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doctoral thesis

### **Towards a dramaturgy of the body.**

### **Vsevolod E. Meyerhold's theatrical biomechanics as inspiration for twentieth-century concepts of actor training in European theatre.**

#### Summary

Despite the passing of a century since the first public presentation of theatrical biomechanics, it has not become a museum artifact and is still the subject of lively debate. Created by one of the greatest directors and theatrical revolutionaries of the 20th century, it holds the promise of a new essence of theatricality for some, while others are disappointed to see what at first glance looks like basic juggling exercises and a few highly stylised, eccentric choreographies performed like a drill to the sound of Russian commands: *otkaz, posyl, stoika*. Commentators seem to identify the aesthetics of Meyerhold's performances with his didactic methods all too often. Precise distinctions are not facilitated by the fact that the artist himself left no canonical elaboration of his method. This, in turn, supports the thesis that such a method never came into being, and that Meyerhold's school and theatre practice never went beyond a more or less original set of occasional exercises. This dissertation presents the opposing thesis: Vsevolod E. Meyerhold (1874-1940) - a visionary, but above all a researcher of the acting art, set himself to liberate the acting body from the dictates of psychological imitation of character as a consequence of the battle for the independence of theatre from literature. In doing so, he gave impetus to the development of new theatrical genres, demonstrating the possibility and need for a thoughtful dramatic composition of the autonomous, though dialectically related, layers that make up a theatrical performance. This applied primarily to the actor's corporeal expression, which should aim at the vividness and specificity of a sign. Acting as a medium of communication with the audience therefore required effective autonomic principles of composition - the dramaturgy of the body. As a brilliant actor himself, Meyerhold created theatrical biomechanics as a set of fundamental principles of creation and dramaturgical composition for actors' bodily actions, as well as a set of exercises on the basis of which the actor assimilates these principles, which constitute the embodied know-how of the profession. Thus, biomechanics appears not as a given acting technique, but as a paradigm of 'pre-formation' (Eugenio Barba), allowing the actor to experience through practice the guiding

principles of the profession in order to compose his actions according to them in any aesthetic and any context. Meyerhold's considerable competence as a theatre historian and fierce research skills allowed him to establish a well-founded basis for the scientific study of the actor's technique. He drew on the fair show traditions, commedia dell'arte, practices of oriental theatres, Russian and world drama classics and concepts of the European avant-garde convinced that on the basis of past practices and experiments conducted with scientific rigour it would be possible to build a modern, professional model of acting as a craft with its own rules and tools, subject to rational verification and description.

The first part of the dissertation is devoted to the process of developing a new theatrical language and a new acting technique, which took place in several stages: 1) the diagnosis of the shortcomings of the existing situation of the theatre and the announcement of his quest to invent a new actor and a new theatre (work at the Studio Theatre, book *On Theatre*, 1905-1912, Chapter 1.); 2) subsequent experiments in laboratory and studio work, the results of which he tested in acting practice (activities of the Studio on Borodinskaya, 1913-1917, Chapter 2. ); 3) development of a didactic methodology for the new acting technique (*Kurmascep and School of Acting Craft*, 1918-1919, Chapter 3); 4) synthesis of a curriculum based on theatrical biomechanics; 5) evaluation of the results of teaching and artistic work (*GWYRM/GWYTM and taking charge of his own theatre*, 1921, Chapter 4.). Biomechanics is the first synthetic actor training in Western theatre derived 'artificially' from the synthesis of heterogeneous elements united by the educational purpose they serve. I attempt to present a periodisation of Meyerhold's work in the field of theatre pedagogy, and at the same time fill in the gaps in understanding biomechanics. Some of its unique features only become comprehensible in this historical light, as Meyerhold was fundamentally committed to universalising the technique he created, sometimes consciously obliterating traces of its origins, which he argued was a desire to liberate it from 'archaeological and stylistic attributions'. At each stage, I primarily trace the paths of inspiration and links to the intellectual milieu of the time (Pyotr Lesgaft's system of physical education, Taylorism, Pavlov's and Bekhterev's reflexology).

The base thus prepared serves to present in part two a detailed reconstruction of Meyerhold's project of theatrical biomechanics as a 'higher acting technique' based on physical expression and artistic composition as a creative method. This project encompassed both the detailed principles of creating and composing expressive movements in a situation of stage communication (Chapters 5 and 8), as well as a whole system of training aimed at assimilating these principles at the level of bodily know-how (Chapters 6 and 7). I conduct

this analysis by adopting the perspective of historic and theatrical documentary analysis, supported by my own practical experience of training practice. The third part puts theatrical biomechanics in a broader perspective – as a model example of synthetic actor training - created 'on demand' through the synthesis of heterogeneous practices in response to didactic demand, as well as a paradigm and tool for the transmission of embodied experiential knowledge. (Chapters 9 and 11). The conclusion of this section is a return to the theatrical context with an analysis of the function of biomechanical exercises as a dramaturgical template modelling the actor's creative processes (Chapter 10). Meyerhold's theatrical biomechanics here provides a paradigm of actor training that is currently prevalent mainly in theatres working 'in process', using devised theatre methods, and yet absent from contemporary Polish theatre schools. I juxtapose this model with the proposals of Eugenio Barba's Theatre Anthropology. Barba has repeatedly stressed the importance of his borrowing from Meyerhold's concepts, calling himself 'Meyerhold's grandson'.

I conclude by drawing on Diana Taylor's proposed opposition of archive and repertory to outline the fate of biomechanics from the closure of the Meyerhold Theatre to the present day. Describing the activities of recognised contemporary heirs to the technique: Alexei Levinsky and Gennady Bogdanov, as well as the 'self-proclaimed' heir Nikolai Karpov, I outline the different attitudes they represent towards tradition. These can be summarised as the question of canon and the sanctity of the integrity of the tradition. By reflecting on the inherited legacy, I want to move beyond the dispute of two mindsets: fidelity to the canon vs. fidelity to the idea, and look at the lessons of biomechanics for future training practices. Accompanying the work is an Appendix containing translated texts and source documents never before published in Polish.