

Robert Leach

MEYERHOLD AND BIOMECHANICS

Training! Training! Training! But if it's the kind of training which exercises only the body and not the mind, then No, thank you! I have no use for actors who know how to move but cannot think.¹

THROUGHOUT HIS CAREER, VSEVOLOD Meyerhold sought to train the brains and bodies of actors so that they would be able to participate in his lifelong quest for a theatre which would not attempt to reproduce the surface reality of living, but would be, rather, 'theatrical'. Yet largely because of accidents of history, which cruelly silenced him and fortuitously aided the ideas of his mentor, colleague and ideological rival, Konstantin Stanislavsky, the significance of his quest is, even in the twenty-first century, rarely recognised or acknowledged. His contemporaries believed that he was Stanislavsky's equal, and that this was as true for his ideas about actor training as about stage production. It is probably fair to say that virtually all those scholars, especially Western scholars, who have discussed his work since his 'rehabilitation' in 1955, have underestimated the importance of his pedagogy.² But many of his ideas were preserved through dark times by his pupils, and his pupils' pupils, who are now promulgating them energetically, and the time has perhaps come for a new assessment of Meyerhold's work on training actors.

Meyerhold's own troupe, the Comrades of the New Drama, was founded in September 1902 when Meyerhold was twenty-eight years old. His experimental and pedagogical practices developed alongside his mainstream production work, notably through his work with Stanislavsky's Theatre Studio on Povarskaya Street, Moscow in 1905, then from 1906 until 1908 at Vera Komissarzhevskaya's Dramatic Theatre in St Petersburg, and in his own Studio on Borodinskaya Street, St Petersburg between 1913 and 1917. After the Bolshevik Revolution he developed a course on stage production in Petrograd (which, however, seems never to have operated meaningfully); then, in 1921 the Meyerhold Free Workshop was established in Moscow, and this was absorbed into the Meyerhold Theatre when that became a reality in 1923. From then until its liquidation in 1938, the Meyerhold Theatre school trained actors conscientiously and in significant numbers.

Meyerhold cared passionately about his pupils. Erast Garin, one of his star graduates, painted an unforgettable picture of the Master overseeing his students:

He would appear in the doorway with a green military greatcoat flung carelessly over his shoulders. . . . The studio was never properly heated, but we were young, and involved in energetic exercises, so we didn't mind. Meyerhold sat by the round, tiled stove, smoking . . . and watching us as if he was studying each one of us.³

Meyerhold's own acting career began as a founder member of the Moscow Art Theatre. At that time, Stanislavsky had not even developed his 'round the table' method of analysing text, though his insistence that every stage action must be justified, or motivated, and that each character must have an 'objective', was already present in his work method. Meyerhold always held to these principles, even as he energetically rejected the Moscow Art Theatre's search for a life-like naturalism. The turn of the century was the period when Symbolism dominated avant-garde literature and art, especially in Russia, and Meyerhold sought a stylised means of staging the works of Symbolist dramatists. In 1906, however, his production of Alexander Blok's *The Fairground Booth* completely destroyed stage Symbolism. In the play, dreamy mystics and starry-eyed lovers confront the old theatrical masks, Harlequin, Columbine and Pierrot, and their spurious emotionalism is (literally) swept away by the theatrical games of the *commedia dell'arte*. Harlequin 'jumps through the window. The distance, visible through the window, turns out to have been painted on paper. The paper bursts. Harlequin flies head over heels into nothingness.' A few moments later, as the hitherto-agitated 'Author' joins the hands of Columbine and Pierrot, 'suddenly all the scenery rolls up, and flies away'.⁴

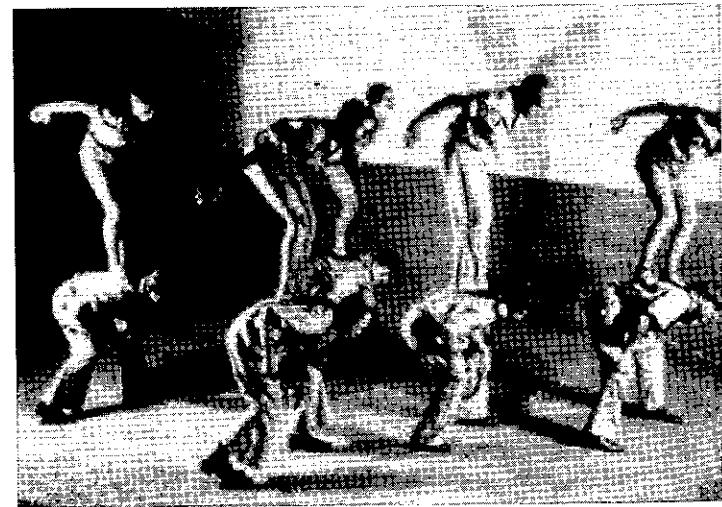


Figure 2.1 Biomechanics: The Stance on the Back.

