

MEYERHOLD AT WORK

**EDITED AND
TRANSLATED BY
PAUL SCHMIDT**



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Introduction

It is the evening of December 17, 1898, the opening night of Chekhov's play *The Sea Gull* at the Moscow Art Theater. On stage, in the roles of the two opposed playwrights Treplyov and Trigorin, are Vsevolod Meyerhold and Konstantin Stanislavsky. "What we need is a new kind of theater," says the aspiring Treplyov/Meyerhold. "We need new forms. . . ." And to Nina, when she complains that his play "has no living people in it," he replies: "Why should there be? I don't want to show life as it is, or the way it should be, but the way it is in dreams." Nina rejects Treplyov/Meyerhold and becomes the lover of Trigorin/Staniislavsky, who tells her: "I'd like to be in your shoes just for an hour, to see through your eyes and find out what you're thinking and what kind of person you are."

Like Nina, the October Revolution rejected Treplyov/Meyerhold and chose Trigorin/Staniislavsky. It abandoned the openly revolutionary vision of "the way life is in dreams" and chose the prurient, petty desire, "to be in your shoes just for an hour, to see through your eyes and find out what you're thinking. . . ." The reasons for that choice are of less interest than the fact that a choice had indeed to be made; Chekhov had understood that as clearly as he understood most things. And the casting of his play for that evening seems an act of prophecy, for the choice must still be made today: in distinctions between the work of Stanislavsky and the work of Meyerhold is the definition of a modern theater to be found.

Stanislavsky's influence has been, and remains to this day, powerful, inside Russia as well as out. Yet the triumph of the Moscow Art Theater and the Stanislavsky system was a triumph of culmination, not of innovation. It marked the end of the nineteenth century, not the beginning of the twentieth. It was Meyer-

hold who brought theater into the twentieth century, yet he and his theater were obliterated, and he is still strange to us here in the West. How then can we distinguish Meyerhold's "new forms"?

We look in vain for some substantive text that will outline his method for us; he left none. Meyerhold wrote little. He did publish in 1912 a volume of essays in which he sketched out his earliest notions of theater and described some of his productions. But writing seemed to constrain him, and he did it less and less. What he did write was brief and polemical; he never attempted to turn his ideas into doctrine. He could not. His work was theater, and his clearest definition of that work leaves no room for writing. "The production of a play," he said, "is a conceptual task, which I accomplish physically using all the means that theater affords." To distinguish the theater of Meyerhold from the theater of Stanislavsky, then, we must seek something apart from language.

Let us return again to the evening of December 17, 1898, to the Moscow Art Theater, and to Stanislavsky and Meyerhold onstage. Both men were superb actors, but both men eventually left the stage in order to seek something beyond the role. Their vision of theater encompassed more than the introspective concerns of playing a part.

The actor is central to the theatrical enterprise. And yet the actor is always limited by his role and by the self-absorption he needs to perform it; he can never be anything but Hamlet or Boris Godunov. If we go merely to see him as Hamlet or Boris Godunov, we can never see the play *Hamlet* or the play *Boris Godunov*. The director alone can perform the play for us. And in order for the director to do so he must first break through the willfulness of most actors, their overwhelming consciousness of self, their unawareness of their surroundings. He must teach them to hear not just their internal rhythm, but the rhythm of the whole.

All of Meyerhold's training devices, his "science" of biomechanics, were attempts to teach actors an externally controllable technique—but one that came, nevertheless, spontaneously and organically from the actor's gestalt.

Like Stanislavsky, Meyerhold knew that if we perceive in the actor's performance a split between mind and body, if we perceive the process of control of one over the other, we are distracted from the organic process of the performance as a whole. And yet he knew he could not as a director construct an elaborate whole, of which the actor was only one component, even though *primus*

inter pares, until he could rely with absolute assurance on the actor's sense of the whole.

