

# Meyerhold and his contribution to theatre assignment

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## VSEVOLOD EMILEVICH MEYERHOLD AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THEATRE

Introduction Vsevolod Emielevich Meyerhold, considered one of 20th century greatest theatrical innovators, was born on February 10, 1874 in the Russian town of Penza. He was originally born into a Lutheran German-Jewish family with the name Karl Theodore Kasmir Meyergold. In 1895 he took the name Vsevolod Emievich Meyerhold after converting to the Russian Orthourdox Church. Meyerhold studied Law at Moscow University for two terms. He became fascinated with the art of theatre and as his interest increased he registered for an acting class at the Moscow Art School.

Between 1898 and 1902, he worked at the Moscow Art Theatre where he was an actor in a wide range of productions including; The Seagull and The Death of Ivan the Terrible among others. Meyerhold's career as a stage director began in 1902 and lasted 37 years. He is said to have directed more than 290 productions. His earliest work was characterized by an interest in realism. However, in a series of productions at the Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1905, Meyerhold broke away from realism and demonstrated his creative approach to directing for the first time.

He became the first Russian director to develop a symbolist style of theatrical representation. This was while working at Vera Komissarzhevskaya's Theatre in St. Petersburg in 1906 - 07. His productions of Maeterlynck's Sister Beatrice, Blok's The Fair Ground Booth, Andreyev's Life of a Man, and other plays marked his departure from the realistic theatrical tradition. The intelligentsia of Russian society responded enthusiastically to Meyerhold's great theatrical innovations. But imperial officials were not pleased.

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They exerted heavy pressure on him to reform and revert to a conventional realistic style for the emperor's theatre. Beginning in 1932 the Soviet regime under Joseph Stalin ended all forms of avant-garde innovation. In 1936 Meyerhold lost his theater, and four years later, after months of imprisonment and torture, the Soviet internal police secretly executed him. His childhood home has been preserved as the Penza Theatre Museum.

Meyerhold's Contributions to Theatre: Meyerhold had many distinctive and influential theories.

Among the first theoretical and practical innovations which Meyerhold introduced as a theatre director were constructivism and biomechanics. He also bequeathed to theatre two methods of directing a play which in different ways establish the relationship between the actor and director. One system restrains the creative freedom of both the actor and spectator, while the other liberates both the actor and spectator, permitting the audience to use their imagination actively rather than merely sitting down and watching.

Meyerhold presented these two systems graphically, bringing together the four fundamentals of the theatre namely; the author, director, actor, and spectator. The first system he called the triangular theatre and is represented thus: Spectator Director Author Actor The first system is a triangle with the apex representing the director, and the bases the author and the actor. The playgoer sees the work of the author and actor through the work of the director. (Graphically the 'spectator' is at the top of the triangle. This is one kind of theater-the 'triangular theater.' The second system is represented thus: AuthorDirectorActorSpectator A straight,

horizontal where the four fundamentals of the theater are represented from left to right: author, director, actor, spectator. This is the other kind of theater-the "straight theater." The actor freely reveals his soul to the spectator after having incorporated the work of the director, just as the director had incorporated the work of the author. This idea informed his theory of the 'triangular theatre' and the 'straight theatre'.

In his own words Meyerhold explained the triangular and straight theatre theories thus: "In the 'triangular theater' the director, after having discussed his plan in great detail, will rehearse until his conception is simply reproduced, until he hears and sees the play as he had heard and seen it by himself. In the 'straight theatre' the director takes the part of the author, and makes the actor see his work (author and director are one). After incorporating the author's work by way of the director, the actor comes face to face with the spectator (author and director at the actor's back), and acts freely while enjoying the give and take of the two main elements of theatre ??? the player and the playgoer. The director alone must set the tone and style of a performance so that the 'straight theatre' may not become chaotic, and yet the acting will remain free and unrestrained." This stylization leads Meyerhold to the "arrangement of the stage with flat surfaces", specifically, to eliminate the scenery and present the actor, as a principal mechanism for theatrical expression.