This production signalled Meyerhold's rejection of mysticism in the theatre. From then on, as Erast Garin wrote later, Meyerhold's 'point of departure' became the 'liquidation of the awe-inspiring, shamanistic aura surrounding the art of the actor'.⁵ It led to his discovery, through the *commedia dell'arte*, of the grotesque as an artistic principle, that is, the bringing together of matters, actions, ideas, which are not thought to naturally cohabit. At his Studio on Borodinskaya Street, under the pseudonym of 'Doctor Dapertutto', he experimented with the interplay of character and action as it had operated in various historical and exotic contexts, not only in Renaissance Italy, but also in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France and in Shakespeare's England, in China, Japan and elsewhere. The work consciously combined actor training and experimental performance.

Meyerhold's ideas were drawn together and, in some senses, formalised in his syllabus for the course on stage production which he worked out with Leonid Vivien in Petrograd immediately after the 1917 revolution.⁶ But his practice in the training of actors continued only when he moved to Moscow, first at his Free Workshop from 1921, and then at the school attached to his own theatre. As his system acquired a more integrated and theoretically justified basis, he gave it the typically Soviet, but not inappropriate, name of 'biomechanics', implying its connection with a technology of the body. Throughout the next two decades Meyerhold continued to adapt, refine, promulgate and demonstrate the biomechanical system, but in 1938 the Stalinist dictatorship closed his theatre. He was arrested the following year and judicially murdered in 1940, in gaol. Just at the time when Stanislavsky's ideas were receiving their greatest acclaim and support, both in Russia and in the USA, Meyerhold's career and work were wiped from the record, and his ideas consigned to oblivion. For fifteen years it was as if he had never existed. From 1955, when he was officially 'rehabilitated', his achievements were gradually rediscovered and made public again; at first cautiously through the Communist period, and then more expansively, so that by the end of the century his true position as one of the enduring colossi of the stage could again be legitimately argued.

From the time of his break with Stanislavsky (for whom, however, he retained the warmest admiration), Meyerhold's constant question was: what is 'theatrical' about the theatre? It was a question typical of its time, and may be compared with Kandinsky's contemporary search for the 'painterly' in painting, or the Russian Formalist critics' argument that it was the 'literariness' of literature that was its real strength and appeal. Stanislavsky's system was rooted in an earlier time, for it was designed to make stage action 'lifelike'. For Stanislavsky, 'theatricality' was a negative concept. Meyerhold, however, wanted a system which could cope with all styles (including naturalism, though he regarded this as something of an irrelevance; for him, Chekhov's appeal, for instance, did not lie in his 'truth to life'). The actor for the task which Meyerhold was to set – the ability to perform farce and tragedy, melodrama, pantomime and circus-style skits, to name but some of the genres he was interested in – needed a rigorous and long-lasting training: 'An actor must study as a violinist does, for seven to nine years. You can't make yourself into an actor in three to four years.'⁷

Beginning with the formulation that: 'Every art is the organisation of its own material', Meyerhold asserted that: 'In order to organise his material, the actor has to have a colossal reserve of technical resources.' The reason for this need was that the actor, unlike other artists, 'is at one and the same time the material and the organiser'.⁸ This was formulated algebraically by Meyerhold as:

$$N = A1 + A2$$

(where N = the actor; A1 = the organiser of the material; and A2 = the material). The actor must therefore be able to move and to think.

But what – or rather, how – is the actor to think? He is not to identify with the part, wondering what the character is feeling, or trying to identify his or her wants. Rather, the actor's brain is to decide on the physical formulation of the moment. Igor Ilyinsky, one of Meyerhold's most impressive actors, noted that: 'If the physical form is correct, the basis of the part, the speech intonations and the emotions, will be as well, because they are determined by the position of the body.'⁹ Another of Meyerhold's protégés, the film director Sergei Eisenstein, concurred: 'The pulse of the emotion (its curve) is the result of spatial-plastic placing. It is excited as a result of the quality of the treatment and training of the material' (that is, the 'A2' of the actor).¹⁰ Therefore, the actor's training was, for Meyerhold, devoted largely to an understanding of the body in space, or as he called it, 'scenic movement'. Following his work on *The Fairground Booth*, his scenic movement class focused most closely on the 'play' of the *commedia dell'arte*. 'It is not necessary [for the actor] to feel, only to play, to play', Meyerhold exclaimed in 1913.¹¹ The actor was thus to be seen as akin to the child when he or she is playing: for the child, the play is 'real', but it involves, initially, recreating the motion of the action, not seeking the Stanislavskian objective of the character in the 'play'. Understanding, which may include an understanding of feelings, becomes accessible to the child, but through the doing. Jonathan Pitches, one of the few British performers to have trained with a Russian biomechanics Master, and then to have put what he learned into practice, noted that 'to experience biomechanics practically is to understand it . . . I developed a sensitivity for detail. I noticed which foot was leading, where the actor's weight was situated, the rhythmic pattern of each action'.¹²

In his Studio in St Petersburg in the 1910s, Meyerhold experimented tirelessly and in great depth; first with the *commedia*, the strengths of which lay not only in 'play', but also in the traditional characters – Harlequin, Pantaloon, Columbine and the rest – 'masks' whose characterisations derived most significantly from their individualised movement and gesture patterns. The characters were literally masks: the performers wore masks over their faces, partly to focus attention on their characteristic movements, but also because masks eliminated passing or fleeting emotions, and because they fixed and expressed specific attitudes, or mental or spiritual states.