The Stanislavskian actor is always idiosyncratic, autochthonous; Stanislavsky's drive was toward improvisation: acting "as if": as if it were spontaneous. Hence his acting is illusionary, subjective, conventional in the sense of stereotypical (since how else would we recognize it?). It is a concept of acting that rests ultimately on individual genius and denies the idea of any except supplementary training.

Hence any performance with such actors works best when the director simply provides a frame within which they are left to do what they do. The focus of attention in such productions is on the alchemical reaction between actor and actor. From this point of view we see that Stanislavsky was not a director, but a trainer of actors; his directorial impulse dissipated in the attempt to coordinate the individualities of his actors. Thus he was able to perceive the text only rudimentarily, only as an opportunity for the display of authentic emotion.

Meyerhold wanted his actors to express emotion, but he needed them also to fit into a larger pattern. He tried to systematize acting so it could be taught to all. His system of biomechanics was an elaboration of physical exercises which emphasized the actor's outward visualization of himself. It used the terms *risunok* (sketch, pose, outline) and *samozerkalenie* (self-mirroring) to force the actor's visual awareness of himself.

Meyerhold always tried to help his actors find the right pose, the right gesture or business, to figure forth their interior state as economically as possible. Through biomechanical exercises they were able to find the largest, most grandiose poses and gestures and then scale them down to precise measure. Meyerhold's system stressed the actor's dependence on the actors he played with; it changed him, that is, from a self-serving improviser to one who saw himself as a director would see him—as part of the whole.

Meyerhold's theater concentrated on the *act* of acting, not on acting as representing some kind of reality. Meyerhold's conception of acting totally denies the idea of "character," with its nineteenth-century overtones of bourgeois individualism: of private morality and personal motivation. And above all it attacked the Freudian notion of sexual individuality as a motivation for action. Freud's strange Viennese monodrama, the isolated individual talking in an endless attempt to reveal his intimate past to an invisible and unreacting audience—this was the image of the

actor that Stanislavsky and his followers, willy-nilly, had installed at the heart of his theater. It is this image of the actor more than any other that has dominated the western stage for the last forty years. And it was this image that Meyerhold's theater was to deny above all else.

In Meyerhold's theater darkness is destroyed by light, the hidden chair of the analyst-observer-audience is discovered, made present; a passive, purely aural process is replaced by an active, physical transaction between two equal entities who occupy the same space. The idea of audience, those who hear, is replaced by the idea of spectators, those who see. The primacy of the actor as a speaker of words is denied for the sake of a text written in more than words. And the creation of this text is the task of the director.

Meyerhold was the first director to insist on the primacy of the director's role, indeed the first to conceive it as a role, something to be played out, performed—but a creative force as well, equal to the role of the playwright in shaping the theatrical experience, an experience considered different from the playtext, and not achieved merely by actors. Without the director as demiurge, henceforth, nothing theatrical would obtain. The role of the director is here perceived as an extension of the Romantic notion of the Interpreter, shifted away from the actor and the idea of character, from the mimetic impulse merely, to more complicated impulses.

Under Meyerhold's hand the whole of a performance became a crystallization of meaning. And the code of that meaning, beyond the language of the text, was *movement*—*gesture* and the *reaction* that gesture ineluctably calls forth. Only theater, by combining language with patterns of gesture and reaction, can encompass a future, and thus link the notion of probability to human behavior. It is in this sense that theater is always revolutionary. It points toward a future without having to present that future; rather, it shows us the virtualities contained within the present, and asks for response. Theater illuminates gesture and its source—the individual who makes it and the class it identifies: the class to which the gesture-maker belongs by virtue of having made the gesture. It traces the consequences of that gesture: it shows us Oedipus, blinded and setting out into exile; Hamlet, dying and yielding place to Fortinbras; Boris Godunov, dying and yielding place to the Pretender Dimitry.

The creative role of the director, then, as organizer of more

than the actor's mimetic impulse, of more complicated impulses deriving from the already created playtext, is precisely to organize gesture into significant patterns. And in their conception of gesture Stanislavsky and Meyerhold differed greatly.