This marked the beginning of the deconstruction of the stage space. The disarrangement of the stage under Meyerhold is said to have had its climax in the constructive solution of *The Magnificent Cuckold* and *The Death of*

Tarelkin. The stage in these two performances referred to above is said to have resembled the renaissance box, was made as dynamic as possible and put completely to the benefit of the performance itself by being stripped to a maximum extent; allowing only enough elements to enable the actor convey his art.

Disarrangement of the “ box-stage” in the theatrical system inevitably includes another element, which is very important to Meyerhold ??? the spectator. An imaginary wall of the room no longer separates the stage from the auditorium. Actors do not play “ as if they are alone”; and they are supposed to be aware of the audience’s reaction at any moment:” A specific peculiarity of the actor’s creativity (as opposed to the originality of the playwright, the theatre director or the other artists) is that the creative process is being conducted in front of the audience.

As a result, the actor and the spectator are interposing a particular mutual relationship, specifically; the actor puts the spectator in the position of a sounding board, which reacts to every action upon his command. And vice versa ??? sensing his own resonator (the audience), the actor immediately reacts, by improvisation to all the demands coming from the audience. Following a series of signs (noise, movement, laughter etc. ), the actor must define the attitude of the audience towards the performance correctly. ” Thus, Meyerhold contends.

With Meyerhold, the issue of which element had priority: drama text or theater, simply does not exist. Everything is subordinated to the theatrical expression as a whole. Therefore, without having any prejudice, in 1924 he

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dissected the play *The Forest* by the classicist Ostrovsky into 33 episodes, thus abandoning all the “rules of fine behaviour” and respect to Russian classical dramaturgy. Moscow, as well as the whole of theatrical Russia was scandalized in 1926, finding Gogol’s *The Government Inspector*, (sometimes titled *The Inspector General*) completely changed.

Meyerhold remodeled the Gogol’s comedy, deleting whole scenes, makes one character out of two. Vsevolod Emilevich, while analyzing *The Government Inspector* in front of his theatre staff, says: “What makes this play difficult is that, like other plays, it is directed towards the actor, not towards the theatre director.” Meyerhold is quite certain about who should manage the complex theatrical mechanism. Therefore, the Master, should “create (through changes in the text, amongst other things) a situation which would be easiest for the actor, enabling him to put on the performance without any difficulties. Such an approach gives the theatre director an opportunity to model the text and adjust the dramaturgical material to his own theatrical and aesthetic needs and principles. At the same time, the theatre director, while selecting the play, is no more limited by the dramaturgic or literary values of the text. Simply, it is possible to take low-quality dramatic material and re-arrange it. The limits, in this case, are set only by the creative powers of the theatre director and of the actors. The fourth basic element in the theatrical system advocated by Meyerhold is the actor.

Meyerhold defines the actor as the main fundamental element of the theatrical performance. Such a definition appears to contradict Meyerhold’s

proclaimed attitude that his theatre is a director's theatre; a system where the theatre director is the principal creator of the play. But when properly considered, it becomes clear that since the actor, in Meyerhold's view, is the central figure in the theatre, he is the only 'medium' by which the theatrical director's idea can be transmitted to the audience.

And this informs the reason why Meyerhold considers the actor the "living representation of the theatre director's ideas." Certainly, in order to be successful, the actor should have great natural creativity, in order to convey the theatre director's instructions through his own creative filter. According to Vsevolod Emilevich, the task of the theatre director is "to sublimate certain elements of the play, certain characters, each part, into an organic whole, suitable to his own general idea of the complete play. On the other hand, the actor's task, while accepting some of the theatre director's ideas about his character, is to convey them through his own creative filter and transfer them to the audience. Another outstanding contribution of Meyerhold to theater is style of lighting. Meyerhold was one of the first theatre directors of the 20th century who moved the lighting from the stage to the auditorium. In addition, Meyerhold elevated the role of light and lighting to a level equal to the role of music and rhythm in the performance. Says Meyerhold," The light should touch the spectator as does music. Light must have its own rhythm; the score of light can be composed on the same principle as that of the sonata." The bio-mechanical system of Vsevolod Emilevich Meyerhold can be defined as a system for the basic grounding of actors and stage articulation, and also as a global theatrical system.