The investigation of *commedia dell'arte* led to further explorations of clowns, puppets and marionettes, as well as of other theatrical traditions from both Europe and the Far East. These in turn led to a bewildering and eclectic array of exercises and other practical acting work, from which much of interest and importance emerged. For instance, the relationship between the stage and the proscenium or forestage was examined; the oriental concept of 'self-admiration' (a kind of self-watching or monitoring) was introduced; and actors found a fulfilling excitement in emitting a cry or shout at moments of intensity. Costume was explored as a decorative ornament rather than a utilitarian necessity, and the hat as something to be doffed, not just worn. A prop – a tambourine, for example, or a flower – acquired significance when it became an extension of the hand (which itself was an extension of the arm, and thus an extension of the whole body: the resonance of the body as a whole being important); and stage furniture, such as the screen, was used in various ways. Entrances and exits were also playfully explored. All of these made an unsurpassed range of technical acting devices available to the Meyerholdian performer, not to be used merely for the recreation of past theatrical styles from which they were derived, but now as weapons in her or his armoury for contemporary stage compositions.

Meyerhold's 'scenic movement' covered all these experiments at this stage of his career (immediately before the Bolshevik Revolution), and created a grotesque 'polyphony' on the stage. But the exercises may be said to have had their focus in concepts of rhythm – spatial rhythm as much as temporal rhythm. His student actors improvised prolifically to develop physical agility and physical responsiveness to others on the stage (spatial rhythm), and then what he called 'musicality' (temporal rhythm). Thus, actors might be asked to hum whilst they moved, or they might treat speech and dialogue as musical scores. These concerns with rhythm found their confluence in the pause or 'silhouette', the expressive moment when the movement was spatially and/or temporarily broken.

Many surviving photographs of Meyerhold's productions show a picture-like composition, the theatrical equivalent of the still frame from a moving film, where the dynamic of the scene is reflected in the bodily postures of the performers, and their interrelationship in space. It was something not unlike Brecht's 'gestic interruption', but more self-referential, initially at least having more to do with the onward movement of the scene than with the socio-political structures in the outside world to which it might be referring. Meyerhold told Gladkov two decades later that: 'The swifter the text, the more distinct the breaks must be, the transitions from one segment to another, from one rhythm to another. Otherwise the motivation is lost, the living breath of meaning vanishes.'¹³

In his work at the Borodinskaya Street Studio, he found that this concern with what might be called the 'through rhythm' could be most easily explored in the improvised pantomimes he occasionally presented and with which he frequently worked. The specific learning cycle which he developed at the studio began with exercises. These were often developed into 'études', whose purpose was mainly to do with developing the actor, and then further expanded to become self-contained pantomimes suitable for public consumption. Such were most of the items in the presentations by his students.¹⁴ Other examples were the traditional Chinese 'black comedy' improvisation, when actors pretend it is a dark night and creep furtively about on the brilliantly illuminated stage; and the three-minute version of *Antony and Cleopatra* which they showed to the visiting Italian Futurist, Filippo Marinetti.

By the time of the Free Meyerhold Workshop, and the establishment of his own school attached to the Meyerhold Theatre in Moscow, the 'polyphony' and the almost endless variety of explorations were becoming more focused and integrated. A new social awareness was also apparent in the work, and Meyerhold's students were now expected to have a sense of social responsibility which would inform their work. Thus, in Meyerhold's thinking about characterisation, instead of relying on the old traditional masks, he now developed the concept of the 'emploi' belonging to the 'set roles' of the actor, which extended the boundaries of the mask by relating it in new ways to what might be termed 'real life'.¹⁵ At any given moment, Meyerhold's actors were asked to present a theatricalised 'mask' to the audience. But as the plot (or intrigue) developed, the character required a new mask. Their 'set role', and consequently their 'emploi' (what they did, or how they behaved), also changed.

As illustration, we might consider Hamlet. When he finds Claudius praying, his set role is that of the Revenger; but moments later, in his mother's bedroom, his mask is that of the disobedient child. Characterisation was, therefore, no longer simply a device of the pantomime, it was more like our experience of life, for, like Hamlet, we change: we behave as a child when with our parents, whatever our age; and – at least to some extent – we behave as a supplicant to our bank manager, as a 'good fellow' to our acquaintances in the pub, as a conscientious worker to our boss, and so on. The



Figure 2.2 Biomechanics: The Leap to the Chest.

actors' 'set role' changed through the production, so that instead of a consistent through-line, Meyerhold's creations were grotesque, paradoxical and associative. They theatricalised the action and were the agents for the expression of emotion. Thus they effectively became action-functions. The actor's 'emploi' – how she or he expressed the 'set role' – was therefore not quite psychological, nor was it a stylistic peculiarity of the production, though it owed something to both of these. Rather, it was the exposure of the driving force of the specific image at a particular point in the production, the theatricalisation both of the specific motive (the objective, in Stanislavsky's term) and of the state of the relationship.