Stanislavsky conceived of gesture as movement that was neither presented nor arranged but that signified only accidentally, in reference to what he called "real life." Stanislavskian gesture is intended always to seem like movement observed unawares, and thus it implicitly reduces the spectator to an eye at a keyhole. Such gesture tends toward pornography, because it denies the possibility of the spectator's reaction and involvement.

Meyerhold structured gesture to present a possibility, a virtuality, an idea. This is a social act. It involves two gestures; the primary one is the gesture of presentation: the act which indicates and defines the gesture as gesture, and which demands from the spectator the gesture of response.

Stanislavsky was interested in gesture only as it served to reveal character. But the power of gesture, precisely, is that it can reveal human significance apart from individual personality. When an actor performs, as Meyerhold knew, only his gesture is real, not his "character." His gesture, and the things that surround him onstage. When these realities are arranged in patterns, carefully integrated with the language of the playtext, complex signification becomes possible. The uniqueness of Meyerhold's work resides in his investigations of these possibilities.

We observe in Meyerhold's work a constant breaking of the playtext into episodes which provided the framework for the staging, a constant use of "retard" and "reject" to slow the action, and a constant striving toward moments when the action onstage slows, freezes, stands still—a striving toward tableaux. Gesture was structured and presented in space, but in a moment removed from time. It seems to me that these are Meyerhold's attempts to make visible the *significant objectivity* of the world. Like a photographer, he attempted to make a past out of a present moment—but in that action, unlike a photographer, he also pointed the way toward a future. In Meyerhold's tableaux, in his episodes, temporality and causality in their traditional dramatic sense were removed: the time of the action as well as the time of the performance were both dissolved, the idea that *x* has caused *y* was suspended for a moment, and a situation (which may well have been contrived out of dramatic causality) was held up for observation and comment before the spectator. The line of

causality was thereby removed from the dramatic frame and laid out along another axis—the line between stage and spectator. The tableau says to the spectator, in effect: “Consider this well: your own behavior is involved in this, may well be responsible for this. Now that you have seen this, what will you do in the future?”

Further, did not Meyerhold in his manipulation of time and space seek what Rimbaud has named as the goal of poetry, a moment of “essential desire and satisfaction”? His tableaux attempted to impose on the rigorous linear progression and causality of dramatic action the ambiguities of metaphor; they attempted to destroy “drama” and to substitute something richer and more flexible. His theater was polyphonic: complex rather than simple; it was polysemic: ambiguous rather than clear. It resembled a novel, in that plot and story became inseparable from staging; one could not distinguish plot from *mise en scène*.

The playtext on the page relies on linear causality; the director’s task, as Meyerhold conceived it, is to reveal within the playtext a structural necessity. And since this directorial act is also a critical act, it can involve considerations not explicit in the playtext but which belong to the matrix which formed it, which derive from consideration of it as a political, economic, and ideological phenomenon. As a historical phenomenon, in other words.

In this modern conception of theater there is more to the playtext than actors or designers alone could convey. The text had to be revealed; it did not correspond to reality, it no longer held a mirror up to nature. In Mayakovsky’s phrase, theater was “not a mirror but a magnifying glass.” Meyerhold’s was a modernist view of the complexity of the text, its need for elucidation. Meyerhold first of all directors operated on the playtext in the modern sense: he wrote the text anew. In Barthes’ phrase, he “crossed its writing with a new inscription.” And in this he reveals to us the only way in which a playtext can be “read” in the complex sense of the word *read* which Barthes intended: in the juxtaposition of text with historical time. Its performance (“reading”) at any given moment is the measure of the time between its original writing and this new inscription. The author fixes the text in his own time, the director in his staging inscribes it in his, and in the inscription reveals history to us. It is in this sense that Meyerhold was a Marxist director: he knew that certain texts belonged to a past, and had to be reconstructed in a present with a sense of their implications for the future. Thus his responsibility to the

text comprised his understanding of the time when it was first written, of the time in which he as director was to rewrite it, and of his vision of the future, which would determine the direction of his rewriting.