Meyerhold's theatrical system required the actor to be a perfect machine, using his body to the utmost limits: " The material of the actor's art is the human body, i. e. the torso, the limbs, the head and the voice.

While studying his material, the actor should not rely upon the anatomy, but upon the possibilities of his body, as a material for stage performance. " The biomechanical way of training the actor's body starts from the principles of tailoring the movements. The theory of Frederick Winslow Taylor for rejecting all unnecessary movements during the work, in order to reach greater productivity and effectiveness, and reduce the consumption of physical power of the worker, corresponds to Meyerhold's experiments in the theater and to his search for actors who would respond to these experiments.

The part which Meyerhold stresses is an improvement of Taylor's theory. However, Vsevolod Meyerhold, in his creative demands, could not be reduced to being a mere imitator of the thesis of " man-machine", which was very popular in Soviet Russia in the years after the October Revolution. It is quite clear that he recognized the actor as some kind of a machine (one of the principles of biomechanics says: " the body is a machine, the worker is a machinist"), with a very important correction ??? he let the actor preserve creativity in his acting.

Specifically, starting from Coquelin senior, saying that the actor is both a creator and a substance to the creativity, Meyerhold says: " It seems that in each actor, when starting to play his role, there are two actors: the first one is himself, the actor who actually exists and is ready to play the role on stage ??? A1, and the second, who doesn't yet exist, whom the actor is ready to

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send on stage ??? A2. Acting could be expressed by the formula:  $| N = A1 + A2 |$

A1 looks upon A2 as material which still needs to be worked upon. Firstly, A1 should consider A2 within the stage area, since it is clear that the actor's performance depends greatly upon the size of the stage, its shape etc. Such a structured concept of the actor's technique is linked to the need for "excitement", as a necessary element in the actor's art. To Meyerhold, "the excitement is the capability to convey an externally received task through feelings, movements and words. The coordinated demonstration of reflecting excitement, represents the actor's performance. The actor-creator (A1), quite consciously, using his previous knowledge, capabilities, physical abilities and following the theatre director's own concept, shapes the material which is at his disposal: primarily his own body. Biomechanics, in a way, raises these theoretical attitudes to their culminating height. Vsevolod Meyerhold said, "if the tip of the nose works ??? so does the whole body". This continues the tradition of stressing the need for an actor "to observe himself" on the stage, in other words, stressing (once again) the actor as one who synthesizes both the creation and the material from which that creation is made.

This idea means that an actor has to be capable of "coordinating in the space and on stage, the ability to find himself in the whole course of the play, the ability to adjust and the ability to define visually the distance between actors on the stage." The actor must have these qualities in order to construct the whole performance in the best possible way and to give the

theatre director (the final sublimite of the creativity of all participants in the theatre) the means by which to plan the development of the performance to the smallest detail.

Meyerhold's theatre, based on twentieth century thought and theories of art, looked to a new future and was truly revolutionary. It looked to old theatrical forms for its inspiration, and in execution created new theatrical forms.

Traces of Meyerhold's spirit is still to be found in the avant-garde theatre of the 1990s in Russia and throughout the West. Because it required a social system permitting complete freedom of expression, this theatre could not survive the soviet totalitarian regime. It was a director based theatre encouraging innovation in style and content.

Distortion of an author's intention or of reality itself was permitted and encouraged. His theatre demanded freedom to create a theatrical reality representing the personal and unique vision of the director: Theatre which would allow the audience to see reality anew and perhaps create its own reality. Meyerhold's creative work has, over forty years, been directed towards one unique goal: not to let theater be the same as life. Works Consulted Wikipedia,( 2009). [www. wikipedia. com](http://www.wikipedia.com) Ohiri, C. Aspects of the Theatre