This helped Meyerhold to develop the learning sequence from exercise–étude–pantomime as practised in the Borodinskaya Street Studio to exercise–étude–acting: in other words, this greater awareness and flexibility enabled the work to be utilised more easily for all sorts of acting work for the public stage. But it still depended primarily on Meyerhold's 'scenic movement', now called biomechanics, which Ilyinsky described powerfully and precisely. In biomechanics, he wrote, the actor

seized his partner's body as it was stretched in the sun, threw it over his shoulder and carried it off. He dropped this body. He threw a discus and traced its imaginary course. He gave his partner a slap in the face, and received one back. He leaped on his partner's chest, and received him on his chest. He jumped onto his partner's shoulders, and his partner ran,



Figure 2.3 Biomechanics: The Stab with the Dagger.

carrying him. Certain exercises were very simple: to take the partner's hand and pull his arm, then repulse the partner, then seize him by the throat. . . . Although we sometimes gave demonstrations of these exercises, we did not need to transpose them literally to the stage: they served to give us the taste of conscious movement on the stage. The exercises combined the gymnastic, the plastic and the acrobatic; they developed in the students an exact 'eye'; they enabled them to calculate their movements, to make them meaningful and to coordinate them with their partners; and . . . they helped them to move more freely and with greater expressiveness in the stage space.¹⁶

The 'exact eye' is the 'self-admiration', or self-awareness, referred to above. In a theatre such as Meyerhold's, the actor needs to be extremely sensitive to what his body, his gestures, his movements are connoting. He needs a kind of in-built mirror.

Biomechanics is not arbitrary. It requires of the actor, and it trains: (1) balance (physical control); (2) rhythmic awareness, both spatial and temporal; and (3) responsiveness to the partner, to the audience, to other external stimuli, especially through the ability to observe, to listen and to react. It is worth pausing for a moment to consider these as they were experienced by Jonathan Pitches. His experience of the *étude* 'Throwing the Stone', for instance, was that it developed

the solidity of the physical base by introducing falls, jumps, runs and exaggerated body positions and demanded the same movement away from the centre of gravity before finding this centre anew. The *étude* required a constant shifting of weight from left to right and, at one moment, from the lower body to the upper body. As the hieroglyphic body shape was adopted for the *étude*, one's balance was further tested, particularly by the jumps included in the exercise.

Pitches similarly found that the biomechanical exercises developed spatial awareness and the ensemble, noting particularly that the work,

with its emphasis upon collective, collaborative action, insists that each element of the ensemble comes together with a shared point of intense concentration whilst retaining each person's uniquely individual stamp as a physical body on stage. There can be no progression until each person has found the appropriate rhythm and mastered the skills within each action. The ensemble is in effect bound by a common cause which breeds a humility in relation to the work.¹⁷

These are large claims, but by examining a few of Meyerhold's exercises and *études* in detail, and relating them to performance, it may be that we shall be able thoroughly to justify them.

Perhaps the first and simplest of the exercises is that with the stick, a straight piece of broom handle or dowel about a metre long. Stand with the legs about 30 centimetres apart, the knees slightly bent, the stick held three-quarters of the way down in one hand. Bend the knees to obtain momentum, and rise, and as you rise, toss the stick easily up so that it arcs over. Keep your eye on the other end of the stick, and catch it, letting it fall into your hand. Do not grab at it. Repeat. Continue to repeat each exercise many times. Now toss the stick so that it arcs twice and you catch the same end as you threw. Toss it so that it arcs once and catch it in the other hand. Toss it so that it arcs twice. Three times. Four times. Always bend the knees and toss as you straighten them. The exercise should be performed in as relaxed a manner as possible: easily, lightly.

Now hold the stick in the middle, vertical to the ground. Toss it from one hand to the other. Hold it horizontally, with the back of your hand upwards. Bend the knees, straighten them, and as you straighten them lift your hand and open your fingers so that the stick flies out. Bring your hand down, catch the stick, the back of your hand still upwards. Repeat, letting go with one hand, catching with the other. Pass the stick from one hand to the other under one leg; then under the other. Pass it behind your back.

Place the stick in the palm of the open hand. Toss it up. Catch it, without closing the hand. Catch it on the other palm, without closing the hand. When the stick is in the air, turn the hand over, 'bat' it up again with the back of the hand or the back of the wrist. Catch it on the open palm. Place the stick on the index and middle finger. Balance it. Push up with the index finger, 'catch' the stick between the middle and fourth finger. Push up with the middle finger, 'catch' it between the fourth and little finger. Continue, involving the index finger again, till you can twirl the stick.

