

## HSC Drama – Scaffolded Essay

**Question:** Compare how the practitioners you have studied use the body to express dramatic meaning in performance. In your answer, refer to your study and experience of this topic and TWO texts in this topic.

### Planning:

Verb = “compare” → I need to carefully analyse both practitioners, and also provide insights into differences and similarities of their contexts, philosophies and approaches to actor training and performance.

### Key Words:

- Body to express: the physical expression of meaning is of the upmost importance to the actor in order to convey clear and purposeful dramatic meaning to audiences
- Dramatic meaning: the deeper level of meaning that the practitioners want to get across to their audiences based on their context and philosophy, and the context of particular audiences

### Essay Plan:

- Introduction
  - Importance of physical expression to each practitioner
  - Why physical expression was such a large part of their philosophical approach to performance and actor training and how their specific contexts crafted these philosophies
- Clarity in movement
  - Boal – demechanisation and dynamisation of the senses in order to ensure character is clearly communicate instead of the actor alone
    - Link to Theatre of the Oppressed and importance of these skills in ensuring the success of Forum Theatre and Image Theatre
    - Link to specific exercise aiming to “dynamise several senses”
  - Meyerhold – efficient and purposeful movement to showcase the ‘set role’ at any particular point in time; a series of poses rather than continuous movement
    - Link to biomechanics and mastering of etudes to break down movements into otkaz, posil, tochka to ensure every action is complete and efficient and that superfluous movement does not exist on stage
- Communicate social messages in the actors’ physical expression
  - Boal – Theatre of the Oppressed and clear physical expression needed to overcome oppression and provide opportunity for spect-actors to overcome language, social and cultural barriers to engage in the participatory theatre and evoke social change, or at least provide ideas as to how to make such progress
  - Meyerhold – entire approach to actor training came about as part of the social context of industrialisation in Russia following the Russian Revolution, the physical approach to actors’ work communicated this
- Comparative paragraph – sum up their similar contexts and they both desired to train the physical approach an actor took to their work, but they did not ignore the psychological; they each believed that the physical development would manifest appropriate psychological responses of the actors.

## Meyerhold and Boal – Sample Essay

***The following is a sample essay in response to one of your PRACTICE questions. It does not answer your assessment question. Sample essay = 2241 words.***

The body is the most useful and effective tool that the actor has to work with and they must be trained to use this tool appropriately to communicate dramatic meaning. The vitality of their training cannot be overlooked. Augusto Boal and Vsevolod Meyerhold both carefully trained the physicality of their actors; each believed in the importance of the external accuracy of the character, and once this was achieved then the psychological dimension was accurate by default. While they held these beliefs at the core of their artistic being, their philosophies and approaches to actor training developed as a result of their own contexts. Boal's focus on oppression and understanding how characters work as victims and instigators of oppression reflects his personal journey working in Brazil in the early 1970s under a military government whose power is what Boal gave the people a voice to question and oppose. Likewise, Meyerhold was also influenced heavily by political matters during the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the industrialisation of the workforce which inspired his updated view on how the actor and their body should work. The focus on the body and physical expression of the actor can be linked to the tumultuous contexts in which both worked and trained actors; body language became a universal language that overcame social, cultural and language barriers that could have interrupted the flow of communication. However connected to their contexts their philosophies and work might be, the continued relevance and effectiveness of Boal and Meyerhold's methods cannot be understated, and elements of their work exist in modern theatrical practices, directorial approaches and even in mainstream media formats.

Both Boal and Meyerhold worked to achieve great efficiency and clarity of movement and body language on stage and, though they appear to have contradicting views on how to accomplish this, they viewed the physical expression of character as paramount. This is not to discount emotion; the physical expression aims to demonstrate clarity in emotion. Boal wrote in Games for Actors and Non-Actors that "emotion took precedence over all else" (p.29) and argued that too often emotion was not clearly communicated because the actors body was mechanised and that "a newly discovered emotions runs the risk of being petrified" in automated response that limits 70% of the body's capacity to convey meaning. For efficient use of the body to be accomplished Boal's actors had to demechanise and retune their body in order to utilise its full range of movement and expression. A mechanised body is the result of repetition in daily life and categorising what we see, hear and feel into comfortable norms with clear parameters. The actor must therefore dynamise these senses in order to fully utilise them to create clearly defined characters.

