



MEYERHOLD

Physical approach to actor training.

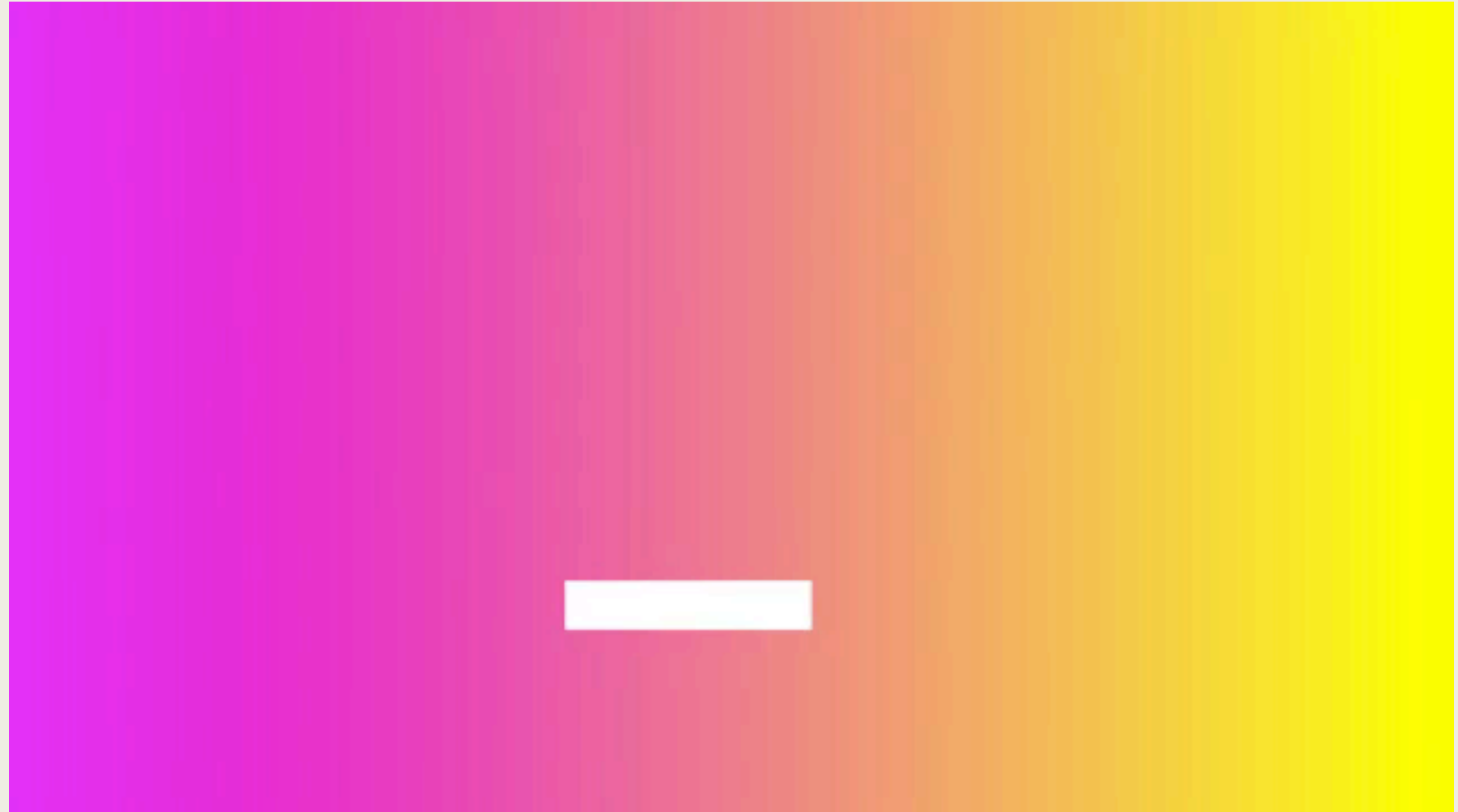


You need to know:

- Cultural and historical background to Meyerhold
- Meyerhold's Philosophy and Writing
- 7 Key Areas of Thinking:
 - *Naturalism*
 - *Stylisation*
 - *Rhythm and Music*
 - *The Mask*
 - *The Grotesque*
 - *Biomechanics*
 - *Montage*

