shared” with the audience, advising actors to “speak directly to these alter egos, these counterparts.” Jon Jory emphasizes in Teaching the Actor Craft that the teacher’s job is not to hand down pronouncements from on high, but to serve actors as a coach, guiding them to make choices and helping them make those choices clear.
JORY, THE VETERAN DIRECTOR/producer/playwright currently working as a professor of acting at Santa Fe University of Art and Design, aims his nuts-and-bolts training manual at his fellow teachers, though acting students can profitably read it on their own. Teaching the Actor Craft is unabashedly devoted to mechanical skills, yet throughout the book Jory reiterates with Stanislavskian firmness that “technique must be accompanied by a rich, functioning inner life.” Exercises in the form of short monologues and dialogues written by Jory (and divided into 50 categories) provide opportunities to acquire and develop such techniques as physicalizing transitions, changing focus points, employing intentional and intuitive gestures, overlapping and intersecting lines, handling props and varying vocal rhythms.

Jory doesn’t entirely make clear the distinction between, say, “ancillary action” and “behavior,” which both involve performing specific physical tasks while delivering lines, and his investigation into the use of pauses is scattered. Repetition doesn’t bother Jory, though—he believes that repeating exercises is essential to give actors the secure technical foundation they need to fully express their imaginations and the playwright’s intentions.

Frankel, another longtime teacher, draws on his 30 years leading HB Studio’s Shakespeare workshop to demystify the Bard for intimidated Americans. Of course you can do this is the message conveyed by his brisk, conversational tone, maintained even when he’s parsing the intricacies of iambic pentameter. Four short introductory chapters lay out some very basic concepts. Language as action is Frankel’s guiding principle, key words and units of thought make the speeches’ meaning specific; varying rhythms chart a character’s intrinsic nature and changing moods. He also takes a (Michael) Chekhovian look at the psychological gesture, “the defining piece of physical expressiveness that governs all the behavior of a role” (embracing for Juliet; conducting for Prospero), and, although he doesn’t call them “spines,” offers one- or two-word summaries of various roles’ essences (Viola is marooned; Caliban is outcast).

The remainder of Shakespeare for American Actors and Directors, playfully subtitled “How Apply You This?” (Coriolanus, I, i), contains 16 “model scenes,” accompanied by Frankel’s no-nonsense exegeses—and his selections, favoring male-female exchanges, remind us how sexy Shakespeare can be. The author’s love for the Bard warms every page of this charming crash course for beginners.

In Rehearsal leads actors through the multifaceted process of crafting a role for performance. As Sloan defines it in his subtitle, that process takes place “in the world, in the room, and on your own”—in other words, everywhere. Sloan wants actors to become more active collaborators. Do your homework, he urges—read the author’s other plays, research the historical period or contemporary setting. Don’t “follow” direction: take it and use it; accept it if you can, and respectfully disagree if you must. In the perennial memorization debate, he favors learning your lines in advance, at minimum getting off book as quickly as possible. “Yes, spontaneity can be the lifeblood of truthful actions,” he writes, but “it’s better to prepare for rehearsal and then stay open to what could happen.”

In addition to the interviews with designers mentioned above, Sloan also talks with playwrights, dramaturgs, directors and fellow actors to explore how to interact most fruitfully with colleagues during rehearsal. (Short answer: Be polite, be willing to try anything and couch all discussions in terms of the character’s needs, not yours.) Sloan covers the particular requirements of film and television, where “rehearsal” is often limited to quickly setting the blocking. He illustrates his points with anecdotes (a few quite funny) from his own 30-year career, but this is at heart an earnest exhortation to actors to take their work seriously and honor the “profound responsibility [that comes] when you accept a role in a production.”

THE SEEDBED OF ANY PRODUCTION is the script, and crafting plays from other genres is a tradition as old as the Greek
Wendy Smith is a frequent contributor to this magazine.

The hard work involved in making the piece evident in all these books as they break down acting, writing, and directing into the component parts that need to be mastered before they're assembled into a finished script. Colleagues look to these books as they break down the actors' jobs, and they provide a guide for anyone who would like to become a successful director. The book also includes some practical advice on how to work with actors, how to schedule rehearsals, and how to deal with problems that may arise during the production. While the book is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to directing, it does provide some useful tips and techniques that may be helpful for those who are interested in pursuing a career in directing.