Boal created a series of activities in order to assist the actors he was training to dynamise their senses; these were categorised as 'feeling what we touch', 'listening to what we hear' and 'seeing what we look at'. They aimed to help the actor recognise their own mechanisations and to then go through a process of demechanisation to broaden the scope of potential characterisation. 'The Cross and the Circle' is an example of realising the limiting nature of physical mechanisations as the actor attempts to draw a cross with one hand and a cross simultaneously with the other. Mostly, nobody can do this perfectly; this is "pure psychological mechanisation" (Boal, p.51). Having admitted to the fact that their bodies are mechanised, actors are then forced to move and behave in ways they are not used to. 'Colombian Hypnosis' is an excellent activity that Boal crafted whereby the actor surrenders control of the physical movement to a hypnotist. In workshops I found this particularly useful when The Joker called 'freeze' at random intervals and I created characters from the position I had been 'hypnotised' into; as an actor it was liberating to be able to develop a physical character separate to my normal way of moving.

Boal created a way for actors to free their bodies in order create character, whereas Meyerhold held that actors required very clear and structured movement in order to create efficient visual meaning for the audience without superfluous movement getting in the way of dramatic meaning. He, inspired by the industrialisation of the workforce in Russia following the 1917 Russian Revolution, created the system of biomechanics in 1922. The main contributing factor to the development of biomechanical training was the work of Frederick Winslow Taylor who 'Taylorised' the workforce making factories run more efficiently; each action an employee had to complete was broken down into a series of tasks with a set time limit. The buzzwords of the era, such as 'efficiency' and 'productivity', influenced Meyerhold and his approach to directing and actor training. He effectively 'taylorised' the movement of the actor by

creating five key etudes that extend the physical plasticity of the actor in order to provide a large range of movements and poses that can be called upon for performance, however, the etudes themselves were never performed on stage. The breaking down of actions into a series of tasks is very evident in the approach to completing each etude; Pitches explains in detail the approach taken to learn and master in biomechanics in his book Vsevolod Meyerhold. 'The Slap' etude, for example, consists of a range of tasks/steps, e.g. 'prepare to slap', 'slap', etc. Each task itself is also broken down into distinct moments of preparation/refusal (otkaz), action (posil) and result/rest (tochka). As the actor comes to master these three components to all actions they are able to commit to more efficient and meaningful movement on stage because each moment of their performance is clearly thought out and has clear intentions.

The detailed approach to actor training that Meyerhold took through his biomechanical training is a manifestation of his own philosophy on theatre and art. Having worked and trained in realism with Stanislavski, Meyerhold was very aware of the psychological component of characterisation. He believed, though, that if the physical expression of the character and the proxemics between characters was correct then the psychological response would be sparked without the deep analysis of text that Stanislavski insisted upon. He also believed that a representation of reality on stage was an injustice to theatre itself and called upon his actors to be highly theatrical and stylised. Meyerhold proved in his work that any play can be stylised to communicate the essence of any moment or play by reducing it to its key meaning and building up from that. He compared this to painting a picture on a canvas. Pitches provides an extremely effective example in his book when describing the character of Nora in Henrik Ibsen's The Doll's House (a generally very realist play) played in a stylised fashion with "no more than a series of poses during which the feet simply tapped out a nervous rhythm" (p.52). The actress in this instance has been able to find the essence of the moment and the clear emotion of the character in that precise moment, what Meyerhold would label as her "set role" at that point in time, and paint a physical picture of this through her physical expression and manipulation of rhythm. The ability to convey character in clear and stylised ways demonstrates the thorough training of this actress and her competency in the key skills that Meyerhold instilled in his performers.

Training in biomechanics and the perfecting of the etudes was not the development of a performance; the training developed essential skills that would be used in the actors' work. The previous example demonstrated the essential nature of rhythm in the actor's work because Nora's foot tapping and transition between stylised poses was communicating dramatic meaning. In addition to rhythm, other key skills that biomechanical training developed included precision, coordination, discipline, responsiveness, playfulness, efficiency, expressiveness and balance; all skills that the actor refines when mastering the etudes. To use 'The Slap' as an example again, the actors learn the importance of coordination, rhythm and responsiveness in this pair etude because they must move in reaction to each other during the otkaz, posil and tochka moments of each task/action. I found the skill of playfulness was emphasised in the 'tap dance' that follows each moment of the etude; not only did it break up each action of 'The Slap', it also reminded the actors in the workshop to have fun with what they were doing. The etudes focus on slightly different skills, 'Throwing the Stone' develops balance as the actors move from standing to kneeling and back up again, and the actor is equipped with an array of highly effective skills they can utilise in their characterisation, once they have completed their biomechanical training.