Meyerhold offers us theater as spectacle: a conception worked out in opposition to Stanislavsky's untenable notion of realism in theater, of "real life" upon the stage. To the idea of an art existing by itself and for itself, where the viewer is idealized and the author is absent, Meyerhold opposes an art whose very existence is the transaction between viewer and author. In his theater the viewer is made visible, and made to confront the author as director/inscriber, as presenter/commentator, as "author of the spectacle," as Meyerhold used to sign his productions. Meyerhold offers us a theater of the world, one that forces us to look at the world and our existence in it.

He offers us, in others words, a vision of community. And the work of theater—the arrangement of images in spectacles, where we spectators, as a group, can see ourselves as a group and can understand that the performance touches our behavior—is one of the truest expressions of community today, in that it attempts to rescue us from solitary slavery to the power of the written word, to the authority of the printed book. The struggle between authority and community is at the heart of the theatrical experience, for it is the struggle between the playtext and its staging.

To believe in books is to believe that things can last; to believe in theater is to know better. To contemplate performance is to understand with Heraclitus that all things flow and change, and no authority can stem that flow. All performance vanishes; only the idea of performance persists, in the memory and imagination of the community within which the performance took place—the community constituted, in fact, by the very performance.

It is in the memory of a community, then, that we must look for Meyerhold. We must seek his ideas in the realm in which he created them—beyond text, in imagination and in memory. We must find out how people remembered him, how he impressed them, how he left his mark. What did the people who knew him see? How much of him did they see? How close were they; how clear are the images in their memories? How well did they know him?

He wasn't easy to know. He dreamed a vision of community, but understood only authority. He talked of equality, but com-

peted hierarchically, up or down, with his teacher Stanislavsky or his pupil Eisenstein. He imagined the Revolution, acted at it, but could not live it out. He delighted in the forms of disorder, but only insofar as they were raw material upon which he could impose his own sense of order. Like most directors, he was paternalistic, authoritarian.

Thus he was also lonely, like all lonely people he was difficult, and like lonely people of intelligence he surrounded himself with crowds, worked always in full view, in public. Yet those who surrounded him were followers, subordinates; they stood in the profoundly dependent position of actors before a director. He could not abide the only contemporary equal he had in his own world, Alexander Tairov, a director of equal imagination though infinitely less intelligence and vision.

Who then are the people who knew him and remembered him? Actors, directors, musicians, playwrights, poets—people who worked with him, who watched him work. People whose written texts, in fact, were largely dominated by the memory of Meyerhold and by the power of his image in their minds, images of working with him in the community of theater.

It is within that community that we must seek Meyerhold. And we confront him there cleanly, as we can never confront Stanislavsky, Brecht, or Artaud, because we have no canonical text to set between ourselves and him. We confront him in his work. We cannot monumentalize him on the shelf; he escapes our grasp, moving on ahead of us as he did in life, an image that beckons us to follow—sometimes as a pillar of cloud, sometimes as a pillar of fire.

Spectacles, we used to call the eyeglasses we interpose between our vision and the page, to make the page yield up its vision to our own. Let the pages that follow rather dissolve beneath the images of Meyerhold and of his spectacles, his theater, and so yield them up to us.

This book is intended to provide a view of Meyerhold at work on a few selected productions, as he was observed and remembered by those who worked with him, and to trace some patterns in the major events of his artistic life. I have tried to select and arrange the material so that Meyerhold's most important theoretical notions are clear, and so that something like a tone of voice can be heard. The focus of these materials is specifically Meyerhold's work onstage and the complicated personal relationships that were a constant part of that work, and not primarily

the cultural and artistic context in which the work was produced. The majority of the texts included here do, in point of fact, situate the work historically, and for me one of the pleasures of reading these texts has been to piece together, from the random bits of information they contain, some of the power and passion of artistic creation during the Soviet twenties and early thirties. But my particular concern has been to find substantial texts by people associated with Meyerhold in the daily work of theater, texts in which the stuff of that work, the actual techniques of acting and staging, are discussed and made clear.