Balance the stick on the palm of the hand so that it is perfectly still. Balance it on the back of the hand. Balance it on one finger. On the wrist. The elbow. The shoulder. Balance it on the foot, the knee, the back of the neck, the forehead. Keep the eye on



Figure 2.4 Biomechanics in action: D.E. (1924).

Source: from the collection of Robert Leach.

the end of the stick. The aim is for it to be absolutely still at all times. The number of stick exercises is enormous: these few simple beginnings will give some idea of the richness of the work. It is also useful to work in pairs, tossing the stick in various ways from one to another. Make sure your feet form a solid base, and concentrate on making the stick feel soft and light: never grab it, let it land in the hand. The stick is an indication of your own balance and co-ordination, especially when you balance it. Any movement in the stick indicates that you have not found your centre of gravity.

The remaining biomechanics exercises and études are more complex, and more strict, but each is carefully calculated to produce the kind of effect described here. The first exercise is the Dactyl, a sequence of moves designed to put the student-actor into a state of physical and mental readiness. A 'dactyl' is a verse foot, comprising of long beat, followed by two short beats. This is mirrored in the exercise.

THE DACTYL

Stance: stand firm, alert, but relaxed, feet about 30 centimetres apart, arms loose at sides, head up, facing front. There are no pauses in the exercise, the whole movement flows through the seven points isolated here. The tempo of the exercise may vary, but

initially at least it is quite slow and relaxed, flowing from point to point until movement 4 below, when the movement speeds up and points 4–6 are performed with a degree of taut intensity.

- 1 Both arms swing in a wide arc from in front of the body backwards, knees bend, torso leans forward, head forward.
- 2 Both arms remain straight as they swing forward and up high, the knees straighten, the feet remain firm on the ground.
- 3 The arms are brought straight down in front of the chest with bent elbows, the torso inclines forward, the head begins to bend.
- 4 As the hands reach a point about level with the groin, they clap energetically.
- 5 Immediately after the clap, the body partially straightens again, the elbows bend, the hands are drawn up towards the chest, the head lifts.
- 6 Immediately the body bends again, the head lowers, the elbows straighten and the hands drop, clapping energetically again at about the level of the groin. The effect is of two quick, strong claps closely following one another.
- 7 Relax to starting stance.

This preparatory exercise is performed by student-actors before, and often at the end of, other exercises. It requires them to stretch the spine and bend it, to 'open' and 'close', and to be physically alert and responsive. Erast Garin notes that the movement of the hands 'transfers itself into the torso, imparting elasticity to the whole body'.¹⁸

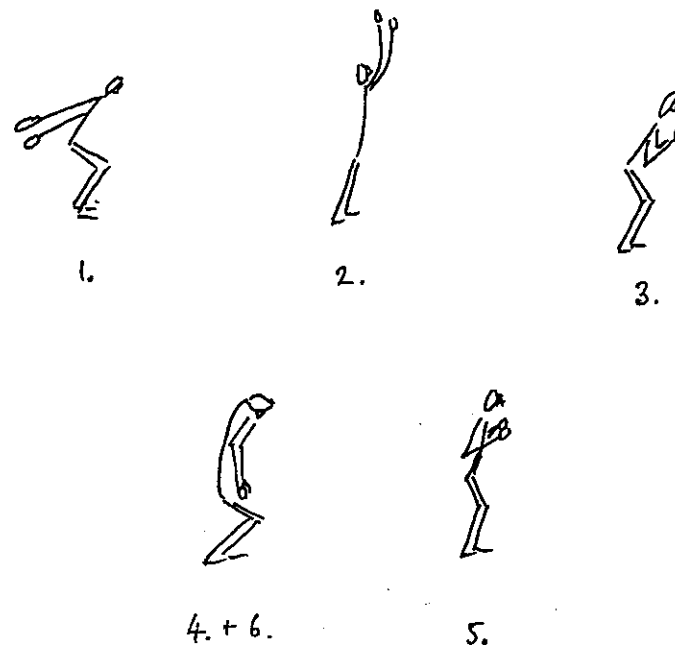


Figure 2.5 Meyerhold's exercise: The Dactyl.

There are other exercises, which lead on to études, and then into performance, including 'Pushing the Kneeling Partner with the Foot', 'Throwing the Stone', the 'Stab with the Dagger' and 'Shooting from the Bow', all of which are preserved on contemporary film from the 1920s in what are clearly Meyerhold's authorised versions. Others include the 'Leap on the Chest', the 'Slap in the Face', 'Dropping the Weight', the 'Leap on to the Partner's Back', and more. Meyerhold himself did not codify a specific series, and used them more or less as the situation seemed to demand. Modern practitioners such as Alexei Levinsky often argue that only five of the exercises are really essential for a biomechanical training: 'Throwing the Stone', the 'Slap in the Face', the 'Leap on the Chest', 'Shooting from the Bow' and the 'Stab with the Dagger'.