It is important to acknowledge that, although biomechanical training does develop these essential skills, the terminology and language associated with the training is derived from Meyerhold's context; just as Boal's approach to actor training and philosophy grew from his context. Meyerhold's focus on the physical efficiency of the performer is intricately linked to 'time and motion' studies in the workplace and the physical tasks in factories and how workers completed them. Frederick Winslow Taylor was responsible for the 'Taylorism' of the workplace following the Russian Revolution and the economic downturn that resulted; he had to ensure his factories were operating as efficiently as possible. To this end, he went about breaking the actions of his workers into a series of timed tasks to remove any extra and superfluous tasks from interrupting productivity. Meyerhold was intrigued by this and applied the same principal to performance and the actor communicating clear and stylised meaning to the audience without being interrupted by unnecessary action or 'filler business' on stage. The closing moment of The Government Inspector is a prime example of this when all characters are 'petrified' on stage due to the shocking revelation at the end of the play about the real inspector arriving in town. The image captures the shock, horror, confusion and

mayhem of the moment and how each character is feeling through their body language, gesture and expression. This example really emphasises Meyerhold's concept of 'the mask'; he asserted that 'mask' is any way or means of altering the external appearance of character through make up, hair style, gesture, body language, costume, etc. The 'masks' adorned by the actors at the end Gogol's play, which Meyerhold directed a very renowned production of, convey very clear meaning to the audience.

Similarly, Boal was clearly influenced by the fact he was working in 1960/70s Brazil under an extremely oppressive military government. Though not of a lower social class, he did certainly acknowledge the mistreatment of people across communities in Brazil and established three main forms of Theatre of the Oppressed to help give a voice to the oppressed. Image Theatre allowed spect-actors to overcome language barriers and share their thoughts in visual means. Image Theatre was also a useful way for actors to create characters because they could be moulded by the oppressed citizens in order to better represent them on stage. Forum Theatre relied on actors having clear physicalisation of character in order to clearly communicate the will and counter-will of the characters on stage in order for spect-actors to then replace particular characters and attempt to overcome oppression without altering the essence of the characters. Invisible Theatre is very much a result of the oppressive government in Argentina, where Boal was exiled by the Brazilian government, because he had to find ways of communicating messages without it being seen as pre-prepared theatre by the authorities, though it was very much planned and rehearsed. This form of theatre relied very much on clear external characterisation in order to engage audiences who did not know they were audiences in public places.

While their training methods developed from their contexts, there is still evidence of their work and philosophies in contemporary theatre practices. Meyerhold's aim to achieve efficiency and clarity of movement on stage is akin to the work of Anne Bogart and Viewpoints in her directing and actor coaching that forces acting students to consider their relationship with space and time through a series of what she labels 'viewpoints'. Boal's concept of Forum Theatre is still used by theatre companies in its original form; Milk Crate Theatre's 2016 production of Wasted is a perfect example of how Boal's format is still helpful to societies and, therefore, his physical training in demechanisation and dynamising the senses is still highly relevant.

The importance of physical expression of dramatic meaning is essential to both Boal and Meyerhold's work and stems from their philosophies relating to the purpose of theatre and how actors should be trained from the outside-in. They were also heavily influenced by their respective contexts which have had a clear impact on the language and terminology used in their training schemes, which contemporary students can see from books like Games for Actors and Non-Actors (Boal) and Vsevolod Meyerhold (Pitches). Contemporary theatre, actors, directors and practitioners owe a debt of gratitude to the workings of both Boal and Meyerhold because of their continued relevance and influence in modern theatre. Meyerhold's work connects to modern theories of time and movement in performance and Boal's theatrical forms are still utilised in communities today. The fact that their work, influences and philosophies are still used and respected demonstrates the essential nature of physical expression in theatre to ensure the communication of clear dramatic meaning.