Johnathan Pitches

author of our book “Meyerhold”



Historical and Cultural Background

- Born 1874; died 1940;
- Live and worked in Russia in a very tumultuous era – during the Russian Revolution of 1917;
- Executed by Stalin in 1940 because his “love of experimentation finally became an unendurable threat to the leader of the Soviet Union” (Pitches, p.2);
- Like in Boal’s experience, the political leaders were aware of the power of the arts and theatre to communicate ideas to the public that were against their ideologies – hence Boal’s exiling and Meyerhold’s execution;
- Born into an affluent family; his father was a vodka distiller. Due to this Meyerhold spent time mingling with the workers at the distillery and had experience with the working class;
- Growing up, Meyerhold became very good at playing the violin and had two career paths, before going into theatre, which were to become a professional violinist or a lawyer – both of which require detailed and lengthy training!
 - *These two interests are key to his approach to actor training – the careful and precise training of the actor and the musicality and rhythms applied to his productions*
- Worked and trained with Stanislavski, and held great respect for his approach to actor training in the ‘system’, and the “two men shared a fundamental belief in the complete training of the actor and the need to experiment continually” (Pitches, p.6);
- Meyerhold became much more interested in the careful, purposeful and efficient use of the body as a way of developing and communicating character, evolving from the deep-rooted psychological approach of Stanislavski

Historical and Cultural Background

- Russia entered into the Industrial Revolution later than other countries and Meyerhold witnessed the industrialisation of the workforce in order to achieve greater efficiency in economical ways.
- Meyerhold focused on the physical representation of meaning, like Boal's Image Theatre, and spent time with his actors crafting their ability to achieve pictorial impressions of their characters.
- The body must be used to express character: “the gestural language of the actors was carefully prescribed and choreographed so that the ensemble created a predominantly pictorial impression.” (Pitches, p.14).

Meyerhold and the Russian Revolution



Meyerhold and the Russian Revolution

Contradictions

- Meyerhold occasionally contradicts himself.
- He lived a life of contradictions and he integrated his paradoxical existence into his thinking on theatre.
- Modern politics in this country sometimes make it easy for us to forget that disagreement is not a weakness. Meyerhold reminds us of this fact at every stage.

Key areas of Meyerhold's thinking

- Naturalism
- Stylisation
- Rhythm and music
- The mask
- The grotesque
- Biomechanics
- Charlie Chaplin

Naturalism

- Meyerhold cut his teeth acting in and directing naturalism pieces of drama
- However, he was no lover of Naturalism as a style.
- He spent most of his career promoting *anti-illusionary* style of theatre.
- His first writings distance himself from Stanislavsky.
- He doesn't reject Naturalism completely but here are things he disliked...



7 Things

1. The emphasis is on the trivial detail
2. It leaves nothing to the imagination
3. The actors rely on facial features not physical dexterity
4. It results in the actors merely illustrating the playwright's words
5. The natural rhythm of the play is subsumed under surface trivialities
6. The overall shape of the play is lost in the process of textual analysis
7. The naturalistic aim of 'reproducing life on stage' is itself absurd

Overall

Naturalism reduced the expressivity of the performer



- Instead of using the actor's body to define a character, Naturalism encouraged what Meyerhold called 'reincarnation'- a transformation of the actor into the character using make-up, costume and voice. In doing so the actor is encouraged to focus on the little details, 'trifles of everyday life' to capture the person they are playing (NOTE: the difference between this idea and that of Augusto Boal!)
- Why invest such effort in attempting to disguise the theatre's own theatricality? Asked Meyerhold. Why not simply give up the pursuit of verisimilitude?

Stylisation

1. To simplify and reduce something down to find its 'essence'
2. To extend the range of expression used
3. To pay particular attention to the question of rhythm

7 things Meyerhold liked about the stylised theatre...

1. The emphasis is on the actor, working with minimal props and scenery
2. The spectator is compelled to use their imagination
3. The actors rely on physical plasticity and expression
4. The words of the playwright may be transformed by the director
5. Rhythm becomes uppermost in the director's and the spectators' minds
6. The look of the work is carefully constructed, like painting a picture
7. The stylised theatre can produce any type of play from Aristophanes to Ibsen

What this means...