However that may be, it is interesting that a comparison between Levinsky performing, say, 'Shooting from the Bow'¹⁹ and the same exercise performed by Meyerhold's actor in the 1920s reveals Levinsky's considerably more complex structure. The exercise itself is described in detail below, but an analysis of Levinsky's performance of it shows that he has twenty-eight discrete units, each segmented from the others by a pause. The earlier version recorded under Meyerhold's supervision includes only eighteen distinct movement units, and several of these run together with no pause between them. Moreover, Levinsky's performance gives an impression of deliberation, each move being considered and measured, and actually performed in almost the same tempo throughout. Meyerhold's actor changes tempo frequently, some of the actions being performed *presto*, others clearly *largo*.

This is not pointed out in order to detract from Levinsky's work; on the contrary, it shows that the exercises are capable of great personal variation as between one performer and another; as well as how the exercises have proved capable of development. Levinsky learned from Mikhail Kustov, who himself joined the Meyerhold Theatre's school around 1930. His version of this exercise is therefore likely to be later and more 'developed' than the earlier version.

The exercise of the 'Leap on the Chest' was one which allowed Meyerhold to delight his own students. In its simplest version, it is precisely what its name implies: one student-actor stands firm, one foot in front of the other, braced ready to catch the second student-actor. The second then runs straight at the first, and leaps up, placing his knees on the catcher's chest, and binding one arm round his neck, whilst the first actor wraps his arm (or arms) round the back of the leaper's knees. If the student-actor who is to perform the leap concentrates on leaping up, and not on his catcher, the exercise is quite easy.

It is then developed into an étude, which was what Meyerhold showed off. Based on the 'Stab with the Dagger', it was a miniature melodrama, which shows how Meyerhold was keen to theatricalise everything the students did. Erast Garin recalled:

He chose a student who was strongly built, and showed him how to hold himself firmly, gripping the table behind him, and imparting 'give' to his body. Then he [Meyerhold] acted a pantomime of creeping up to the student, when he leaped upon his chest, his right knee against the student's ribs. With his right hand he then drew out an imaginary dagger from his belt, stabbed his partner in the neck, and leaped down. The wounded figure slumped to the floor, while the attacker straightened up.²⁰

The exercise was transferred into performance precisely as a leap on to the chest in Meyerhold's 1922 production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* by Fernand Crommelynck, when the Cooper rushed through a door and leaped on to the unsuspecting Bruno's chest. More interestingly, perhaps, a version of the étude was performed in Eisenstein's 1947 short dance *The Last Conversation*, performed by members of the Bolshoi Ballet. This dance was perhaps the film-maker's last creative work, and was based on the final act of Bizet's *Carmen*. In it, the faithless heroine was murdered in a danced, almost dreamlike sequence which ended when she was stabbed. Eisenstein did not simply reproduce the étude, however, but made his own version of it, and this at a time when Meyerhold's name was obliterated in the USSR and when any mention of him was dangerous. He created a piece which seemed on one level almost like his leave-taking, his regretful but desperately necessary breaking-away from his Master, with its unexpectedly moving finale. The choreography was a dynamic testimony to the enduring power and versatility of Meyerhold's creation.²¹

The exercise of 'Shooting from the Bow' is one of the best known in biomechanics, but it is much less easily transferred to the stage than the 'Leap on the Chest'. Student-actors at Meyerhold's school in the 1920s first learned a simplified version of the exercise:

The left hand mimes carrying a bow, the left shoulder leading. When the student sees the target, his body stops, with the weight equally disposed between both feet. The right hand moves back in an arc to take the imaginary arrow from a quiver on the back. The movement of the hand is conveyed to the body as a whole, and the weight is shifted to the back leg. The hand finds the arrow, and brings it to the bow. The weight shifts again to the front leg. The arrow is aimed. The imaginary bow is drawn back, the weight shifting again to the back foot. The arrow is loosed, and the exercise is completed with a leap and a cry.²²

Later, they discovered the full version (which, however, was shorter than Alexei Levinsky's as noted above). The exercise was preceded and concluded with the 'Dactyl'.

SHOOTING FROM THE BOW

Stance: as Dactyl (see above).

- 1 Slow swivel to left on right toe and left heel, arms by sides.
- 2 Bend and straighten knees, rapidly flick left hand to left shoulder, completely bending left arm, then extend the arm downwards and point with the finger (at imaginary bow on ground).

Pause.

- 3 Slowly bend knees, keep torso vertical, arms by sides.
- 4 Left hand moves rapidly to the floor (to pick up imaginary bow), takes the weight of torso which is now parallel to ground; right arm extended vertically, legs bent, weight on left leg.

Pause.

- 5 Return to position 3.
- 6 Slowly stand, weight on both feet, arms by sides, spine straight.
- 7 Slowly bend left arm so hand touches left shoulder, then extend left arm, hand vertically upwards, weight on right foot.

Pause.