For this reason the book is unavoidably weighted in favor of later productions, for which more extensive material is available. Even so I have been highly selective, and the focus here is specifically on three productions: Crommelynck's *Magnanimous Cuckold* (1921), the unrealized production of Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* (1936), and Dumas fils' *Camille* (1934). In texts concerning these productions, I feel, we have a clear picture of Meyerhold at work, passionate and intense, with all the power of his experience behind him. For it is Meyerhold at work that we want. This book is meant as a source book for actors, directors, and designers; it was compiled with the needs of contemporary theater people in mind. They have studied long enough with Stanislavsky and Brecht.

I begin with a short biography of Meyerhold's life and career, with the dates of his major productions, and end with a glossary of the important Russian names in the text, including brief biographical details. The reader unfamiliar with the history of Russian theater would do well to refer to the glossary as these names turn up in the text.

Russian sources are given in scholarly transliteration following each separate text; newspaper articles are indicated in the text heading. Russian names in the text are given in more familiar, traditional form. All letters in this book are from V. E. Meyerhold: *Perepiska* (Moscow, 1976) and are indexed there by date.

Of recent books on Meyerhold available in English I recommend *Meyerhold on Theater* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1969) and *The Theater of Meyerhold* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1979), both by Edward Braun, and *Meyerhold: The Art of Conscious Theater* by Marjorie L. Hoover (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974). These volumes are serious presentations and contain valuable material; I hope the present book will complement them. Hoover's book includes a complete list of Meyerhold's productions. More detailed information on selected pro-

ductions can be found in my article "A Director Works with a Playwright: Meyerhold and Mayakovsky," *Educational Theater Journal*, vol. 29, no. 2, May 1977, pp. 214–220; and Nick Worrall, "Meyerhold Directs Gogol's 'Government Inspector'," *Theater Quarterly*, vol. II, no. 7, July–September 1972, pp. 75–95, and "Meyerhold's 'The Magnificent Cuckold'," *The Drama Review*, vol. 17, no. 1 (T-57), March 1973, pp. 14–34.

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A Brief Chronology of Meyerhold's Life and Major Productions

Karl Theodore Kasimir Meyerhold was born in 1874 in Penza, southeast of Moscow. His parents were Lutherans and German citizens. When he was twenty-one he changed his name to Vsevolod, adopted Russian citizenship, and converted to Orthodoxy. A year later he married Olga Mikhailovna Munt.

Also in 1896, Meyerhold left his first-year studies at the Law School of Moscow University and joined the acting classes taught by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko at the Moscow Philharmonia. He graduated in 1898, having won first prize for best actor, and joined the Moscow Art Theater, the new company that Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky had just founded.

At the Art Theater Meyerhold created the roles of Treplov in Chekhov's *Sea Gull* and Tusenbach in *Three Sisters*. Disagreements with Stanislavsky occurred. Meyerhold left the Art Theater and for two years directed his own company in the provincial cities of Kherson and Tiflis.

In 1904 Stanislavsky invited Meyerhold to direct his new experimental Theater-Studio. Meyerhold staged Maeterlinck's *Death of Tintagiles* and Hauptmann's *Schluck und Jau*. Stanislavsky was dissatisfied with the work, and neither production ever opened. Meyerhold returned to his provincial company.

In 1906 actress Vera Kommissarzhevskaya invited him to direct her new company in St. Petersburg. He staged significant productions of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, Maeterlinck's *Sister Beatrice*, and Alexander Blok's *Balaganchik*. When disagreements with Kommissarzhevskaya arose, Meyerhold resigned as director.

In 1908, Meyerhold was invited to direct at the Imperial Theaters in St. Petersburg. There, over the next ten years, usually in collaboration with designer Alexander Golovin and choreographer Mikhail Fokine, Meyerhold directed notable productions