- You need to communicate the essence of the scene
- You can reduce the technical requirements to an absolute minimum
- You need to think like a painter and construct the scene with a conscious eye for form, line and colour
- You need to draw on the physical expressivity of your performers, concentrating **at all times** on rhythm: the rhythm of the dialogue, the rhythm of the actors' movements, the rhythm of the shapes created when the actors come together in a tableau.

Rhythm and Music

- Meyerhold was not afraid of giving his audiences conflicting messages and used the clash of music and action to keep them alert and consciously engaged in the performance
- Music provides a constant stimulus to the action. It is part of the form itself, not simply another layer on top of everything else.
- 'It's all a question of rhythm of movement and action...Rhythm with a capital R.'

The Central Rhythm

- Made up of three parts
 1. *Otkaz- the 'refusal' and describes the preparation an actor makes before any actual action- crouching down before jumping or reaching back before throwing.*
 2. *Posil- 'to send' and is the action itself. The actual expression, the jump or throw itself.*
 3. *Tochka- marks the end point of a cycle of action. It is the rest at the end of any movement.*

Why is rhythm important to an actor?

1. It gives form and structure to everything you do on stage.
2. It makes explicit any rhythmic choices you might make on stage
3. It gives freedom within a defined set of boundaries
4. It establishes a language to be used between actors and with the director.
5. It makes you think in musical terms from the outset.

The Mask

- A central part of the spectator's experience
- Masks can be created by make-up, hairstyle, facial expressions or by any technique which defines a character in terms of its external characteristics.
- Can represent two opposing forces within the same character
- Most importantly for Meyerhold the mask forces the actor to externalise his means of communication- to use the body. The shapes generated by the body need to complement the expression of the face.
- Essentially non-naturalistic- a stylised form

The Virtues of the Mask

- The mask is full of contradictions
- The mask is both part of history and of 'the moment'
- The mask constrains and liberates in equal measure
- The mask encourages spontaneity, freeing up the expressive work of the actor
- The mask demands a physical approach to building a character
- The mask demands clarity of gesture and expression
- The mask heightens the spectator's awareness of any awkward or unnatural gestures
- The mask stimulates the imaginations of the audience
- The mask creates distance between actor and character
- The mask can be changed or transformed
- The mask can show us different perspectives on the same character.

The Grotesque

- Meyerhold hated anything predictable
- "The grotesque isn't something mysterious. It's simply a theatrical style which plays with sharp contradictions and produces a constant shift in the planes of perception."
- The grotesque breeds discomfort



- It mixes opposites tragedy and comedy, life and death, beauty and ugliness
- It celebrates incongruities
- It challenges our perceptions
- It is naturally mischievous, even satirical
- It borrows from different (and unlikely) sources
- It always has a touch of the diabolical, the devil's influence
- It stretches the natural to the extent that it becomes *unnatural* or stylised
- It revels in fantasy and mystery
- It is constantly transforming things: objects, figures, landscapes and atmospheres
- Example given from Blok's 'The Fairground Booth'

Biomechanics and the actor of the future

“Biomechanical training might be compared to a pianist’s studies...Mastering the technical difficulties of the exercises and etudes does not provide the student with a prescription for the lyric energy necessary, let’s say, to perform a Chopin nocturne...yet he must master the techniques in order to master his art. Technique arms the imagination.”

(Garin- one of Meyerhold’s most talented actors)

- An absence of superfluous, unproductive movements
- Rhythm
- The correct positioning of the body's centre of gravity
- Stability

Note the language
of the Revolution!



Emotion does not come from the inner workings of the mind but from an outside stimulus, from 'physical positions and situations'. Emotion is, in effect, a reflex.

Meyerhold designed sets of etudes designed to address all the basic skills of the actor.



Charlie Chaplin

- An episodic structure to the overall production
- Carefully directed juxtaposing of the episodes to maximise the 'explosive' effect
- Surprises, collisions, incongruities
- Pronounced and varying rhythms emerging from the overall montage
- A thinking audience, putting together meaning for itself
- The possibility of two or more parallel storylines
- A clear sense of theatricality, of being aware of the joins in the montage.
- 'Modern Times' (1936)
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AvNQiF89Pek&feature=related>