- 8 Right arm makes a big arc parallel with the ground to draw imaginary arrow from belt at left hip, left arm bends to shoulder, weight is transferred to left foot, torso swivels left.
- 9 Right arm is raised to vertical above head, left arm extended, hand upwards, torso leans left, head half down, weight on left foot, right foot on toes, right leg bent, left leg straight.
- 10 Right arm rapidly bends, touches right hip, and extends vertically upwards again, torso bends left to be parallel with ground, left arm remains thrust out.

Pause.

- 11 Rapidly shift weight to right foot as right arm arcs back to horizontal, torso is brought back to vertical, head up, left arm still thrust out.

Pause.

- 12 Slowly, left arm is bent, hand nearly to shoulder, as right arm is brought in big arc over head to beside left arm, weight shifted to left foot.
- 13 Right arm 'draws bow', left arm extends horizontally, weight on left foot still.
- 14 Return to position 12.
- 15 Rapidly swivel torso to right and down, weight on right foot, both arms vertically down (as if 'firing' bow at right foot), torso bent over to right, head down.

Pause.

- 16 Rapidly swivel the torso to left and up, both arms raised, head up, weight on left foot, back arched.

Pause.

- 17 Bend knees, then rapidly straighten them and leap, left foot then right, pulling right arm down rapidly to vertical, whilst stretching neck and spine upwards; at end, weight equal, both feet firm on ground after leap.
- 18 Slowly bring left arm to side, face front, as at start of exercise. Stand.

This exercise led into the étude 'The Hunt', in which the hunter shot the bow at a wild animal. The actual hunt could take various forms, depending on the individuals performing it and the animal being hunted. Meyerhold was used to taking his students to the zoo for an afternoon to study the animals, which were then used as models for this étude. As 'Shooting from the Bow' is itself, at least in its most

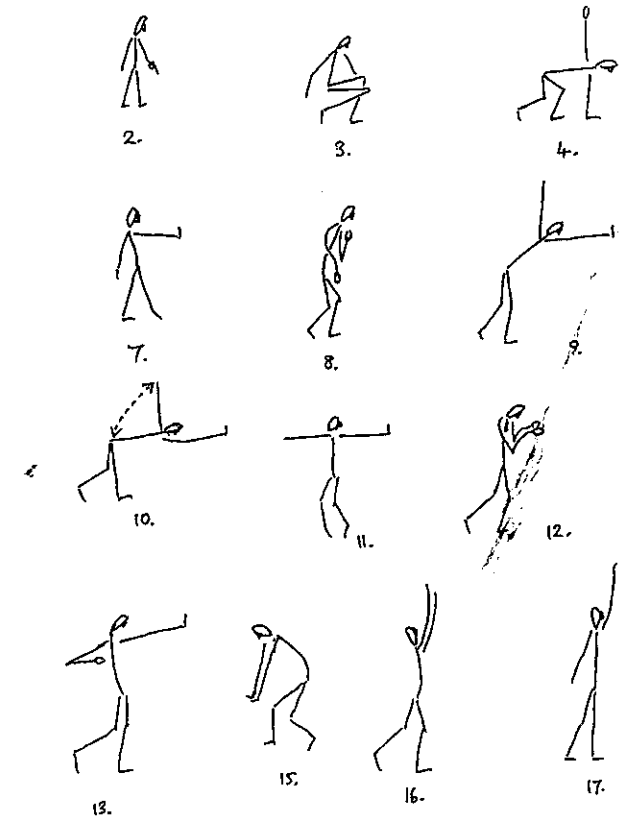


Figure 2.6 Meyerhold's exercise: Shooting from the Bow.

extended form, almost an étude, so 'The Hunt' is almost a pantomime: it is certainly instructive to watch good students perform it, since, at an advanced level, it does allow for the improvisation associated with the public presentations of the Borodinskaya Street Studio days. But after the Revolution, in Moscow it informed several production sequences, including the spectacular chase of Tarelkin by the police in *The Death of Tarelkin*, for which Eisenstein was the assistant director in 1922. Most notable, perhaps, was the adaptation of 'The Hunt' in the fourth episode of *The World Turned Upside Down* by Sergei Tretyakov, first performed in 1923, in which Brast Garin played the cook, whom he made into a sort of clown:

In a white jacket and hat, and with a large knife in my hand, I had to chase a live cockerel which was to be put into the pot. I had to stumble and the cockerel flew out of my grasp. (It was secured by a long black string, since nobody completely trusted the way the cockerel might develop its part.) Then the chase began, full of comic improvisation. Once, before a packed house, I could see Meyerhold on the front row at the right hand side of

the stage. The audience was enjoying the chase. The cockerel stopped, blinded by the stage lights, and looked round. I jerked the string so as to get hold of it, but it flapped its wings madly, broke away from my grip and flew off towards the audience. The string had broken. Shame, misery. . . . Suddenly Meyerhold leaped from his chair like a cannonball from a cannon, a look of grim determination on his face. He caught the cockerel in mid-air, and tucked it under his arm. Then, with some difficulty but as nonchalantly as a stage attendant, he walked through the audience to the stage, and handed the cockerel up to me. I put it under my arm and exited hastily to wild applause!²³

Amusing, even exhilarating, as this is, it only indicates part of the true value of biomechanics for the actor, which Jonathan Pitches hinted at in his assessment:

At the beginning of the process there was no conceivable link between the workshops and the rehearsals on Gogol's text – the work on the etude merely acting as a diversion from the real matter in hand. It was my belief that as the pressure built on the schedule we would be forced pragmatically to lose the 'luxury' of the biomechanical training in order to devote all our time to the blocking of the text. But this scenario did not play itself out. As the language of the etude began to establish itself the biomechanics became progressively invaluable. The rewards of the training in terms of concentration, ensemble discipline, rhythmic understanding and gestural expressivity were too great to be lost. We had no choice but to continue with the two hour workshop right up to the week of performance, a total of four months.²⁴

It is clear from such an evaluation that Meyerhold's biomechanics do indeed uncover what is 'theatrical' in the theatre, and how it can be true to itself. The Russian critic Nikolai Pesochinsky observed how it may in fact transcend Stanislavsky's system: 'In the power of the [biomechanically trained] actor, there resides not only the imitation of ordinary life, but also the way towards its subconscious image-association, the embodiment of the metaphor.'²⁵ For Pitches, his biomechanical work showed how the training enabled the actor to 'maximise the theatrical potential of every moment in performance as the physical quality of the body itself is defamiliarised and estranged onstage via an approximation of the Meyerholdian grotesque'.²⁶ Because it has seemed strange in an age dominated by the naturalistic acting styles associated with Stanislavsky, Strasberg and their followers, the virtually limitless potential of biomechanics has long been obscured. Perhaps it will become apparent again in the new millennium.

Notes

- 1 Gladkov, Aleksandr (1997) *Meyerhold Speaks, Meyerhold Rehearses*, Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, p. 104.
- 2 The most significant works in English about Meyerhold are: Braun, Edward (1995) *Meyerhold: a Revolution in Theatre*, London: Methuen; Hoover, Marjorie (1974) *Meyerhold – The Art of Conscious Theater*, Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press; Leach, Robert (1989) *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Rudnitsky, Konstantin (1981) *Meyerhold the Director*, Ann Arbor: Ardis.

- 3 Garin, Erast (1974) *S Meierkhol'dom*, Moscow: Iskusstvo, p. 34.
- 4 Reeve, F.D. (ed. and trans.) (1973) *Twentieth Century Russian Plays*, New York: Norton, pp. 174, 175.
- 5 Garin, Erast, op. cit., p. 30.
- 6 See Leach, Robert, op. cit., pp. 50–51, where the basic syllabus is reproduced.
- 7 Gladkov, Aleksandr, op. cit., p. 108.
- 8 Meyerhold, Vsevolod, Biomechanics course notes, 1921–22, quoted in Titova, G.V. (1995) *Tvorcheskii teatr i teatral'nyi konstruktivism*, St Petersburg: MKR, p. 198.
- 9 Ilyinsky, Igor (1961) *Sam o sebe*, Moscow: Iskusstvo, p. 154.
- 10 Eisenstein, S.M., Notes from a lecture by V.E. Meyerhold, 1921–22, quoted in Bushueva, Svetlana (ed.) (1992) *Russkoe akterskoe iskusstvo XX veka*, St Petersburg: Russian Institute of History of the Arts, p. 141.
- 11 Verigina, Vera, in Valenti, M.A. (ed.) (1967) *Vstrechi s Meierkhol'dom*, Moscow: VTO, p. 57.
- 12 Pitches, Jonathan (1997) 'The Actor's Perspective', in Shruballs, Anthony and Pitches, Jonathan, 'Two Perspectives on the Phenomenon of Biomechanics in Contemporary Performance', *Studies in Theatre Production* 16, December, p. 101.
- 13 Gladkov, Aleksandr, op. cit., p. 104.
- 14 An example was the presentation on 12 February 1915, the programme of which is reproduced in Leach, Robert, op. cit., pp. 48–49.
- 15 Meyerhold's list of 'set roles' for the 1922 biomechanics class is published in Leach, Robert, op. cit., p. 75.
- 16 Ilyinsky, Igor, op. cit., p. 155.
- 17 Pitches, Jonathan, op. cit., pp. 105, 119.
- 18 Garin, Erast, op. cit., p. 35.
- 19 Levinsky's work may be seen on Arts Archive, the Third Archive, video number 10, Meyerhold's *Biomechanics: A Workshop*, Arts Documentation Unit, Exeter, 1997.
- 20 Garin, Erast, op. cit., p. 36.
- 21 The short ballet *The Last Conversation* was reconstructed by Sally Banes, and the performance recorded by her on video, available from the Department of Theatre and Dance Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA.
- 22 Garin, Erast, op. cit., p. 36.
- 23 Valenti, M.A., op. cit., p. 310.
- 24 Pitches, Jonathan, op. cit., p. 103.
- 25 Bushueva, Svetlana, op. cit., p. 104.
- 26 Pitches, Jonathan, op. cit., p. 125.

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